The Caged Butterfly

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The Caged Butterfly

by ShadowUnicorn666
Summary

Lord Voldemort and his Death Eaters have emerged victorious from the Battle of Hogwarts and are set to conquer Great Britain while Harry Potter and other Order loyalists remain elusive. Obsessed by the pursuit of power Voldemort is determined to conquer more countries and destroy anyone who stands in his way. Young, naïve and vulnerable after the death of her Father a seventeen year old Astoria Greengrass has joined the Death Eaters having been persuaded by Narcissa Malfoy whose son Draco she loves dearly. However, she soon comes to realise what a terrible mistake she has made by aligning herself with such a brutal and murderous regime. Unable to flee from the Death Eaters under their growing power and with the threat of being killed Astoria is forced to participate in their sadistic crimes against Muggles and wizards alike. But this is only the beginning of her nightmare. The fateful choice she made in joining Lord Voldemort will turn her entire life upside down giving rise to fear, pain and unimaginable suffering from which she cannot escape. This bloody world of war, rape and murder Astoria now finds herself trapped in is set over the backdrop of the decadent, devious and uncaring society of the Pureblood Aristocracy.

Notes

*This story begins around the time of The Half Blood Prince/Deathly Hallows and beyond, spanning over a number of years.*

My other inspirations for this piece are the the Serbian wars, ISIS war crimes and general violence towards women in war. I decided to age Astoria up a bit, making her in the same year as Draco and Harry Potter at Hogwarts.

There are a few original characters which are in keeping with JKR's universe as well as her own canon ones who are given more of a back story and larger role in this.

The chapters start off fairly short and will get progressively longer to accommodate the story.
I. - Solitude

Chapter Summary

Disclaimer: all the magical characters and the world they live in belong to JK Rowling and her publishers/producers. I also take inspiration from George R.R Martin, owner of ASOIAF/Game of Thrones (This is NOT a crossover). Any similarities between this work and his own also belong to George and his publishers. This work is written purely for entertainment purposes for the online fan fiction community, not profit.

Warning: this gets VERY dark, it probes the worst depths of humanity, and there is a lot of rape and violence, so if this isn’t your thing, please stop reading now. I haven’t really seen anything with regard to an Antonin Dolohov/Astoria Greengrass relationship out there yet, so I’m curious as to how it will be received. I’m always open to constructive criticism/feedback :)

Astoria Venus Greengrass awoke early on that Thursday morn. She kicked back her silk bedsheets and thick feather duvet to get up and stretch, catlike, as the sun shone on her naked skin. Mary was not in attendance, but that was not unusual given the hour. Mary was one of the serving maids at Malfoy Manor, originally drafted in when the Malfoy's had lost their House Elf, Dobby. Narcissa had bemoaned this bitterly, maids were held in disdain by those with old family gold. It was only true Pure Bloods who had House Elves to attend them and maids were very much seen as something that 'upstart' 'new gold' wizarding families indulged in. However, the House Elf population had diminished greatly this past year, chiefly due to the Death Eaters newfound zeal of tormenting and slaughtering them for sport. Astoria’s own House Elf, Iddi remained at Greengrass Palace, forbidden by ancient magic to leave its walls to ensure that the Palace did not fall into disrepair. However, due to the influx of Death Eaters now coming and going out of Malfoy Manor, Mary and five other serving girls now attended to their needs and wants, as well as the upkeep of the Manor itself. Narcissa was not about to do it herself after all.

As a Pure-Blooded witch, Astoria was entitled to her own handmaid, which came in the form of Mary. Astoria was fond of Mary, and was intrigued by her often upbeat disposition. Despite all Mary had suffered, she still seemed to have hope that things would one day get better. Her company made life at Malfoy Manor just a little less strange and frightening. Mary was young and pretty, with big blue eyes and luscious dark hair. Indeed, she was not too many years older than Astoria herself, no older than twenty years. Astoria was at a loss of what to do, so she padded over to the large, gilded mirror on the eastern wall. She stood there, taking in her appearance. Her eyes automatically found the ugly skull and snake burned into her inner left forearm. It was now permanently black and often prickled every now and again, even when it was not burning for a summons. How she hated it.

Astoria looked at her protruding hip bones and ribs. She had always been slender, but her rapidly thinning figure was beginning to make her look half starved. It had been beyond her control, however. She had been unable to eat or sleep properly ever since she had begun to serve the Dark Lord, so deep was her disenchantment. Despite this, however, no one could argue that Astoria
Greengrass was undeniably beautiful. She had silken hair the colour of honey that tumbled down well past her waist in a rippling river of loose curls which complimented her light golden skin perfectly. Her eyes were a piercing lilac, a rarity only found in the House of Greengrass, even if it was down to centuries of family inbreeding. Combined with her delicate nose and full lips, she would have been the envy of any Veela...Men's eyes who found her did not easily look away. Astoria had been used to male attention ever since she had blossomed into womanhood upon reaching her twelfth year.

Now standing at five feet and nine inches, with large full breasts, a tiny waist and curvaceous hips, many a man had lusted after her, had even made betrothal offers to her late Father. Naturally he had shunned them all, determined to marry her to a Nott or Selwyn. To be sure the choice for eligible bachelors was minimal in Britain, but Father would have gladly auctioned her off to some other great family from abroad if they had favourable bloodlines. Astoria's haughty, solemn manner, rather than to drive men away, only served to make them pursue her even more fiercely. They all seemed to want to 'conquer' this mysterious, frosty beauty. Astoria had always been soft spoken and quiet; with little interest in making friends. At Hogwarts she had disliked the spiteful and vapid group that Draco Malfoy had presided over, only deigning to mingle with them to keep up appearances. What had Father always said after all?

"Trust no one child, but keep matters cordial, lest they mistrust you."

Having said that, Astoria had always been rather fond of Blaise Zabini, whom was very much like herself, comfortable with solitude and only keeping to the fringes of Draco's clique. Her reminiscing thoughts then drifted to Draco. No matter what she may have thought of him in their school days, Astoria now cared for him very much and longed for his return. When they were not out enforcing the Dark Lords commands, they would have long walks together through the vast grounds of Malfoy Manor. They would discuss anything and everything that came to mind, and although it was risky, it was an inexpressible comfort to Astoria to have someone to confide in. The tender moments spent with Draco were one of the only things that kept her going during her darkest hours. To be sure, Draco could be cruel and stupid, but his truest nature was so much more than that. Most of his faults were down to his upbringing, not unlike Astoria herself. She thought that it was this that had brought them so close in the past year. They both felt alone and afraid, both now questioning everything they had ever been told, and above all, they both hated being Death Eaters. Indeed, the whole notion of what it actually meant joining the Death Eaters had horrified and disillusioned them. The murder of Albus Dumbledore had been proof of that, the fateful night when everything had come crashing down. She vividly recalled how Fenrir Greyback had come bursting into the girl’s dormitory of the Slytherin dungeons, dragging her out of bed and commanding her to dress.

When he chose to be, Draco could be kind and gentle, she had experienced it first hand when she had poured out her heart to him for the first time. He had listened quietly as she had sobbed into his chest, softly stoking her hair. The harsh, sneering bravado he projected to the rest of the world was his attempt at a show of strength. Astoria knew that deep down, Draco was desperately lonely and behaved in this way to conceal this from others, lest they see his weakness.
"You may" Astoria replied. Mary then came through the door with a basket of freshly laundered robes hovering in front of her. Midnight blue, pistachio green, lilac and so many more, Astoria’s vast wardrobe had come along with her from Greengrass Palace after her Father had died. She could no longer take any pleasure in garbing herself in rich fabrics and colours as she had done before, those days were over. But she supposed she had to wear something. Mary was dressed in simple, navy maid’s robes and was quite unabashed by Astoria's nakedness. Handmaids were used to this, after all. They were involved in some of the most intimate parts of the lives of the ladies they served.

"A bath, Miss?" Mary asked, as she began flicking her wand so that each set of robes flew into the large, mahogany wardrobe in the adjacent dressing room.

"Yes, and I think we shall go with the midnight blue brocade and silver today, if you please" replied Astoria. "And I will take my breakfast up here this morn."

"As you say Miss." Mary replied.

Minutes later Astoria entered the bathing suite, a large room done in white and pink marble, silver gilt mirrors sparkling in the dim candlelight. She climbed into the steaming hot water in an elaborate, solid silver bathing tub. The taps were in the form of snakes, their mouths wide and gaping. She lay there staring at the carved ceiling as Mary saw to her hair, lost in thought. To be sure, Astoria hated eating downstairs in the morning room with everyone else. The other Death Eaters frightened her more than she could say. It was not just the fear of being cursed, tortured or killed for the slightest misdeed, the likelihood of one of the men taking her by force was growing by the day. Indeed, Mary had warned her that this may happen. She had told her of one night when she was clearing the kitchen, alone, as all the other girls had retired to the servant’s quarters. There, she was accosted by Mulciber, who proceeded to drag her into the pantry where he had beaten and raped her for close to an hour. Astoria had been horrified, but what disturbed her most of all was the matter of fact way Mary had described it, almost as if she seemed to expect this kind of treatment. To hear her tell it, she was not the only one this had happened to either.

Astoria suspected that it was only her Pure Blood that had thus far protected her from this fate. As a shield, it was getting ever weaker; the male Death Eaters were becoming incredibly scary to be around. Antonin Dolohov in particular, frightened her more than all the others put together, even more than the Dark Lord. Dolohov had an evil reputation as a depraved pervert, thug and a drunk. It was common knowledge that he was always the first to rape and torture Muggle women before killing them. Why should his own kind be any different? Indeed, it was whispered that he had a wife some years ago, during the First Uprising. However, she had disappeared under suspicious circumstances and was never mentioned in society again. The most consistent rumour was that he had killed her in a drunken rage, transfiguring her body and dumping it in a lake. Astoria could easily believe that, Dolohov had the coldest eyes she had ever seen, not one drop of kindness or remorse in
their icy blue depths. Like Bellatrix Lestrange, he gloried in his horrific acts, nothing giving him greater pleasure than causing pain and suffering to others. She imagined he had killed his wife without a second thought.

Astoria would always catch Dolohov staring at her avidly whenever he was in residence, hunger and malice in his gaze. At mealtimes, Dolohov would make sure he was sat next to or opposite her. He would put his food slowly and deliberately into his mouth, licking his lips lustfully, a gesture she found remarkably obscene. Other times, Dolohov would slyly stroke his finger along her hand, or else grasp her thigh under the dinner table and whisper in her ear telling her how beautiful she was, all the while leering at her breasts. His unwanted advances made Astoria sick with fear. When Dolohov's constant besetting failed to illicit a satisfactory response from her, he would then take to constantly prowling about after her around the vast Manor, looking, she suspected, for an opportunity to strike. Once Dolohov had almost succeeded. One morn, he had silently come up behind her in the drawing room and attempted to fondle her between her legs. Astoria had jumped violently, knocked Dolohov’s hand away and ran from him.

“Come, sweet lady!” Dolohov had called in a delighted voice as she fled. “I was just going to make love to you!” He had then laughed loudly. “No, no, I am only japing, I am going to fuck you.”

Astoria had escaped through a tapestry, dashed up to her bedchamber and used the most powerful form of magic she knew to seal her door, heart hammering. She had not slept that night. Rigid with fear, she had spent the twilight hours sitting on the window seat, her wand pointing at the door. As if this wasn't terrifying enough, she had so far been forced to endure the others too: Yaxley's sly pinching, Mc Nair's obscene suggestions and Rowle's endless hints about how much he wanted to bed her. They were like a pack of hungry wolves, all determined to claim her. Severus Snape was the only one that showed little to no interest in joining in their sport of pestering. Perhaps he was disinclined towards women and for that she was thankful. She had never liked Snape at Hogwarts, despite him being head of Slytherin house. He had always struck her as a cruel and bitter individual who delighted in preying on the weak. But was she truly any better than he was? They had both chosen the Death Eater path after all.
II. - Regret

Chapter Summary

So this chapter explores Astoria's feelings towards her Father, her family history and how she views the world now. There will be a point to this story I promise, but I'm someone who likes to 'set the scene' as it were. And I like to give a bit of background info on the character, otherwise it just feels rushed. Same disclaimer applies.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Astoria was brought her breakfast, always far too much than she had asked for as usual. Boiled eggs, fruit, cheese, fresh baked bread, an assortment of jams and a large platter of cold meats were presented to her on delicate, snake embellished silverware. After eating just one boiled egg and sipping a little wine, she decided to make for downstairs. Astoria navigated her way through the many richly carpeted corridors of the Manor and at last came to the top of the grand staircase. She suddenly felt in one of the pockets of her robes, looking for her wand. It wasn't there. No matter she thought, the serving girls did practically everything for her anyway, and she could easily send one of them to fetch it for her if needed. A wandless summoning charm was unlikely to work from this distance. To be sure, her main duties for the Death Eaters were surprisingly light for the most part. Apart from half a dozen campaigns or so, she spent most of her time patrolling the corridors, keeping an eye on the Malfoy's, compiling 'tip offs' regarding Potter and ensuring that the magical perimeters around the estate still held.

Astoria had never been out on a campaign with the main clutch of the Death Eaters. She was always sent with others similar to her in age: Draco, Zabini, Crabbe, Goyle, Nott…practically everyone she had been to school with. Each campaign was seared vividly into her mind. Astoria recalled when the Dark Lord had commanded them to burn down a Muggle hospital. The images of burned and screaming Muggle men, women and children would never, ever leave her. Astoria shook off these uneasy thoughts and swept swiftly down the many steps, at least three score of them, the train of her silken blue robes softly whispering on the marble surface.

When she had at last reached the ground floor, she drifted off to the kitchens with the intention of greeting the other serving maids. They always gave her a warm reception; always when there was no one around, to be sure. The kitchens however, were empty. That was queer. Astoria made for the morning room and glimpsed three of the girls outside feeding a flock of the albino peacocks that roamed the grounds. She imagined that Mary was still cleaning her bedchamber and the sixth girl was elsewhere in the Manor, also cleaning, most like. Astoria checked the drawing room too, half expecting to see Lucius covered in vomit and sprawled face down in a wine soaked sleep, but again, there was no one to be seen. She would make for the gardens she decided, perhaps she would feed some of the flying fish that lived in the bottomless pond.
Astoria roamed about the rest of the Manor for a while, looking in on various rooms and salons. It would be pleasant to escape to the calm and beauty of the gardens. The ornate, softly splashing fountains and delicate flowers had a calming, if only temporary, effect on her. As such it was the only place she truly felt at peace these days, the only place where she did not feel that she wanted to throw herself from the highest tower of the ancient stronghold that was Malfoy Manor. Astoria’s thoughts then strayed to her Father as she walked slowly down a cavernous corridor lined with portraits of every generation of the Malfoy family. She missed him dearly. Hadies Xander Greengrass had been misguided in many ways but he was still someone to turn to…. someone to love.

Father, speak to me. She thought, though she knew her Father's ruthless attitude towards blood purity and wizard supremacy would sound something like:

"You should be proud! I would expect nothing else from mine own daughter!" or "you should be thankful for the chance of a wholesome, pureblood marriage!" etcetera, etcetera...

Hadies Greengrass had been the richest and most powerful Lord in the Sacred Twenty Eight and did everything he could to block any laws that would weaken Pure-Bloods. He was enraged when the Muggle Protection Act had come into force, sending several Howlers to Cornelius Fudge in protest, spitting with fury. Astoria grimaced and pushed away these thoughts, knowing how futile they were, only serving to bring up feelings of intense conflict, grief and shame. She knew her father was infatuated with Dark magic and downright fanatical with regard to the old, pure blood ways. "Imperium tua Magnitudo" - "Power is greatness" were the Greengrass family words after all, she thought with rancour. Astoria had tried time and time again to convince herself that he was 'noble' and 'a talisman for upholding the family traditions.' However, the more she was exposed to the real wizarding world outside of the elitist, Pure Blood one she had always known, the more she had to grudgingly admit to herself that there was a possibility that the 'old way' wasn't the good way, perhaps it was even wicked and perverse. Astoria had been in denial however. No matter how much these doubts nagged at her as she matured, no matter what her distant misgivings, in the end she had been greedy and stupid. In her sixth year at Hogwarts she had made the fateful decision to become a Death Eater, helped by Narcissa Malfoy. Narcissa had told her of all the wondrous things she could accomplish, how she would be helping to make a better world by purifying the wizarding race, how she would be able to perform magic beyond her wildest dreams. Thus, giddy at the prospect of increasing her own power to spectacular levels, and to hell with any 'risk', Astoria had been taken in by the dark glamour of the Death Eaters. After all, what would she have to fear with powerful magic at her fingertips and the Dark Lord's most devoted followers by her side? Her Father had died by then after all, who else did she have? So, when the time came she accepted her Dark Mark like a good little soldier, never dreaming how far reaching and terrible the consequences would be.

Despite Father's twisted views, whatever else he was, he had been a good Father, hadn't he? He had on occasion, told her stories as a little girl and taken her out riding. He was the only parent she had ever known after her Mother had died when she was just an infant. Father had not been overtly affectionate, Mother's death had changed him in that respect. Her uncle Apollo had told her that he had never been the same again after her passing. But beneath Father's stern facade, she knew that he had loved her more than anything in this world. Astoria sighed inwardly. In the cold light of day, she
knew it was no good. Father was gone, never to return. Her last shield, her last protector. Gone. There was no one left to save her, all she had were the Malfoy's, who had taken her in after her Father's death. Though to be sure, their intent had mainly been to get their hands on the family gold and match her with Draco. When she was eleven, she knew her Father had coldly rebuffed Lucius when he proposed a union between their families. Father's reason being that there were far too many Half-Bloods befoiling the Malfoy family tree, and that was something he could never forgive. Purity was everything to him, and he was not about to hand over his precious daughter to a 'tainted' family, whatever the Sacred Twenty Eight might say. In any case, what real good were the Malfoy's anyway in her present situation? They were no shield at all and even if they dared to help her escape, the Dark Lord would kill them all in an instant.

_Foolish child,_ she thought savagely; snapping back to reality. _Even if Father was here, do you honestly believe he would be able to protect you?_

She knew the answer to that already. No one dared to defy the Dark Lord, no matter what their families had sacrificed for the cause. Her Death Eater brother, Alcaeus, had been slaughtered by Alastor, 'Mad Eye' Moody at the end of the First Uprising when she was barely a year old. She had no memory of him. A year later her mother, Irina, followed him to the grave. Their deaths fed her Father's fiery hatred of the Ministry and the Order, she knew. Astoria had very, very distant memories in the back of her mind of a pretty, lilac eyed woman bouncing her on her knee, laughing and singing, planting soft kisses all over her face. Other than that, all she knew of her Mother were the scraps of information that Father had fed her over the years, combined with the various photos and portraits around Greengrass Palace. Father always said that Mother had died of a broken heart at the loss of Alcaeus. The rest of the Greengrass family were also dead and gone. The family tradition of intermarriage had left many barren or sterile, or else predisposed to miscarriages and still births, so Astoria had no immediate cousins. Her own parents had been niece and uncle after all, to keep the bloodlines pure. Even with the introduction of other Pure Blood families, the line had still dwindled. Astoria had some very distant relatives in the Sacred Twenty Eight but, in truth, she had no one. She was the last Greengrass left. The very last. The raw naked truth of that fact crashed over her at that moment. She did not know why it had suddenly hit her so hard, but it disturbed her more than she could say.

Chapter End Notes

So I named Astoria's Father Haides as Hadies is a mythological Greek God who is King of the underworld. Her Father was the richest and most powerful Lord in the Sacred Twenty Eight so I thought it fitting. Even though Hadies loves his daughter and family, he is pretty evil and cold.
Astoria had finally come to the Great Hall, her footsteps echoing on the magnificent green marble. She hastily brushed away the beginnings of tears and continued her purposeful stride across the hall. Her lilac eyes swept the sumptuous surroundings, until she suddenly stopped dead.

What was that?

Antonin Dolohov suddenly loomed out of the shadows; his long, pale, twisted face brought into sharp relief. He had clearly been lurking behind one of the many great pillars that outlined the hall. Astoria flinched, she desperately wanted to run, but stood her ground and drew herself up to her full height. No matter what she felt inside, she would not let Dolohov see her fear, that would only feed his cruelty. Tall as she was, Astoria was still dwarfed by Dolohov. He was a man of forty years or so, but looked far older. Dolohov's lips were thin, his nose straight, sharp and pointed with harsh lines etched across his face. His hair was short, dark and slightly thinning, and he wore it slicked back from his forehead. Dolohov may have even been reasonably good looking once, but Astoria supposed that fourteen years entombed in Azkaban had wasted away any good looks he may have ever possessed, his long, pale face now twisted with a maniacal fervour. Dolohov stood at over six and a half feet tall, and despite his age, was heavily muscled and powerfully built with wide shoulders, like a man of twenty years or so. Dolohov's magic was strong, and he had an extensive knowledge of the Dark Arts. Wands or no, with her delicate frame and not being fully qualified in magic, Astoria was no match for him. Dolohov could have snapped her neck like a twig or destroyed her in a duel if he so chose.

"Miss Greengrass" Dolohov said, silkily. He bowed low over her hand and kissed it firmly.

"Mr. Dolohov, good morn to you." Astoria said stiffly. She curtsied respectfully, but did not dare to even look at one of the Dark Lord's most loyal servants directly in the face. She felt him looking her up and down. Feeling compelled to speak and distract him, she went on, "I- I thought I was alone. Where are the- the others?"

"Oh, but you are alone" he said with a soft chuckle. "And do you not think there are enough of of us?"
Astoria inclined her head stiffly and attempted to sidestep him, refusing to let him play with her like this. "To be sure. If you'll excuse me, I was just making for the gardens. Let me pass if you please." Dolohov was still chuckling, shaking his head in amusement; he then reached out to touch her delicate jaw. He blocked her path, dominating her personal space with his height and sheer size, tower ing above her. It made Astoria feel weak and helpless as a cold bucket of fear rushed over her, freezing her solid where she stood. Dolohov's gaze was now crawling greedily over the curves of hip, waist and breast beneath her fine silken robes, undressing her with his eyes the way he always did. It always gave Astoria that unpleasant feeling as if she were truly naked, standing there before him. Dolohov suddenly grasped her underneath the chin, forcing her to look into his empty, pale blue eyes. "Unhand me." She said, indignantly, attempting to shy away.

Dolohov ignored this and grasped her jaw still more firmly. "I trust you are aware of the Dark Lord's wishes that all Pure-Blooded witches are to be matched with suitable husbands once the war is won."

"Yes" he continued softly, "The Dark Lord has been most vociferous on this matter." Dolohov then lowered his head towards her elegant, swan-like neck, taking a long deep sniff. As he exhaled, Astoria felt her skin pricking, utterly revolted and barely repressing a shudder. "Mhmm... Lavender and Jasmine is it not?" he crowed. "A most becoming scent on you, my lady, simply delightful." Dolohov straightened and leered, his face full of malicious pleasure, clearly taking huge enjoyment in the distress he was causing her. He moved even closer so that they were practically touching. "Yes, you must be so pleased" he went on in that dangerously soft tone, toying with a lock of her honey coloured hair. "You shall have a wholesome Pure Blood marriage, isn't that what you always wanted?" Astoria looked up at him and just as quickly looked away. As she did so, his twisted face split into an awful smile. "That means before long you shall have a little Pure Blood baby to call your own, won't that be glorious? Well, preferably a son, but these things happen, don't they?" Astoria tensed but still said nothing. Dolohov brushed her cheek, his fingers moving down over her collarbone, caressing her soft, golden skin with longing. His hand eventually came to rest over her rapidly beating heart, stroking the spot insistently. Astoria was desperately afraid, still refusing to look at him, though she could make out his lecherous sneer out of the corner of her eye. "So lovely. Simply exquisite." Dolohov went on, almost as though talking to himself. "You look exactly like your Mother, Irina... perhaps even finer" he murmured, still running his hand through her loose curls. Her flesh crawled with the intensity of a thousand cockroaches as he began to aggressively grope at her left breast. His hand then travelled south of her waist and he grasped her backside, his breathing growing heavier. All Astoria could do was stand there, paralysed by fear. "The Malfoy boy wants you, that is plain to see" Dolohov carried on, breathlessly. "But a stunning creature like yourself needs a man, not a boy. And I suppose..." his voice now dropped to a whisper, his mouth next to her ear, "As long as we are all Pure Blood, it does not matter who puts the baby into you, does it?"

Astoria was filled with abject horror as Dolohov began rubbing his hard manhood against her vigorously through his robes. His breathing became deeper still as his arousal increased by the second, seemingly out of control. For a moment, the world seemed to balance itself on a knife's edge. Astoria whirled, desperate to try and get away from Dolohov's terrible embrace, but in her heart of hearts she knew it was no good. "Ivolvento!" Roared Dolohov, and Astoria was ripped from her escape at once. She was dragged by an invisible force into the dining hall, without a wand she had no way of countering the charm, let alone stopping him. Astoria had been knocked over by the force of the spell and was now scrambling to her feet. Dolohov moved menacingly towards her, a crazed, animalistic hunger in his cold blue eyes. She backed away from him.

"Stay away!" Astoria said in a shrill, shaking voice that made her sound even younger than her seventeen years. "I'll- I'll tell! You c-can't do this. The D-dark Lord he, he won't, he... you-you knew
my Father! How can you do this!? I am a Greengrass, not one of your common whores, how dare you! Stop this at once Dolohov, you're scaring me! It is a crime to force a Pureblood witch to-to... everyone says so...." Her voice trailed away, forcing her into terrified silence.

Dolohov laughed. "The Dark Lord!? The law? Ha! You pretty idiot. Do you truly imagine he will begrudge me, his most faithful servant, in putting you to your proper use? Have you never been taught what a woman is for, you little fool?" He taunted, still laughing. "When we have rid our world of the Muggle scum and done away with the charlatan Harry Potter, you are going to be my little wife and be grateful for it"

"No!" Astoria screamed fiercely, "never! I will never, ever marry you! Do you hear me Dolohov?" She went on defiantly, "NEVER!" Astoria was still backing away down the long dining chamber when she suddenly hit the wall. She was trapped.

"Yes. We shall wed, and we shall breed." Said Dolohov rapturously; moistening his lips in anticipation as he fondled the bulge between his legs, his enormous chest heaving rapidly. "The Dark Lord will grant me this, I am certain. I have served him faithfully and deserve my reward. Until then, however, I mean to claim my rights." He gave her a lecherous sneer. "I have waited, oh so long. From the time I first laid eyes upon your visage, I have thought of naught else but you my lady, and I mean to have you."

They were now a foot apart. "Stop!" She shrieked, now hysterical. "Dolohov please don't! Please stop!" He continued to advance upon her however, ignoring her pleas, his eyes gleaming with a wild excitement at the prospect of the prize he was about to claim.

As they stood face to face, Astoria's hand lashed out to slap him in a last-ditch attempt of defiance, but he caught her by the wrist and bent it back until there was a sickening snap. She doubled over and stifled a scream of pain, her wrist aflame. Dolohov, taking advantage of this, wrestled her to the ground. A flick of his wand was all that was needed to keep her pinned down to the floor, ensuring that she could not put up a further fight. Dolohov knelt and climbed on top of her, his weight pressing down on her chest so that she could barely breathe. He grasped her jaw painfully hard with one of his big hands and thrust his tongue down her throat, his cruel mouth on hers. Dolohov tasted and smelled like stale mead, it made her gag so badly that she attempted to bite him. He pulled away, furious, and proceeded to slap her four times; left to right, then right to left. The blows were so viscous that stars popped before her eyes and she felt her lip split.

As she lay there, dazed, she dimly heard Dolohov say, "I bet you used that face of yours to get everything you wanted didn't you? You truly are a pampered little slut. Daddy's not here to save you now. You should remember this lesson I'm going to teach you. A good wife is obedient and respectful of her Lord and Master"
Astoria's vision was slowly coming back into focus, her head lolling from side to side. She saw Dolohov unbuttoning the front of his robes. "No…not…wife…never" she said hoarsely, struggling feebly and in vain against Dolohov's spell. He looked down at her, a sadistic grin spreading across his face. "Antonin please! Please stop it! Please!" She begged, her voice breaking, 'I will not tell a soul, I swear!"

"As if anyone would care" he sneered. "You are nothing without that Father of yours, even if he was an empty headed fool. Did he fuck you too just like his niece? Don't all the Greengrass' ravage each other? I bet he could not resist spreading those lovely long legs to see what was in between." He let out a bark of cruel laughter. "But perhaps not. Well do I remember him, he would not have had the guts, weak and worthless as he was. You should be grateful to be honored by a real man, you should be thanking me on bended knee, where you belong." Dolohov then drew out his member. It was an ugly thing, thick and long, bursting with veins and an angry purple head. This could not be happening, someone would come in, someone would stop this, she thought, desperately. The next moment Dolohov was roughly pushing up her robes and underskirts. He savagely ripped away her delicate lace underwear and garter belt to reveal everything beneath. She trembled, cold with dread with what was about to happen to her. Dolohov then shoved apart her legs, tearing her stockings as he did so, gripping her smooth thighs with iron fingers. She felt her eyes burning as he began to rub her roughly, panting with excitement. "Such a pretty little cunt." He breathed. "Honey sweet. Just like a lovely pink rose, begging to be plucked." I won't cry out, I won't! thought Astoria fiercely, as Dolohov forced himself inside her with a moan of pleasure. She bit her tongue so hard she tasted blood as he began to thrust inside her, mercilessly. He grabbed a handful of her beautiful, golden hair and yanked her head back violently, biting down hard on her neck. Astoria willed herself to focus on the dining room ceiling, a painting of a fierce battle of dragons and wizards wheeling above her, desperate for anything to remove herself from the reality of what she was enduring. Astoria was still gazing at the mural, trying to block out the constant groaning in her ear when Dolohov suddenly ripped her robes right down the middle so that she was completely naked and exposed. He gave a strangled shout of delight and increased the pace of his thrusting as he began to mauk her breasts with his hands, his mouth, his teeth, puffing and grunting like a beast. Astoria did her best not to scream in pain, though by now the tears were running freely down her face. Again, and again, he pumped in and out of her until his release came upon him. He moaned loudly as he spurted inside her womb, sweat plastering his dark hair to his face. Astoria merely laid there, numb, trying to process what had just happened. But her brain seemed to have jammed and there was a faint ringing in her ears. Dolohov's breathing slowed and he rolled off of her with a contented sigh and got to his feet, his twisted face shining with triumph. As Dolohov was buttoning himself back up he said, "with any luck, I will have planted a son between those legs today." Astoria could not hold back the tears then, she began to weep unrestrainedly as she lay naked and battered at the feet of this monster. Dolohov merely chortled. "But if not, I can always try again, can't I?" He grinned and swaggered out of the room, the huge, oaken door banging shut behind him.

Astoria did not know how long she wept for. She wept until she thought her head would burst, until she had no more tears left within her. All the injuries inflicted by Dolohov made themselves known then and she was in intense pain, wincing as she attempted to sit up. Her head was throbbing very badly, and as she gingerly touched the sorest spot, she found that a small part of her scalp had come away with the hair that Dolohov had torn from her. She looked down upon at herself. Blood was already starting to dry on her thighs and bruises were blooming all over her hips, arms and legs. She felt angry wheels on her neck where he had bitten her and she was certain that her wrist was broken. The bile suddenly came rushing up her throat and she vomited all over the floor. Astoria then began to crawl down the dining chamber towards the door, blood and seed dribbling out of her and her
ripped robes hanging off her body. She knew time was of the essence. She must somehow get to the greenhouse to try to find some tansy and asphodel in order to brew up some tansy tea, her intention being preventing a pregnancy. Dolohov seemed to be obsessed with getting a child from her for whatever, twisted reason. That he would never have, if Astoria Greengrass had anything to do with it. The thought of carrying and birthing his child was utterly repellent to her. She did not think she could bear that, a permanent living, breathing reminder of what Dolohov had done to her. Astoria tried to get to her feet, but the world span dizzily and she collapsed onto the floor. As she fell, she hit her head on the side of the table, and everything went black.
IV. - Tansy Tea

Chapter Summary

This chapter will introduce Narcissa Malfoy and also give a bit of background information about Mary the serving maid, which will be important for later on in the story.

Same disclaimer applies.

Hours, or maybe minutes later, Astoria was woken by a woman's horrified scream. Everything that had happened came rushing back to her then. Horrid images flashed across her mind as the harsh reality slapped her in the face just as hard as Dolohov ever had.

"My god, my god who do did this do you think?" It might have been Narcissa speaking. This was odd if true as these days Narcissa barely got out of bed; dulling her misery and fear with 'Healer Helena Gripes Liquid Opium'. "Quick, quick, someone get her upstairs!" Yes...it was definitely her.

Astoria lacked the strength to even open her eyes, so she let whoever was around her do whatever they were doing. It would change nothing after all. The next she knew, she was drifting through the air; obviously someone had decided a gentle hover charm was the best way to move her up the large, sweeping staircase to her bedchamber. Not too long after she felt someone dabbing her forehead with a warm cloth. She opened her eyes for the first time in what felt like forever, her lids heavy and sore. Mary was leaning over her, her face pale and frightened, her eyes red.

"Miss" she said in a cracked voice. "Oh, Miss!"

As Astoria took in her surroundings, she recognised that the handsome room was indeed her bedchamber. She was lying in her plush, empire bed with purple velvet hangings and gold swirls. The high ceilings were illustrated beautifully with more depictions of wizarding chivalry. The grand, marble fireplace was cracking faintly, filling the room with a warm glow. Many ornate urns and figurines lined the shelves and a magnificent dressing table, gilt in gold, took pride of place. Her favourite scents were lined up on the table, as were her family crest jewellery pieces along with jade and jewelled combs and brushes. Her wand, she saw, dully, was also among the trinkets. She did not know what use it would have been against the likes of Dolohov, but she had always had great faith in her wand. It had not failed her yet after all: Aspen, twelve and a half inches, unyielding, with dragon heartstring as the core. It's like nothing's changed. Astoria thought, looking at the pretty objects as they sparkled in the candlelight, unknowing. And yet, everything had changed for her now. She had been no maid of course when Dolohov had taken her, but that was scarcely the point. She hazily thought back to the first time she had been joined with a man. It had been three years ago now. She had surrendered her virginity to a handsome, blonde seventh year from Durmstrang Institute when the Triwizard Tournament had come to Hogwarts. It was a small mercy, she thought,
but at least Dolohov could not take that from her. That one precious gift a woman can only give but once, she thought, with a grim sort of satisfaction.

Astoria drew her attention back to Mary. She grasped her wrist with her good hand. "You must help me Mary" she said in a hoarse voice.

Mary looked very scared. "Miss Greengrass I don't think I can-"

Astoria cut her off. "Tansy tea" she said urgently. "I need it as soon as possible and I do not think I need to tell you why."

Mary still looked nervous; she was glancing at the door as if afraid Dolohov would come bursting in at any moment. "You are my only hope" said Astoria, her voice breaking, "I cannot have his child! I cannot! I beg you, I beg you Mary, in the name of Circe, please Mary, please!"

There was a long pause. Then Mary gave a shaky nod. "I will do my best Miss."

"One more thing" Astoria said. "I want a mirror"

Mary looked horrified, and for a moment Astoria thought she was going to defy her. However, Mary turned towards the glittering dressing table and muttered, "Accio." The mirror flying into her hand at once.

Mary then nervously handed her the golden, hand held mirror encrusted with emeralds and diamonds, after which she backed out the room. Astoria took a deep breath and held the mirror to her face… She almost cried out in shock. Both her eyes were blackened, her lilac, bloodshot eyes peering out dully from the ruin. There was a gash across her nose and finger mark bruises all over her face and neck. Her snapped wrist had been mended, but it was still stiff and painful. Most of these injuries could be fixed with healing charms, but what did it serve? She thought with disgust. No one would ever want her now, beautiful or not. She felt filthy, used, worthless and ashamed. Filled with self loathing and revulsion, she flung aside the mirror where it shattered somewhere across the room.

Not long after Mary had left, there was a tentative knock at the door.

"Enter." Astoria croaked, weakly.
Narcissa Malfoy then stepped into the room, wearing a green, silk bed robe. Astoria said nothing. She merely stared at her. Narcissa was looking shocked and disturbed, as if she was seeing Astoria for the first time. "Dolohov?" She said in a trembling voice that was barely audible above a whisper.

"Dolohov." Replied Astoria in a flat, dead tone.

Narcissa's blue eyes shone with tears. "I am so, so sorry" she whispered.

Astoria had, in the past, felt some pity for Narcissa, a collateral victim of her husband’s proclivities for Dark magic she supposed. But no. To hear Draco tell it, she was exactly like Lucius; a mad fanatic. He was truly a great ruin of a man, she thought, viciously. A foolish coward who had endangered his entire family and for what? The Malfoys were now at the bottom of the food chain, only their Pure Blood protecting them from execution. Indeed, the only reason the pair of them were so miserable was because they had fallen out of favor with the Dark Lord. Granted, that was good cause to fear, but Astoria wasn't in a sympathetic mood.

"Oh, you are sorry, are you?" Astoria replied, cold as ice. "Who brought me here?" She asked, her temper rising and her voice growing louder. "Who allied themselves with the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters, convinced me to join them and hath imprisoned me in this god forsaken hell hole!?”

"Dear, you must understand, I-" But Astoria didn't let her finish. She was shaking with fury.

"Understand!? How dare you! You cannot possibly understand what I have just endured! I have been used and spat out like a fucking brood mare, but oh no! You want me to understand? Get out!"

"Tori, dear, please." Narcissa said in a placating tone.

"Do not dare call me that. Get out, get out I say! I do not want to see you ever again! Get out now or I swear, I shall curse you to within an inch of your pathetic life! Get out, get out, get out!" Astoria was screaming at the top of her voice, releasing some of the blind rage and pain gushing from her broken heart.

Astoria did not give a fig who may overhear, what did it matter anymore? She seized the crystal goblet by her bedside and threw it as hard as she could towards Narcissa where it shattered on the silken wall. Narcissa lifted up her hands to shield herself from the shards of glass. As she lowered them, she looked very scared. Narcissa hesitated for a moment, then turned, and left the room. Mary
returned not too long after, carrying a tray of herbs and potions, along with her wand. She set the tray on the gilt bedside table and asked, tentatively, "May I begin, Miss? Some of these -these wounds, may take a little time to heal." Mary had a Healers background, Astoria knew, but she had given it up to enter domestic service instead. Mary sat on the edge of her bed, and reached out, gently to turn her face. At this, Astoria flinched, shrinking back into her pillows.

"I am sorry Miss, I shall do my best, but sometimes I will have to touch here and there to make sure I get them all, alright?" Astoria gave a shaky nod, willing herself not to weep. Mary then began doing all sorts of complicated movements with her wand, muttering incantations now and again. She had also wanted to fix the bruising between Astoria's legs too, but as soon as she lifted up the edge of her silk sleeping shift, Astoria had burst into hysterical sobs. Mary apologised over and over. "Very well, very well, we can leave those. Miss, it's alright. Drink this."

"What is it?" Astoria asked in a choked voice, wiping away her tears with a scrap of lace.

"The tansy tea you requested, Miss, I managed to procure some from the greenhouses. I have infused it with a touch of valerian to help you sleep. And - and I thought you ought to know...he has departed the Manor for the nonce."

Astoria did not need to ask who he was. She gulped down the tea as if she were some crude ruffian in a tavern but she did not care, all she cared about was getting this tea into her body as soon as possible. "Thank you, dearest Mary." Her voice was already beginning to slur a little. "You...you are so very kind..." She did not manage to finish, for she had slumped back onto her pillows and had drifted off into a troubled sleep, half hoping that she would never have to wake.
V. - Broken

Chapter Summary

So here we get a look at actual interaction between Astoria and Draco and her dealing with the aftermath of the rape. The story also begins to develop.
Same disclaimer applies.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It had been almost a moon’s turn until Mary had been able to persuade Astoria to leave her bedchamber. All previous attempts had ended in Astoria weeping and shaking on the floor, clutching at Mary's skirts. Astoria could not bear the thought of going downstairs and potentially seeing Dolohov, waiting there for her. Just picturing his satisfied smirk made her want to tear the skin from her flesh. Dolohov had not returned to the Manor since he had raped her, but still, there was a constant climate of fear that he could be back any day and that was more frightening than the thing itself. Indeed, since it had happened, Astoria would often wake screaming in the night, drenched in cold sweat and urine, convinced that Dolohov was pressing down on her chest or creeping into her bedchamber. There would be days where Astoria would be barely conscious due to all the potions she would need to take in order to dull her anguish. She would also bathe up to four times a day now, scrubbing herself almost raw when the water had long gone cold, as if determined to scrub away the stain that was Dolohov. Narcissa had once again made numerous attempts to speak to her, but Astoria had shunned the woman, she felt too angry and resentful towards the Malfoy’s at present. When this failed, Narcissa had written her letters, sliding them under her door, but Astoria had thrown them all into the fire without reading a single word. The primary reason for Dolohov's absence was due to The Dark Lord summoning his most trusted Death Eaters to go out on a most secretive campaign that was to last for some time.

*Good, the longer I may stay away from his unwelcome embrace, the better. Perhaps he shall even die.* Astoria thought viciously.

Mary had informed her that she had heard tell that it may be something to do with suppressing Ireland as all of mainland Britain was now under the control of the Dark Order. Mary's sources were the other maids as well as herself. When the girls were commanded to 'service' the male Death Eaters, many of the men had often bragged drunkenly of their exploits and conquests in the 'new world' they were building. To hear them tell it, Travers was one of the worst for doing this.

Astoria took a deep, shuddering breath and took a step out of her bedchamber. She was clad in sombre robes of black silk today and though they were fitted at the bodice, they buttoned up all the way to the neck, hiding her as much as possible. As she and Mary passed the central bedchamber where Narcissa and Lucius resided, they briefly overheard them arguing.
"I do not care what you say, Lucius!" Narcissa shouted, and it was evident that she was crying. "I do not care if she is of age, she is a child! A CHILD Lucius!"

"I told you Narcissa that there is naught that I can do!" Lucius roared back. "Do you truly imagine that the Dark Lord will..." But his words drifted away as they continued along the corridor.

Astoria disregarded their words, she did not care about anything or anyone any longer. When she got down to the hallway and laid eyes on the dining hall door she began to shake violently, grabbing Mary's arm with a vice like grip. "It is quite alright, Miss. We shan't go past that way to the gardens today, let us try the West way instead. It is still your will to go to the gardens?" Astoria gave a tremulous nod, still shaking.

When they finally reached the gardens, Mary sat her down on a delicate pink marble bench and draped a silver fox fur shawl over her shoulders. September was drawing near and there was a crispness in the air. "Thank you, Mary. You may leave me now." Astoria said, her voice distant.

"If you are certain Miss, call me if you have need of anything."

Mary's footsteps were drowned out by the softly splashing fountain in the middle of the large, bottomless pond. Astoria looked without really seeing, the teeming flying fish, the miniscule magenta frogs upon giant lilies and most noticeable of all, the enormous serpent fountain right in the middle with water gushing from its open mouth. She used to be fond of this place. Now she felt nothing, and sat there for what felt like an eternity.

"Tori?" A voice called softly from behind her. Astoria leapt to her feet faster than a frightened deer and whirled around, chest heaving with panic and gazing wildly about the gardens. What she saw made her cry out in shock. Standing between the fluttering rose bushes was Draco, his white blonde hair gleaming in the red afternoon sun. "I'm sorry, Tori, I'm sorry." He whispered, "It is me, Tori, come"

Astoria shook her head wildly, taking a step back from him. Then she said in a shaky voice, "Who Imperioused Madam Rosmerta in our sixth year and why?"

For a moment he looked confused and a little worried, as if she were mad. Then comprehension dawned upon his pale face. "It was you. I asked you to curse her as I was in detention that weekend with McGonagall, our transfiguration teacher. It's me, Tori, truly."
He came closer and held out his hand, but she recoiled. "Don't! Just don't! Don't! I can't." She said in a trembling voice, utterly terrified. Yes, he was Draco, but he was still a man and she had not been in the presence of any man since Dolohov had raped her. Men frightened her more than ever before now. Astoria had never seen such abject sadness in those grey eyes of his, but this did nothing to quench her fright and confusion.

"Alright, alright" he said, still trying to keep his voice as soft as possible. "How about I sit here? He gestured towards the stone ledge round the pond. "And you can be seated as before?" Slowly, tremulously, Astoria began to walk back towards the marble bench. She sat, stiffly, averting her eyes from Draco now that they were much closer with a few feet between them. "I know what that bastard did to you, Tori" he said in a low voice. She could tell he was trying to keep the rage out of his tone so as not to frighten her any more than she already was. "He will pay, I swear to you, he will pay. I don't know how I'm going to make this right, but I will find a way, Tori"

She looked up at Draco, lilac eyes meeting the grey. "No one can make this right" she said, tears now rolling down her cheeks. " The damage is done. I am broken and dirty and your empty words will not solve that!" Astoria had begun to sob openly now.

"Mother- Mother tells me you still will not receive her." Draco said, tentatively.

"That is quite right, I will NOT receive her! Your vile family are the ones who got me into this hellish mess!" Astoria yelled at him, erupting with anger.

"Tori please, what happened-what happened was not your fault, I-" Draco began. But by then Astoria had sprang to her feet, the fox fur shawl landing on the ground. Confused and scared, the magic burst out of her and there was a loud slapping noise, as Draco's face snapped to the left when the involuntary spell hit him.

He touched the spot where her magic had repelled him, hurt in his eyes. "Just, just leave me alone Draco! Leave me alone!" She sobbed. And with that, Astoria fled through the rose bushes, back towards the Manor, her anguished wails echoing in the afternoon air.

“Tori- Tori please!” Draco called after her. But Astoria continued to run as fast as she could, tears streaming down her face.

Three moons had passed since her encounter with Draco, Astoria thought as she laid in bed, full of regret of deeds undone and things unsaid. To be sure, he had had good intentions but at the time, she
had been a fragile mess. Not that she wasn't still fragile, however. Dolohov had still not returned, but she felt just a fraction of her shattered self mending a little in his absence. Astoria had suspected that she would have been able to recover herself quicker if there was not the constant black cloud of Dolohov's return hanging over her. Astoria sighed, shoving away her troubled thoughts. The sun was streaming on her face, giving her golden skin an almost unearthly glow. Mary had entered, opening the handsome, brocade curtains with a flick of her wand and was now busying herself on the other side of the room, her back to her.

"Good morn, Mary" she said sleepily, as she swung her long legs out of the bed. Astoria then stepped daintily over to where Mary stood, the silk of her pale blue sleeping shift rustling softly.

Mary gave a start, as if she had only just realised Astoria was there. "Oh, good morn, Miss, are you - are you well?"

"Fairly" Astoria lied, frowning slightly. Something was amiss, Mary was still not looking at her and her voice sounded strained. "What is that you have over there, today's robes?" She asked.

Mary did not answer. She took a deep, shuddering breath and turned around to face Astoria. She was holding a magnificent, pure white, lace gown, inlaid with pearls and glittering diamonds on the bodice and the long, wide cuffs. However, the expression on Mary’s face suggested she was holding a foul smelling, rotting carcass. Astoria stared at the gown for a moment, not quite comprehending what was in front of her. Then her stomach twisted violently. She had seen that gown before. It looked to be an exact replica of the gown her Mother had worn on her wedding day. She had seen enough photos and portraits of her parents wedding countless times to know that she was not mistaken.

"Master Dolohov has returned to the Manor, Miss." Astoria's heart plummeted at her words. "He said you are- are...to wear this today" Mary said, with an enormous effort, as if the words had been ripped from her. "He said you will need something suitable for the - for the ceremony. Today, Miss, today you and Master Dolohov are to be we-

Astoria did not let her finish, if she said those words it would it make it real, absolute. "No." She said in a hard voice, actually taking a step back from Mary and shaking her head feverishly. "I refuse, I refuse to do this, they can't make me say the words, the Bond won't work."

"Miss, I am aware that this is distressing, I am, but I really don't think-

"I told you, NO!" Astoria yelled suddenly, making Mary jump. "Get that out of my sight immediately! Now I tell you!" Mary merely stood there, looking very frightened. "What part of that
did you not understand, Mary?" She snapped, "I do not want that thing in my bedchamber, throw it onto the fire if you must!"

"Miss please listen to me!" Mary implored. "The Dark Order have now invoked Matrimonium Coactus!" She burst out.

Chapter End Notes

Matrimonium coactus, literally translated from Latin, means forced marriage.
VI. - Matrimonium Coactus

Chapter Summary

I find this chapter really disturbing and it was hard to write. Dolohov is just so evil. And in case anyone is wondering, there is no chance of a redemption arc for him, as I said, he is pure evil.
Same disclaimer applies.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Astoria froze. *Matrimonium coactus*. To call this magic medieval would have been generous, she had recalled learning about this in *A History of Magic*. It had been thousands of years since it was outlawed, and with good reason. Matrimonium coactus effectively allowed any wizard to marry any witch he chose, whether she was willing or no. It also entitled the would-be husband in question to have automatic claim to any lands or gold owned by his wife and made her his personal property. Currently, the binding magical contract that sealed all unions would be void if either party were under some sort of magical influence, say, the Imperious curse, for instance. Indeed, both parties were previously permitted to keep their respective wealth and land unless they wished to join it with their spouse. But no longer it seemed. Astoria stood there silently, horror crashing over her like some great typhoon. There did not seem to be any way out of this. Mary also seemed to be at a loss for words, though her eyes were bright and there was sorrowful pity in her gaze.

The door to her bedchamber suddenly creaked open. Astoria whirled around and... There, filling the doorway, clad in black velvet dress robes, stood Dolohov, a look of satisfied smugness plastered across his pale, twisted face. "Leave us, Mary" he murmured softly. Not daring to defy him, Mary scurried out of the room, closing the door on her way out. It was all Astoria could do not to break down there and then. Seeing Dolohov again was like re living the whole brutal ordeal he had put her through. Dolohov’s eyes roved over the skimpy silk shift she was wearing, knowing she was naked underneath. It made her feel incredibly vulnerable and scared. "Well my darling, I am back, did you miss me?" He gave her a lascivious smile that cut. "Did you like my gift? I thought you might. You are the very image of Irina, so I thought it fitting that you donned the same gown for your own wedding day. Well do I remember how magnificent she looked on that day. Oh yes-" he said in answer to the obvious shock on Astoria’s face, "I was there, a boy of twenty five years, though it almost feels like it was yesterday. Ahhh..." He sighed pleasurably. "She was simply divine, like a delicious piece of fruit, just waiting to be eaten" he went on, his voice dripping with salaciousness. "I wanted nothing more than to rip that gown from her body and claim her, right then and there for all to see." Disgusted, Astoria turned away from him, looking but not seeing the grand gardens and rolling hills outside her window, trying to stop herself shaking. She hated it when he spoke of her family, he was always so cruel. "Why do you not put it on my love?" Dolohov was right behind her now, his voice hissing in her ear. Astoria whirled around and saw he was holding out the gown, expectantly. She backed away in dread as he drew closer. "You are so very beautiful after all. Come now, why don't you slip out of that shift for me? No need to be shy sweetheart, there is naught that I have not yet seen beneath there, after all." He said, grinning wolfishly. Astoria held out a shaking hand, not daring to refuse. Dolohov looked madder than ever before. He was practically salivating,
his cold blue eyes popping with such avid intensity that they seemed to pin her to the spot. His hand suddenly shot out and drew her to him forcefully where she felt the sheer potency of his arousal. He gave her a wet, dominating kiss, breathing hard into her mouth. Astoria could not help herself, his taste, his smell, everything about him, revolted her. She shoved him away, cringing, the gown still clutched in her right hand. "Now, that's no way to treat your Lord husband to be, is it?" Dolohov purred. "Indeed, who would have thought it? The daughter of the oh, so proud Hadies Greengrass, born of a line spanning twenty thousand years, warming my bed each night as my wife? What do you think Daddy dearest would say if he could see his precious little princess being ravaged?" He let out an insane burst of laughter, "perhaps we should ask him" he breathed, regaining control, though his voice still shook with sadistic pleasure. "Perhaps we ought to dig old Hadies up and make an inferi out of him, would you like that, my love?" He jeered.

At these words, Astoria gave a wail of abject despair and fear. Then, suddenly came the anger, rising up in her like boiling water, filling her with a reckless daring. She grabbed her wand from the bedside table and fired a viscous stinging hex at Dolohov. Momentarily surprised and caught off guard, Dolohov did not have time to deflect the spell, which hit him square in the chest. She tore the gown in half and spat full in his face as he stumbled and fell, grunting in pain. "Curse you! Curse you! You foul...you evil...disgusting, scoundrel!" She screamed, as pearls and diamonds rolled all over the plush purple carpet. "I would rather die than be your wife! Why don't you just KILL me!"

Dolohov had gotten to his feet. Though he was paler than usual and rubbing the spot where he had been hit, he still managed to smile a terrible, maniacal smile; his cold eyes swimming with blind, unadulterated rage. "Oh, my darling," he said in a slow, velvety voice full of promise. He wiped the spittle off his cheek and licked it, obscenely from his fingers. "You really should not have done that. Such a pity, I thought that you would have learned respect and obedience by now." He gave a deep, mock sigh, as if seriously concerned. "I cannot sully that pretty face on our big day, so instead... you shall just be punished. And as for killing you," He sneered. "I am never going to do that, you are just far too much fun to play with." Astoria was suddenly plunged into shadow, the early morning sun blocked by Dolohov's massive, hulking figure looming over her. She shrank away, trembling, already regretting her angry outburst. He was going to hurt her now, worse than ever before, she just knew. Those glacial eyes were telling her so. There was a ringing silence as they stared at each other, her fear feeding his anticipation. Then -"Crucio!" Dolohov suddenly shouted, drawing out his wand with incredible speed. Astoria screamed. Words could not describe the pain, it was like she was being stabbed, lashed and beaten all at once. The fiery pain penetrated deep to her very bones. She had never ever before endured so much agony. This was a thousand times worse than anything Dolohov had put her through thus far. Surely death was better than this searing, blinding hell. Dolohov had waited a good five minutes before lifting the spell, but it may as well have been an hour. Astoria lay there, spluttering and sobbing, her breathing ragged. "Would you care for some more my dear? Or will you be a good little girl and do as your told now?" He crooned, mockingly.

Astoria was shaking, her muscles still twitching and aching painfully, such was the power of the curse. She found her voice from somewhere deep within her and said, "n-n-no, p-please, n-not again, not again! Please, Antonin! I'll be good! I'll be good, I swear my Lord!" She sobbed, her voice gibbering.
Dolohov sneered. "See, we are learning already aren't we?" he continued, highly amused. "I do enjoy it when you say my name. So delicious. But still, I would not want you to forget this in a hurry, so-" He hit her with the curse again. And again. And again. Astoria did not know how long this went on for, but by the end she was barely conscious. After it was over she was jerking violently, her head sagging and eyes rolling back into her skull. She was then distantly aware of being roughly handled and thrown onto the bed, face first.

No. Not again, not now. She thought in dread.

A final end to the humiliation, Astoria thought, despairingly, as she heard Dolohov fumbling with his garb and panting rapidly behind her. Before she knew it, he had shoved up her silk shift up so that she was fully exposed, as he grabbed her hips. He yanked her towards him and she felt his hard erection pressing against her. But this time, this time, he pushed himself through her 'rear entrance.'

Astoria gasped in shock and pain, causing Dolohov to laugh softly in her ear, his hot, heavy breath on her neck chilling her to the bone. "I have missed you, oh so much" he breathed, with relish "You know you deserve this, do you not? You little slut". It hurt so much that Astoria had to will herself not to scream out in anguish as he plunged in and out of her. She winced every time Dolohov’s sweaty flesh slapped against hers, hard, as he grunted and moaned with pleasure. The best thing that could be said was that it did not last long. Torturing her beforehand had quickened his release, she thought, disgusted. When Dolohov had finished, he leaned over and whispered, "I shall be seeing you later, wife. And if you dare raise a wand to me again, you will be very sorry indeed, my sweet. That was just a taster of some of the things I can do" he then gave her a soft, delicate kiss on the cheek. At this, Astoria went cold all over and wet herself. He chuckled and straightened, giving her a stinging slap on the backside, and rearranged his robes.

Chapter End Notes

So as I said earlier part of this is inspired by what ISIS are currently doing, performing forced marriages as a form of ethnic cleansing. Plus there is the fact that Dolohov is completely obsessed with Astoria and had a similar, creepy obsession with her Mother.
VII. - The Vow

Chapter Summary

This sheds some more light on the devastation that the Dark Order have left behind and also delves into Astoria's personal feelings and more reminiscences about her Father.

Same disclaimer applies.

Dazed and hurting, Astoria stared up at the purple velvet hangings of her grand, empire bed. She did not know how much more of this she could take. It seemed that there was no way of escaping Dolohov and this marriage unless she took her own life. Indeed, she had considered the prospect even before all of this, had even gone so far as to research the best potion for the task, but in the end, she had not the courage to even attempt to make it. The ingredients and methods were so complicated. However, unless some chance of battle felled Dolohov, she was looking at a lifetime wed to this monster, however long her life may last that is. Despite Astoria's hopes, Dolohov being killed was, at best, unlikely at present. He was powerfully magical and a devoted servant of the Dark Lord, who's strength and numbers were growing by the day, as witches and wizards everywhere were finally submitting to the fact that the Dark Order had won. Harry Potter, the so called 'Chosen One' had not been seen or heard from in over a year, with many speculating he was in hiding somewhere. Others thought he was dead, but in truth, no one had the slightest inkling where he may be or what he may be doing. This was an issue that would send the Dark Lord into a frenzied, black rage on the few occasions the subject of Potter was raised in his presence.

Indeed, Astoria had been among those Death Eaters who had been sent on fruitless campaigns to search for Potter. The Dark Lord wanted Potter and he wanted him now. It utterly consumed him and everything else be damned, which indecently, had fallen into chaos. There was no 'Ministry of Magic' any longer. Rogue witches and wizards rampaged unchecked and untamed, terrorising Muggles and their own kind alike, posturing their power by killing and torturing with reckless abandon wherever they chose. To be sure, the Dark Lord himself had killed the Muggle Prime Minister and impaled his body on a flagpole for all of Muggle London to see.

The Dark Lord had big plans for the Muggles Astoria knew, they would all eventually be forced into subservience or killed. They had no idea of the true cause of their suffering of course, she had heard that the Dark Order were being called, 'terrorists' by the Muggle newspapers and 'unknown, highly sophisticated methods' were being used to defeat them. She also knew that the Order of the Phoenix was a spent force, with barely a handful of surviving members left. Who could possibly stand a chance against the Dark Order and its followers now? It was all very well resisting, but with the stranglehold of the Dark Order spreading its toxicity to other parts of the world, what chance did anyone have of defeating them, no matter how powerful, or courageous? And even if, by some miracle, the Dark Order were to be defeated, Astoria's own fate was likely to end with her being thrown into Azkaban for all of her nefarious crimes. Astoria felt vile and broken, as she had done so before, but this time felt like a new low. Was this her atonement? For all the terrible things she had done? She had killed and tortured innocent people, both magical and Muggle. Even though she was under the threat of being killed herself if she did not comply, she had still had a choice, hadn't she?
She had chosen to live and commit atrocities, rather than to refuse and surrender her own, worthless life.

_Maybe I do deserve this, just like Dolohov said._ She thought.

Another memory drifted to her then, one of her Father and some of the last words he ever spoke to her...

"I cannot live without you, Father! I could not bear it if you left me here, all alone, where I cannot follow." She had pleaded, tears streaming down her face.

"Now, now child, I know you shall be perfectly alright" he had replied with a weak smile.

"How, in Merlin's name, could you possibly know that?" She had said, grasping his wasted hand in both of hers fiercely, as though willing him to get better.

"Because," he had said hoarsely, "you are a true Greengrass; and we are strong in the face of adversity. Make me proud my darling daughter, I do love you so very dearly. You truly are, just like Irina, beautiful and brave."

Father had never, ever compared her to her Mother, Irina, before. His death had been the result of a blood borne curse placed upon the Greengrass family over a century ago. Astoria had often wondered if she would also fall victim to the curse, but there was absolutely no way of telling if she carried it in her own blood. Her Father had scarcely mentioned her Mother, Irina, at all throughout her childhood. Yes, her parents had been niece and uncle, that was the Greengrass way after all. But Astoria had often heard of the unbreakable, esoteric love between them. She had remembered at the point of death, how her Father had then gently touched her face with his shrivelled hand, and had looked at her with such deep affection, that she felt as if they were staring into one another's souls, lilac eyes connecting. It was a special moment, not to mention an uncharacteristic show of endearment that her Father had scarcely embraced before.

When Astoria thought of that encounter, a fierce, bubbling defiance had settled itself inside her heart. She was not going to be cowed, would not allow her fighting spirit to be quenched by the likes of filthy slime like Antonin Dolohov. She was not dirty, she was strong, tough and beautiful, a true Greengrass through and through, just as Father had said. As for Dolohov, he truly was the most evil, vile and disgusting human being on the planet. Yes, he was worse even than the Dark Lord. Not that this redeemed his Lordship whatsoever for all his hideous deeds, but Astoria was certain that the Dark Lord had not raped Bellatrix Lestrange to come by their daughter, Delphini. To hear others tell it, it had been a most secretive and passionate liaison, certainly not a one-sided, ruthless campaign of
fear and aggression which was the way of it between herself and Dolohov. One day, Astoria vowed, savagely, one day, Antonin Dolohov would pay dearly for everything that he had ever done. Not only for his monstrous treatment of her, but for his murdered wife, for every man, woman and child he had ever brutalised in his blood stained career as a Death Eater. He thought he could break her, could crush her into submission, but she would be damned to the fiery depths of hell if she let that bastard win.

Dolohov's voice suddenly cracked like a whip, snapping Astoria out of her reverie. "Mary! Get in here!" He barked. Mary appeared at once and came creeping, timidly into the room. "Clean that up at once" he ordered, jerking his head in the direction of the bed where Astoria was still lying in her own blood and urine, his seed on her thighs. "Mend that gown immediately, and I want her ready by noon, do you understand me, girl?"

"Yes, Master Dolohov." Mary said, looking utterly terrified.

"And do something about the blood, I won't have her bleeding through that gown, it cost an absolute fortune." He then strode out of the room, velvet robes swirling.
VIII. - Bonded Forever

Chapter Summary

I think this chapter speaks for itself, but it also covers some of Dolohov's own family history. There's also non-canon Death Eaters introduced, Silas Norton and Elizabeth Nott, who will be recurring characters later on. (I will explain how and why Silas is disfigured in other chapters) I've also given some of the Death Eaters first names who are only known by their surnames in the original book. Same disclaimer applies.

Astoria's wedding day, such as it was, passed in a daze. She had uttered no complaint as Mary had woven pearls and diamonds into her honey-colored hair in a long, elaborate, French braid. Mary had also fastened diamonds to Astoria’s ears and neck, garbing her in the magnificent, glittering wedding gown, its train flowing three feet behind her. White silken slippers adorned with more diamonds and pearls hugged her unsteady feet as she took the first shaky step towards the door. Mary escorted Astoria to the Binding Chapel, a large, oval building situated at the back of Malfoy Manor. When they arrived, Lucius was waiting for them outside the large doors, clad in velvet green dress robes woven with silver thread. His grand garments contrasted oddly with his ashen face, thinning hair and sunken eyes. Astoria merely stared at him.

Lucius held out his hand. "I am to be your Father today." He said.

"I beg your pardon?" Astoria replied, expressionlessly.

"I am the one who is to hand you over to your husband, seeing as your own Father, the dearly departed Hadies Greengrass, is no longer with us" he replied in a weary drawl.

"Very well." Astoria said coldly. "Lead on."

Astoria took Lucius' gloved hand and allowed him to lead her into the Binding Chapel. The entire room was made from pure white marble with gilded gold chairs lining the hall. Fresh flowers were everywhere, matching perfectly with the magnificent stained glass windows depicting the Malfoys in their native France. There were two large statues, also gilt in gold at the end of the Chapel, carved in the likeness of Merlin and Circe. Astoria saw Dolohov standing at the end of the aisle, a look of ill concealed, viscous triumph upon his twisted face. She noticed, dully, that he had now donned a black velvet bow tie over the white silken collar peeking out over his dress robes, matching white gloves covering his large hands. A true bridegroom, she thought, bitterly. Standing next to Dolohov was a sallow skinned, wrinkled, stooped old warlock with only a few wisps of long grey hair coming...
from his scalp. The warlock was wearing grand, burgundy robes inlaid with elaborate golden scrollwork and he was being propped up by a gold cane, whose head was in the likeness of a dragon. This must be the Binder, Astoria thought. The ordeal Dolohov had put through that morning had made her meek and submissive. So, Astoria said the words she needed to say in order for the Binder to bond her to Dolohov for life, despite her brimming eyes. The ceremony went on for hours, and the old warlock kept making incence fly from the mouth of his dragon cane, blowing it everywhere.

Finally, the Binder said, "Do you, Astoria Venus Greengrass, take Antonin Nikolai Dolohov..." Astoria could not believe this was happening, it was like something out of a nightmare. "For as long as you both may live..." She wanted to run, she wanted to hide, to scream and cry, this was all so horribly wrong, it was not meant to be this way. But then- "I now declare you bonded forever" finished the Binder in his croaky voice. As Dolohov slid the huge, pear shaped diamond onto her finger, he gave her a malicious look full of promise.

Dolohov drew her to him and kissed her fiercely when the thing was done, despite the usual practice of giving the bride a quick peck upon the lips as everyone clapped. There were around seventy guests, chiefly inner circle Death Eaters and their families, including the Dark Lord himself. As Astoria walked back down the aisle, Narcissa Malfoy gave her the saddest look she had ever seen, and Draco could not seem to look at her at all, his face grief stricken. Astoria, however, was still filled with so much anger and resentment that she had returned Narcissa's gaze with a cold, hateful stare. Though she did smile mechanically for the photographer who was waiting along with all the well wishers waiting at the Chapel entrance, knowing how enraged Dolohov would be if she did not. From across the Chapel, Elizabeth Nott had then approached her. She was an elder sister to her former classmate, Theodore Nott. Elizabeth had grasped Astoria’s hands in each of her own and told her how much she wished that Astoria would give Antonin many children. Elizabeth Nott, a witch of nineteen years, may have been beautiful with her shining chestnut hair, pale grey eyes and straight, central nose. However, her cruel nature and cold gaze seemed to eradicate any of her beauty. Afterward, Victoria Avery, a curvaceous, red headed witch, had proceeded to congratulate Astoria on landing such a pure, wholesome marriage, her eyes shining with a fanatical glow.

“This marriage, is very good first step.” Proclaimed the Dark Lord over all the babble in his cold, clear voice, snapping Astoria out of her horrified trance. “Blood purity is everything during these times. We must make haste to repopulate the foul, tainted scourge of Muggle-Wizard unions encouraged by the likes of Albus Dumbledore, Charity Burbage and their rotten ilk. The natural order is now being reestablished, to blood purity!” He screeched, as goblets of wine suddenly appeared in front of everyone in the hall.

“To blood purity!” shouted all those filling the Chapel, as they raised their goblets towards the Dark Lord, and drank.

After the Binding Ceremony, all proceeded to the Malfoy’s Ballroom for the dancing in a river of silk, velvet and jewels with much excited chatter among the guests. Astoria was a graceful dancer, her Father had made sure of it, though now she dreaded dancing the first dance with her new
husband. She prayed that she would keep her resolve and composure. Too soon, they had arrived in the magnificent Ballroom. Twenty candlelit crystal chandeliers adorned the ceilings, the wallpaper was pale blue silk, decorated with diamonds and silver leaf swirls. The marble floor was done in the same pale blue as the walls, as were the enormous velvet curtains that framed the colossal, silver gilt windows. Astoria noticed that a small orchestra was seated on the large balcony overlooking the Ballroom as Dolohov led her into the centre. The guests were lining the walls. Dolohov bowed low and she curtsied deeply. Then he drew her close to him, holding her waist and hand firmly. As the music started, they both began to whirl around the room, Astoria's dancing lessons rushing back to her easily. She had to grudgingly admit that she was surprised with the grace that Dolohov also danced with as well… how could such a monstrous being dance so beautifully? After a time, other dancers began to join them, and over the increased pitch of laughter and chattering voices, Dolohov said,

“You look absolutely stunning my sweet, I have never seen such a lovely sight in all of my years. I can scarcely wait to get you in my bed tonight. You belong to me now, you know that now, do you not?”

When Astoria did not answer, Dolohov tightened his grip on her hand and waist. Astoria forced herself to smile the tiniest of smiles, frightened about what he might do in front of everyone and replied, “As you say, husband” and Dolohov gave her a satisfied sneer.

When the dancing was done with, everyone made for the dining hall for the wedding feast. It was very same dining hall where Dolohov had raped her for the first time. The dining hall itself had been decorated elaborately in green and silver. Candelabras in the shapes of snakes adorned the vast dining table, along with bunches of fresh flowers and mountains of fruit and macaroons. The candlelight sparkled off the many mirrors and silverware. Astoria supposed that the effect was beautiful, but was too devastated to appreciate any of it. Astoria and Dolohov were seated on green, velvet chairs at the head of the long table, the Dark Lord at the other head. There was an obscene amount of food, twenty courses to be exact. Apple salad, poached trout, roasted venison, hung pheasant, quail's eggs, giant blue lobsters, dragon steak and so much more. But Astoria had barely eaten a thing at the wedding feast, terrified of what would happen at the end of the night, though she did knock back six large goblets of strong, Elf made wine. It may be slightly easier later if she were drunk. Dolohov stamped on this plan, however. As she reached for the seventh goblet, his hand had clamped down, hard, over own and he whispered, threateningly, "I do not want my wife behaving like some drunken slattern on her special day, I think you have had enough, my dear."

Not daring to argue, Astoria released her grip on her jewel encrusted goblet and stared blankly at a bunch of roses and lilies in front of her plate. Dolohov himself became drunker and drunker and louder and louder with each course. There were many toasts and speeches at the wedding feast, celebrating her marriage to Dolohov. Phrases such as, ‘The New World' and 'Magic is Might' were thrown out, but she scarcely heard them, nor cared. Astoria spoke only when spoken to, keeping her eyes on her silver plate, her fright increasing with each hour that ticked past. Knowing how much her Father would have cared about this most poignant moment in her life, her thoughts drifted to him and again, she could almost hear his words, but she had a few choice words of her own:
Do you see this, Father? Do you see it? Astoria thought, savagely. A decent, Pureblood marriage at last, just as you hath always desired, does that make you happy at last, Father?

In truth though, her Father would have been mortified to see her wed to the likes of Antonin Dolohov. The Dolohov's were indeed a Pureblood wizarding family. However, their House was in ruins. Three generations past, the family had been exiled from their native Russia for their prolific, viscous, Dark activities towards Muggles and wizards alike that could no longer be ignored. The Russian Ministry of Magic had chosen to banish the Dolohov’s rather than to execute them due to their noble, Pure Blood status. Dolohov's Grandsire, Alexei, had uprooted the family to Britain, where his son, Anatole had enrolled at Hogwarts, thereby becoming one of the first forerunners of the Dark Lord's Death Eaters. Anatole's son Antonin, whom he had fathered while still at school, had joined up during the First Uprising. Antonin and his Father had participated in the brutal murders of the Prewett brothers during the Dark Lord's first reign of terror. It was said that they and three others had tortured the two brothers for a day and a half, mutilated their bodies and dumped the butchered remains outside of the Ministry. The elder Dolohov, Anatole, had been killed when he had been apprehended by hit-wizards. But, Antonin, whom had also attempted to fight to the death when caught, had been overcome by aurors and was thrown into Azkaban for his involvement in the crimes. While Antonin was imprisoned, the modest family Estate of Dolohov in Britain had fallen into disrepair and ruin. So as well as having Astoria herself, Antonin would now get the billions of gold and treasures her family owned, including the ancestral seat of Greengrass Palace. It was a most rancorous prospect, she could almost hear her Father turning in his grave.

Drunken yells suddenly jolted Astoria out of her musings. "To bed! Let's bed them! Bed them, bed them NOW!" Roared Corban Yaxley's rough voice across the dining hall.

Oh, Merlin save her. It was time for herself and Dolohov to be bedded. It was a tradition that was part of Matrimonium coactus to ensure the marriage was consummated. As the cry was echoed throughout the hall, Astoria felt the little blood left in her face start to recede and began to shake with terror. Strong arms suddenly yanked her to her feet. Dolohov had gotten up from his chair. Many wizards had started to approach the head of table where they had both been sat.

"There you are boys!" Dolohov slurred loudly. "Take her to my bed!"

Shouts of delight, whistling, whooping and jeering assaulted her ears as Dolohov thrust Astoria into the crowd of drunken, shouting men. Amycus Carrow was wheezing with excitement as he shoved pudgy hand down the front of her bodice, causing the delicate lace to tear down the front, partially exposing her breasts.

"Look at the size of those!" Shouted Clarence Avery, lecherously. He was swaying from side to side, splashing wine from his jewelled goblet everywhere. "You are a lucky fellow, Dolohov, those tits make me wish I had never weaned!"
Astoria's hands automatically jumped up to her chest to cover herself, but Robert Mulciber shoved them away. She was then aware of Walden McNair behind her, recognising his wicked shortle as he began to unlace the back of her gown with deft, well practiced hands. Edward Travers then leapt out of nowhere and tore one of her long sleeves, his eyes gleaming as they ran up and down her form. William Jugson had proceeded to rip at her skirts, breathing hard and shouting incoherently. Walter Selwyn began to grope at her aggressively and Evan Rosier wrenched the lace garter from her right leg, waving it in the air like some perverted trophy. Astoria could hear Dolohov laughing gleefully in the background.

“Do not worry your pretty little head!” yelled a brown haired youth with a disfigured face, whom she recognised as Silas Norton. He gave her a lewd smile, “Dolohov knows what to do with a woman!” More raucous laughter from the crowd followed his words.

It was all too much. Astoria backed away from their leering, monstrous faces. It was as if she was trapped in some grotesque, perverse fair with innumerable, hideous caricatures preventing her escape. Thorefinn Rowle then suddenly and easily scooped her up into his arms and threw her over his shoulder as if she were some freshly hunted deer. Unbidden, she clutched at his back for fear of being dropped, it was a long way to fall after all. Indeed, Rowle stood at over seven and a half feet tall and he was incredibly drunk. "This one is a beauty, Dolohov!” Rowle bellowed over all the noise, patting her backside as he did so. "What do you say boys, do you not think the time is ripe to take this sweet young thing up to the bed of our comrade so he can fuck his bride?!" There was an ear splitting roar of assent and Rowle began to stride towards the cavernous doors along with all the others who were bustling excitedly in their wake, Astoria still flung over his massive shoulder. Through the hallway and up the stairs they flew as McNair and Travers began to sing a bawdy song:

"There once was a witch named Sally, she sat on the lap of a well endowed chap, and cried, Sir, you are right up my alley!

There once was an old witch named Ethel, and you may think it odd when I say, that despite her high station, rank and education, she always spelled CUNT with a K!

There once was a witch from Harrow, who found that her cunt was too narrow, for times without number, she would use a cucumber, but could not accomplish a marrow!"

There was a torrent of drunken laughter as they reached the top of the staircase, which increased in pitch as Avery fell face first onto the plush, green carpet, his goblet crashing down the marble stairs. Rowle turned left rather than right as Astoria herself would have done so to reach her own bedchamber. She had never before been to the West wing where the wizards were housed. This unknown made her fright even more palpable. After travelling through various corridors, Rowle kicked down the door to what must have been Dolohov's bedchamber and ducked underneath the frame. Astoria vaguely took in the room around her. There were very few candles lit which gave the room a dim, ominous glow. From what she could tell, nearly everything in there was done in black velvet, which made the atmosphere even more threatening. Every silver ornament that she could glimpse was in the form of a snake. The same was true for the fireplace, two enormous snakes coiled
together and carved in black marble, which she glimpsed as Rowle laid her down on the bed, giving her a lecherous look as he did so.

Astoria became aware that every eye in the room was upon her. The wedding gown was torn half to pieces after the mauling she had gotten downstairs, leaving much of her flesh exposed. The wizards were all still chattering and drinking, though none could stop staring at her half naked form upon the bed. She knew what they all wanted to do to her. As Astoria shut her eyes to spare herself this nauseating sight, there was a sudden upswing of cheering and clapping. She looked up to see all the wizards parting to reveal Dolohov who had come staggering into the room, a half empty bottle of Ogden’s Firewhiskey swaying wildly in his hand.

Yaxley smiled and clapped Dolohov on the back. "Well old boy, time to do the deed. Enjoy her, she looks magnificent" he said, casting a lustful glance in her direction.

Dolohov laughed as he swayed into Yaxley heavily, "I already have!" he yelled.

The wizards all roared as they began to stream out of the bedchamber, leaving her alone with Dolohov. Though they were no longer in the room, Astoria could still hear them singing and laughing outside the door. From what she had heard, it was fairly common for the bedding party to loiter outside, continuing their drinking, shouting out obscene suggestions and advice to the groom. Indeed, Astoria heard someone, Travers perhaps, yell through the door: "Put that pretty thing on top Antonin, old boy! You'll be able to see those big beautiful tits bouncing away! Merlin what I would give to see that...." but the rest of his words were lost over a fresh outbreak of laughter.

Meanwhile, Dolohov was standing at the foot of the bed, still swaying slightly and attempting to get her into focus, all the while fondling his crotch. He took another great swig from the bottle. "You shan't be needing that" he slurried, thickly, giving a flick of his wand so that the tattered remains of her gown vanished, leaving her completely naked. Astoria began to shake violently and made to cover her breasts, but Dolohov noticed and said, warningly, "No." She stopped at once and shut her eyes tightly, willing herself to block out the sounds of him clumsily undressing. Too soon though, the feather bed began to creak and Astoria felt Dolohov clambering on top of her, breathing heavily and stinking of drink. Her eyes flew open as she felt his hand caressing her right breast and failed to repress a shudder, her chest rising and falling rapidly. Dolohov was stark naked, his large member hard as an iron bar, his bloodshot, icy blue eyes staring at her. "So." He said softly, a smile playing around his thin lips, "Here we are at last." Astoria did not answer. Frightened, she turned her face away onto the pillow, averting her eyes. "Now, now, that is quite impolite on our wedding night" he said with a soft chuckle. "Look at me my darling, I want to see that gorgeous face" his tone was still soft, but she could hear the unspoken threat beneath it: Do as I command, or you shall sorely regret it. Astoria forced herself to look into his face. Dolohov smiled unpleasantly and proceeded to push her legs apart with his knees, he grasped her small waist with both of his hands and took a deep intake of breath. As he exhaled, a hand travelled down between her legs, sliding between her lower lips, beginning to rub her harder and harder. She could feel his length pressing into her thigh, and a dribble of seed trickled down toward her womanly folds. “Such lovely smooth skin” Dolohov murmured, as he ran his other hand up and down her body. “You truly are, exquisite, the most
beautiful witch in the world. Time to put a baby in that belly.”

Unbidden, the tears came rushing to Astoria’s eyes and she had to bite down on her bottom lip to stop herself from sobbing. Dolohov ignored this and proceeded to kiss her all over, after which he jammed two fingers inside, making her flinch. Still taking no notice of her reactions, he proceeded to work his fingers in and out of her for a time before opening up her lips to push himself up inside to fill her with a grunt of pleasure. Dolohov pinned down both of her hands with his own and began to thrust, hard, breathing rapidly into her neck, his moans becoming louder and louder, his bursting, seed filled testes slapping on her backside. At this increase in noise there was much whooping and whistling from the remaining wizards outside, shouting out words of encouragement.

"Fuck that little filly, Dolohov! Plant a son between those legs, that's my boy!" Someone shouted, his words barely coherent, such was the extent of his drunkenness.

A small cry of pain escaped Astoria's lips as Dolohov began to pound her even harder, she was still tender from this morning and was now in agony. He remedied this annoyance by kissing her aggressively, his tongue ramming into her mouth. The kissing served to muffle her sobs as by now she was weeping in earnest. Dolohov grabbed her neck as he began to climax, his loud groans drowning her out completely. After Dolohov had finished inside her, he lay there, chest heaving.

"You are something else my love...something else..." he whispered, his voice thick with pleasure. Astoria did not answer, she despised the wet, sticky feeling of his seed between her thighs. She would clear it once Dolohov had fallen asleep, too frightened to attempt it while he was awake in case he reacted violently. Only, she never had a chance to clean herself. Dolohov had raped her over and over again for half the night, each episode more violent than the last. This time she did scream and cry, she could not help it, but this only served to make him hurt her even more. After he was finally done, Astoria was too weak and exhausted to even move, let alone to do ought else. Her nightmare was just beginning however, the next morn she was awoken by a strong, muscular arm coiling tightly around her small waist. "Good morning my sweet" Dolohov whispered in her ear, his hard member pressing against her back as he began to kiss her neck.
IX. - Home Again

Chapter Summary

So this chapter highlights Antonin's domineering character and his selfish desire for power and wealth. It's part of the reason he has so much rage directed at Astoria because in a way he is jealous of her, seeing as he grew up as an impoverished aristocrat, his family banished, their House in ruins etc and she has/had everything he never did. It's also a kind of sadistic kind of revenge for Antonin, seeing as he hated her Father, knowing that he would have never allowed Antonin to marry Astoria when he was alive, plus the fact that he had desired Astoria's Mother and could never have her.

Same disclaimer applies.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

One week after Astoria's wedding to Dolohov, they both left Malfoy Manor for Greengrass Palace. Antonin had abruptly declared over breakfast on the day that they would be living there henceforth. She supposed it did not serve for them to continue to live at Malfoy Manor. Antonin had informed her that Headquarters were now at Slytherin Castle, an enormous stronghold that the Dark Lord had constructed himself just outside of London. Now that Ireland had fallen, a trifle of normality had returned to everyone's lives. However, before the Dark Lord’s conquest of Europe, matters must be set to rights in Britain after the devastation the Dark Order had left behind. Astoria could not deny it, though she was repulsed by her marriage, the thought of going back to the home where she grew up was a small sort of comfort to her. Mary was to join them that evening; the rigours of caring for the vast Palace and its residents were too much for Astoria's old House Elf, Iddi to cope with.

When they apparated in front of the imposing golden gates emblazoned with the Greengrass family crest; a purple dragon entwined with a green snake, Astoria felt a rush of different emotions as she beheld her family home, even though she was pinned beside Antonin. She was home again. As her velvet, mink trimmed cloak fluttered in the wind, she took a step forward and said, “I am Astoria Greengrass Dolohov, daughter of Hadies and Irina Greengrass, here to enter my ancestral home.”

The golden gates swung open after she had said the words, revealing the majesty of the palace before them. A sprawling, limestone monstrosity loomed above, the courtyard floored in purple marble with gold statues depicting members of the Greengrass family everywhere. A large, winged Abraxan horse soared in the sky above. Astoria had a great passion for horses and was distantly pleased that the horse looked healthy; Iddi had clearly been taking care of them in her absence. Astoria also saw in the distance of the green grounds that the finely bred unicorns were also gambling around in a faraway field. The gilded front doors opened automatically as they approached. When she and Antonin entered the hall with the soft purple carpet cushioning their feet, an enormous portrait of her Mother and Father glared down upon them. A portrait of identical size of her brother, Alcaeus, hung on the left side of the towering butterfly staircase. A concealed, velvet padded, gold wrought lift was hidden behind the staircase, Astoria knew. Towards the end of his life, her Father had been too weak
to go anywhere other than in his rolling chair, so the lift had been necessary when he had commanded to be rolled out into the palace grounds.

“Who is that you have got there with you?” Her Father snapped from his portrait, so realistically that she half expected Father would come creaking around the corner in his golden rolling chair, shrieking and pointing his jewelled cane at her. Astoria quailed. Despite knowing that the portrait was merely a representation of her Father, it still served make her feel scared and subordinate, knowing how much this marriage would have enraged him.

“This-this, is Antonin Dolohov, F-Father.” Astoria stammered. “He is my Lord husband as of one week ago.”

“HUSBAND?!” her Father screamed, lilac eyes popping. “Dolohov was a decent fellow, but married to mine own daughter, absolutely not!” He slammed his fist down on the throne he was painted in. “I will not have it Astoria, I will not have it, I tell you!”

Alcaeus, depicted in the other portrait riding a black unicorn stallion and resplendent in golden robes, also let out cries of incoherent shouts and outrage. Astoria knew that this was angering Antonin, a quick glance at him told her all she needed to know; a muscle was twitching in his jaw and the cords of his neck had come to the surface as he glared up at her Father’s likeness. Therefore, it was no surprise when he drew out his wand and directed stunning spells at each of the portraits. Father slumped and fell silent, Alcaeus falling off his mount. Mother on the other hand had not said a thing, she looked sadly down at Astoria, sorrow filling her lilac eyes. Antonin then seized her by the arm and dragged her into the drawing room. It was just as she remembered. Brocade purple curtains stretched to the ceiling to frame the large windows, silken purple wallpaper adorned with amethysts covered the walls with gold leafed animals prancing between them. All the furniture was done in purple velvet and elaborately carved in gilded gold. Delicate urns in the shapes of snakes and dragons littered the room, made of blown purple glass, daintily painted china and crystal. The moving mural on the ceiling depicted her Great, Great Grandsire, Zeus, defeating a pack of manticores and chimeras. A grand, gold framed mirror hung above the huge fireplace, framed by two dragons, reflected some of the green gardens which sprawled outside.

“Sit” he hissed at her, and she sat upon a chaise long immediately. “So- So” said Antonin, striding about the room furiously. Then he suddenly stopped and looked at Astoria. “Are you not going to show me around and offer me refreshment my lady? I have only been here twice or thrice after all and I expect my wife to know her courtesies.” He demanded with a snap in his voice, unsmiling, one of his dark eyebrows arched.

“Of-of course husband” replied Astoria, slightly taken aback. “Iddi” Astoria said into the silence. At once, a shrivelled old House Elf in a navy blouse and skirt appeared in front of her and curtsied low.
“Mistress Greengrass, how mays Iddi be of-“

But Astoria cut Iddi off, terrified of the look on Antonin’s face when Iddi had called her by her maiden name. “No, no Iddi” she said hastily, “you are to address me as Madam Dolohov henceforth, I am now wed to the noble Antonin Dolohov.” Astoria gestured across the room and the House Elf looked surprised and she turned around to give Antonin another deep curtsy. “He is now your Master and you are to do everything he asks of you."

Antonin was smiling now, a look of deep satisfaction on his long, pale face. “Iddi,” he said in his arrogant, commanding voice. Fetch wine, bread, fruit and cheese at once.” The House Elf quailed a little, but hastened to obey immediately. There was clearly something about Antonin that frightened her, even though she had scarcely known him for a few minutes. A moment later, the food arrived on gold, jewel scalloped platters. “Come to me, my love” Antonin said, holding out his hand, for he had just slouched down onto the largest sofa. Astoria got up from her seat and walked across the room to join him. After she was seated he began to trace her jaw with his fingers before grasping her under the chin to turn her face towards him. “So, what are you going to show me?” he asked, his mouth twisting in a horrible sort of smile.

Astoria swallowed hard. “Greengrass Palace has over eight hundred rooms and one hundred staircases, so I shall show you the main ones, if it- if it please you” she replied, trying hard to keep the tremble out of her voice.

Antonin smirked, released his grip on her chin and leaned forward to seize a large goblet of wine, quaffing it down in one as was his wont. Astoria prayed he would not start to get drunk now as the goblet re filled itself as he took another and drank two more goblets. Astoria herself merely nibbled at a little fruit and only drank a single goblet of wine. When they were done with the food, Antonin stood and held out his hand. She took it and proceeded to show him the various rooms of the palace. The dining hall, the morning room, the ballroom, the hunting lodge and the stables, which were a significant part of the grounds as they arrived outside. After showing him the grand, flower filled gardens and the lake filled with golden swans, Astoria finally led him toward where all the equines were housed. The stables of Greengrass Palace housed over twenty unicorns and twelve Abraxan horses. Though many of the unicorns were still out in the field, there were a still a decent few in their stalls. Father had bred them with domestic horses to tame the wildness within them, it was something that he had always had a great passion for. As Astoria and Antonin walked upon the pale stone floor viewing the elaborately carved stable doors and silver water troughs, she tentatively explained the history of the horse to unicorn breeding that her Father had implemented, outlining the many benefits to this practice. The large, black unicorn stallion named Nero who had been a favourite of her Brother’s, Alcaeus, shied away from Antonin when he drew near and actually lowered his head to display his lethal, sharp golden horn, but Astoria gave Nero a reassuring pat on the neck to calm him. She had always found that equines, unicorns especially, always seemed to know when a person was cold or cruel, someone who would do them harm. After this awkward encounter, Astoria hurriedly went on to the other unicorns which came in many colours: palomino, chestnut, bay, roan, dapple grey and of course, pure white, though she found that these too tossed their heads nervously and pawed at the ground when they passed by. The Abraxan horses had merely looked haughtily at them when they came to the large paddock, flexing their enormous wings and tossing their heads
impressively.

As Astoria was gazing at the animals, Antonin had then abruptly turned to her and said, “Where are the Lord and Lady of the palace housed?” There was an unpleasant tone in his voice that sent a chill down her spine. She had not thought of the bedchambers, perhaps because she knew that she was dreading what would happen within, her thoughts had not even strayed there.

“The- the Lord and Lady’s bedchambers are situated on the top floor of the palace, husband” She replied, very scared.

“Take me there at once.” He commanded, with a nasty smile.

Once back in the palace, Astoria then proceeded to take Antonin up the butterfly staircase, its bannisters covered with purple velvet. When they were walking down a corridor they passed a portrait of her Grandmother, Medusa, her lilac eyes sunken and streaks of silver in her golden tresses. She had been a frightful, querulous old witch and Astoria had half expected for her to start shrieking like Alcaeus and Father, but no. Medusa Greengrass merely sniffed and turned her back on them, her nose in the air. They finally arrived at a set of gold doors, illustrated with green snakes and purple dragons, the jewelled family crest above the frame. The Lord and Lady’s bedchambers comprised of a string of lavishly decorated apartments. Both bedchambers included their own bathing suites, and were separated by a circular dining chamber which was light and airy, done in peach marble with matching silken wallpaper and furniture. There was also a morning room, separate dressing rooms and a small music chamber. The Lord’s bedchamber had its own solar and the Lady’s bedchamber was attached to a nursery, delicately decorated in white and gold.

“Good. This pleases me.” Said Antonin, striding about the Lady’s bedchamber when he suddenly halted at the side of the bed. Astoria’s heart began to race. He softly caressed the silk pillow and murmured, “So this was where Irina slept.” He looked up at her then and there was nothing but greed and lust in his eyes. Astoria was revolted to think that he was becoming aroused at the thought of raping her in her dead Mother’s bed. “And now I think, it is time to christen our new quarters.” Antonin went on, wheeling around to advance upon her with that horribly familiar expression on his pale face. He then shoved her up against the wall and began to kiss her roughly from her cleavage up to her neck before finding her mouth, tasting of the spiced wine drunk before. Antonin ground his body into hers, moaning slightly as he kissed her. Astoria gave a squeal of horror and began to flail, all the while knowing how futile this was, but she could not stand his touch and was still sore from when he had taken her just his morn. Antonin merely grasped her more tightly and held her in place with his strong arms. “Whatever is the matter?” He sneered as he pulled away from her mouth, licking his lips. “Is it not your wish to be fucked by your new husband in your Mother’s bedchamber?” he said, jeeringly as Astoria began to weep. At this, he grabbed her by the jaw and yanked her towards him so that she was looking directly up into his cruel, twisted face. “You should not be weeping all the time” he snarled. “You look far more beautiful when you are graceful and composed.”
Astoria gave the tiniest nod and forced herself to hold back the sobs. Antonin gave an evil, satisfied grin and began to wipe away the tears gently with his thumb, after which he drew out his wand. For a moment she eyed it with a thrill of horror, thinking of the Cruciatus curse, but he merely waved it lazily so that her robes vanished, and she was left standing before him in her lingerie, trembling like some frightened animal. Her undergarments today were black as jet made from silk and lace, decorated with small ribbons. She wore a thin lace corset to support her large breasts which were spilling out of the top. A garter belt hugged her curvaceous hips and suspenders ran down the tops of her slender thighs to hold up the frilly, black, opaque stockings. Antonin beheld her with a grotesque, almost childlike enthusiasm as his eyes crawled over Astoria’s lingerie clad body, he seemed frozen to the spot as he took in the sight, seemingly enraptured. After a moment or two, Antonin seemed to come to his senses. He waved his wand again so that his own robes also vanished and was bare chested, clad only in breeches which he was beginning to unlace. His fingers were fumbling in their excitement but before long, his obscenely large member sprang out from his body.

Antonin then laid hands upon her, yanking down the delicate corset so that her breasts spilled free. Now panting hard, he grabbed her by the back of the thighs and shoved her back up against the wall, forcing her legs wide open to reveal the delicate pink between. He held her there easily and began to feed his shaft into her, though it ceased to go any further to enter her in earnest. Antonin gave a grunt of annoyance and shifted his hips slightly, then pushed again so that his length fully slid up inside. Astoria gave a yelp of pain just as her husband have a groan of pleasure as he penetrated her. Antonin had never taken her standing up, but she hated it even more being taken this way. As she was up against the wall, she and Antonin were nose to nose, therefore she could not gaze up at the ceiling as was her wont when he took her on her back. As Antonin began to climax, he took one of her nipples in his mouth, and with a stab of revulsion, Astoria was mortified to feel it harden, though she felt no stirrings whatsoever. He took his time as he spurted inside her and stood there, panting, his forehead on hers, his breeches tangled at his feet. When Antonin finally pulled out of her, he gazed at her pink womanly folds smugly as his seed slowly trickled out of her to drip on the carpet. As he released her, Astoria slumped down the wall to collapse onto the floor, after which she drew her knees to her chest to stop the shaking. Antonin meanwhile, had pulled up his breeches and was tucking himself back in.

“I think I am rather going to enjoy it here.” Antonin announced. He grinned at her and strode out of the room.

Astoria rested her head on her knees and wept. She did not know how much more of this she could take. She slowly crawled across the vast room to get to the bed, desperate for its soft comfort. As she collapsed onto it, not bothering to take off her lingerie, she thought of her Mother. Though she had never known her, Astoria wished she had her Mother to hold her in her arms and tell her everything was going to be alright. Tears wetted her silken pillow with the knowledge that this was something she would never, ever have and that there seemed to be no escape from her misery. Astoria slowly drifted off into a restless sleep. Hours later she had screamed loudly when awoken by a gentle touch on her shoulder, convinced that it was Antonin.

“Madam, Madam, forgive me! It is I, Mary.” Her voice cried. Mary had at last arrived at the palace, and there was pity in her gaze as she beheld Astoria lying there on the bed. “Master Dolohov has
commanded that you are to be bathed and dressed to join him for dinner in the Lord and Lady’s dining chamber this eve.” Astoria began to cry again. Mary rubbed her shoulder consolingly and gently pulled her to her feet. “Come now Madam, Iddi and I shall not harm you.” She said in a trembling voice, leading her toward the bathing suite.

Chapter End Notes

My main inspiration for Greengrass Palace is the Palace of Versailles: http://en.chateauversailles.fr/
Chapter Summary

So here we get a glimpse of Astoria's activities with the Death Eaters and her first encounter with Harry Potter, Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley. We also get the first contact between Astoria and Voldemort. Same disclaimer applies.

Two moons had waxed and waned since Astoria and her new husband had taken up residence at Greengrass Palace and married life had not gotten any better for her. Without fail Antonin would roughly bed her every morn and every night, not caring how much she cried when he shoved himself in and out of her. She was now constantly tender between the legs and would often bleed when no blood was due. No matter though, when this happened, Antonin would instead take her in her rear entrance which was even more painful. She had never felt more trapped and seemed to be doomed to this misery forever, condemned to spend every morn, noon and eve with this monster who seemed to like nothing more than hurting her. Astoria did not know how much more of this she could take; the terror she would feel when Antonin would come into her bedchamber, the revulsion when he touched her and the utter hopelessness she felt knowing that it was just him and her - she was completely alone and no one was going to come and save her. Rarely these days would she and Antonin leave the Palace other than when they were summoned to enforce the Dark Lord's commands which did not make for a welcome distraction to her misery. As the Dark Lord's grip tightened around the country, their main duties so far had been to round up surviving Muggles or Mudbloods who were attempting to leave the country. The last time was particularly unpleasant and Astoria rather thought that the terrible encounter would be seared across her memory forever. One cold dark evening, as rain lashed the stained glass windows of Greengrass Palace Antonin had received word that a group of twenty Muggles or so who had been in hiding were planning to flee off the coast of Dover. They intended to make for France the letter said, which remained free and unconquered. France was kind of a safe haven for those wanting to escape the tyranny of the Dark Order in Britain, the Muggleborn French Minister of Magic welcoming them with open arms. Therefore the Dark Lord had commanded Antonin, Astoria and seven others to make for the Dover coast and stop them at all costs and Astoria's stomach roiled when she recalled that fateful encounter...

The tall white cliffs of Dover towered high above the long winding golden shore plunging it into an eerie shadow under the red sky. The sun had barely risen and the faint outline of the moon could still be seen when their hooded party Apparated one by one in front of the battered wooden boat gently bobbing in the lapping waves. The Muggles who had been creeping across the deserted beach toward the boat had been taken completely by surprise and at their sudden appearance there were screams. The kind of blood curdling screams one hears from animals who are slaughtered at the farm who know they are going to die.

A dirty and dishevelled Muggle woman seized the small child she had been leading, holding it close as her wide eyes darted terrified between the masked and hooded faces. “No, please no!” She
shrieked, beside herself with fear as she clutched at the crying child. “I beg you, please, have mercy! For my child please, please!” But Antonin and Silas merely laughed jeeringly.

“You have a choice.” Yaxley said in his rough, hard voice. “Submit and come with us, or run and die.”

At Yaxley’s words, the Muggles all scattered as Astoria and the other Death Eaters in turn all raised their wands. Some of the Muggles attempted to wade into the sea, desperate to get away, but Jugson casually fired out killing curses after them, each Muggle he hit landing with a horrible splash into the water. A Muggle man suddenly hurtled at Astoria howling, a jagged white rock in his hand. She stumbled and her Death Eater mask slipped to reveal her face, but she pointed her wand at the man at once causing his neck to snap right around, killing him instantly. At this a woman, perhaps his wife yelled in horror, but Avery made a sharp sweeping movement with his wand and her throat was slashed open, blood spurting everywhere as she collapsed on the sand, a slowly enlarging pool spreading out from underneath her to devour the golden granules. As Astoria whirled about confusedly she was then faced with Edward Travers and Bellatrix Lestrange taking turns in torturing a small Muggle boy of about six years while his Mother looked on, bound to the spot by enchantments and screaming in anguish as they both cackled madly, their faces alight with malicious pleasure. Silas killed a Muggle boy not much older than himself by directing a vicious jinx at him, causing his head to explode. The boy’s skull and brains spattered all over the boat’s hull and the remains slid into the sea, floating. He was the only Muggle who actually managed to reach the boat. Predictably Antonin chose to pursue a teenage Muggle girl directing hexes at her back as she shrieked in pain when each spell hit her in turn. Her screams were punctuated by Antonin giggling like some mischievous child. When he grew tired of the sport he tackled her to the ground and began to rape her, both of them becoming soaked in the softly lapping sea foam as he took his pleasure as the young girl’s pained wails echoed balefully in the early morning air.

Finally, when all the Muggles lay dead upon the beach, Bellatrix turned to address them, panting slightly though the demonic grin upon her pale face could not have been plainer. “Good! The Dark Lord shall be most satisfied. I do not doubt that these are some of last scum that have not escaped our purge. The rest are either dead or enslaved.” She declared in her harsh voice as she continued to survey the bloody scene with the utmost satisfaction and glee. At her words, Silas let out a screech of triumph and blasted the Dark Mark into the sky, its green light eradicating the glow of the morning sun. Bellatrix chortled approvingly, her dark eyes gleaming with the reflection of the Mark as she gazed up at it rapturously. “I shall inform the Dark Lord of the good work you have all done here this morn.” She finished. After this hideous proclamation each of them vanished as quickly as they had appeared to return to their homes, leaving behind the horrific carnage of flesh, blood and bone that was scattered up and down the beach and the softly lapping waves.

That grim encounter had been half a moon’s turn past and Astoria still felt a shiver down her spine and she fought with all her might to push the terrible memory to the back of her mind where it belonged. Still feeling uneasy she continued to sip her Valerian infused Camomile tea alone in the drawing room; Antonin had gotten drunk and used her for longer than usual that morn and she found that this particular blend was the only thing that helped to calm her shattered nerves rather than resorting to wine. She gazed out the window at the gambling unicorns in the distant fields, craving to
be as free as they were yet knowing that was but a childish dream. Astoria took in a deep breath and fought back the tears, not wanting to give herself up to despair again and took another sip of tea. Then suddenly and without warning a crippling burning pain seared up her inner left forearm and she allowed a small cry of pain to escape her lips as her delicate china teacup went flying toward the floor before it broke with a light chink. The Dark Mark always burned more fiercely than ever now that the Dark Lord had grown so powerful. Fear gripped Astoria then as a vivid image of Slytherin Castle flashed across her mind and she knew then what she must do.

I am to Apparate to Slytherin Castle.

Still feeling frightened beyond words Astoria plunged a shaking hand into her pocket to draw out her wand, tapped at her red silken robes and they immediately turned black, the Dark Mark emblazoned in silver-green thread appearing over her heart at once. As she was drawing on short black gloves, Antonin came hurtling into the drawing room also clad in Death Eater robes and looking about wildly, his expression both irritable and alarmed.

"Come, we must leave at once!" He snapped at her, holding out his arm.

She grasped him and they both turned on the spot together, arriving with a pop outside massive, black spiked gates with a large 'S' in the likeness of a snake adorned at their centre. Beyond the gates was an enormous castle on a hill done in pitch black stone, its many sharply pointed turrets piercing the pink afternoon sky. At least a hundred Dementors swirled around the castle and Astoria could feel chills up and down her spine like a horrid mouse with icy feet scuttling up her back. Dementors terrified her and she could not spend more than a few minutes in their presence without feeling faint as dreadful memories poisoned her mind. Antonin automatically held up his hand and Astoria took it, allowing him to lead her just as he always liked. They both made their way up the long, sweeping lane underneath the Dementors towards the castle itself, Astoria shuddering slightly at the unnatural chill from those monsters. Finally, they came to the cavernous entrance hall done in black and green marble with snake statues and urns everywhere. The Dark Lord was sitting on a towering shiny black throne positioned at the top of several stairs. There was a circle of the longest serving Death Eaters sitting before him on lower seats with only two places to spare. All the other Death Eaters, who were likely converts or those who had sought out the Dark Order from abroad, lined the walls and there looked to be over a hundred of them. Another jolt of fear stabbed at Astoria when she realised that she and Antonin had been the last to arrive.

"Ah, the Dolohovs are finally here" Declared the Dark Lord in his high, cold voice in the otherwise silent hall. "Sit. Now." He commanded curtly, pointing a long white finger at the vacant seats. However, they both approached the throne first Astoria aware of every eye in the room upon herself and Antonin. As usual, Antonin bowed very low and Astoria gave the deepest curtsy she could muster, their eyes averted from the Dark Lord's face and it was only after that did they finally take their seats. "The Potter boy is said to be hiding out at one of the homes of the Order." Said the Dark Lord, still in that cold, cruel voice. "Henceforth, I want a taboo curse placed on my true name, making it easier to track any remaining Order members and non supporters whom we have still not yet flushed out. See to it immediately."
The encircling Death Eaters Astoria included, all got to their feet at once, raised their wands and murmured together, "Uti metu, Voldemort." Astoria could not quite keep the quiver out of her voice when she said the name. A blinding flash of white light lit the room as the taboo spell took hold. They all took their seats again once the Dark Lord had given a stiff nod of assent for them to do so. His red eyes then found Antonin and herself.

"Dolohov, you shall partner Rowle. You shall keep watch of any movements the Potter boy may make. Madam Dolohov, as before, you shall compile any relevant information you may receive on Potter and send it straight to me." Said the Dark Lord, coldly.

"Of course, my Lord." They all said in unison, bowing their heads respectfully.

"Snape, you are to be dispatched back to Hogwarts to serve as Headmaster. Bella shall remain here. The rest of you are to patrol the streets of all cities, towns and villages to keep order and weed out any stray Mudblood's and non compliant Muggles. Just in case." He finished, his lipless mouth curving in an evil sort of smile.

The Dark Lord then began to stand to dismiss them all, but suddenly, there was another flash of white light. Only this time, it widened to reveal a moving image of the Mudblood, Granger and the Blood Traitor, Weasley talking to someone invisible whom they were clearly calling, "Harry" in Muggle London.

"Go! Go now!" Shrieked the Dark Lord. "Bring him to me at once! Never mind the Mudblood and the Blood Traitor, kill them if you must!"

Antonin and Rowle vanished immediately, turning on the spot with a pop, leaving a tense silence in their wake. Astoria had been pacing the throne room for what seemed like hours when the Dark Lord finally said, "Madam Dolohov. I command you to investigate the location where Rowle and your Lord husband hath apparated to."

"Very good, my Lord" she replied at once, turning on the spot, just has Antonin and Rowle had done so a few hours before.

When she arrived in the disused Muggle café, an explosion of sound hit her ears. The café was more, or less destroyed and blue smoke hung in the air. All the tables and chairs had been overturned, the windows were smashed and there were large craters in the floors and walls. Antonin was duelling Potter and Granger at the same time, all of their wands flashing and swirling. Weasley was bound in
ropes on the floor on the far side of the room. As Antonin goggled at Astoria’s sudden appearance, the Granger girl took advantage of his momentary distraction and shouted, “Obliviarte!”

Antonin was blasted off his feet and smashed into the counter, rolling over the top and falling out of sight. Granger and Potter then turned their wands on Astoria, who also began to duel the pair of them. Granger seemed to be the more skilful of the two, so when Astoria had her chance, she yelled, “Impedimenta!” at the other witch. Granger was flung into the opposite wall, her skull giving a sickening crunch as she slumped to the floor, blood running from her right temple. With a roar of fury, Potter pointed his wand at Astoria. She automatically conjured a shield charm, but nevertheless spun sideways in the air, landing on the grimy floor with a painful thud. As Astoria got to her feet, she saw that Potter had released Weasley, and both were dragging Granger toward them. She raised her wand and shot a multiple firing stunning spell at them in order to hit all three, several jets of red light flying at them, but she had missed. Her spell instead hit one of the lights on the ceiling, plunging the café into half darkness. From what Astoria could see through the gloom, Potter shot her a look of the utmost revulsion and hatred. He turned on the spot with Weasley with the unconscious Mudblood between them, and vanished. How stupid she had been, she should have cast an anti-disapparition jinx over the café to prevent them from escaping. What on Earth would the Dark Lord say when he discovered their failure? What would he do?

Astoria shuddered and murmured, “Lumos.” Light burst from her wand and her eyes swept the smashed up café. She was covered in white dust, her hands were scratched and bleeding and she was throbbing all over from where all the curses had hit her. Astoria's wand light found the end of the counter filled with rotting sandwiches to reveal two pairs of large feet. Astoria crept behind the counter and her wand light shone to reveal Antonin and Rowle, lying there. Their eyes were unfocused, staring blankly at the ceiling, mouths hanging open. Rowle had a nasty cut on his cheek and the left side of Antonin's face was bruised and bloody from where he had landed on broken china and glass.

"Ennevarte." Muttered Astoria at each of them in turn. They both got unsteadily to their feet, blinking hard and staring around the café. Again, she pointed her wand at the pair of them to counter the 'Obliviarte' charm. "Come." Astoria said. "We must make haste to return to his Lordship."

Antonin and Rowle grasped each of her hands as they all turned on the spot to apparate back into the throne room of Slytherin Castle. Astoria then found herself stood before the Dark Lord's throne, Antonin and Rowle behind her, her whole body trembling. As she glanced back at the pair of them, she saw for the very first time, what looked like fear flash across Antonin's face.

"Explain" said the Dark Lord, coldly.

Astoria could barely form her words, such was her terror. "I- I arrived in the-the, Muggle cafe to find my Lord husband duelling Potter and the Mudblood. R-Rowle, was incapacitated at the time and had appeared to- to.... have had his memory wiped my- my L-lord. My-my Lord husband also
succumbed to this. I did the best I could to reverse the effects. P-Potter seems to have escaped, my Lord."

At her words, the Dark Lord let out a scream of fury and pointed his wand straight at her. Astoria was suddenly smashed into the opposite wall, feeling as if all the breath had been knocked out of her. She landed in a crumpled heap upon the floor, as the Dark Lord began to punish Antonin and Rowle with the Cruciatius curse over and over again for their failure, their yells of pain echoing around the hall as the other Death Eaters watched on. Though she was hurting, Astoria could not quite suppress a hint of triumph as she beheld Antonin writhing on the floor in as she, herself had once done. This feeling of triumph was short lived however. After the torture, Antonin had taken out all his rage and humiliation out on Astoria. When they returned to Greengrass Palace that night, he had viciously raped her, littering her body with bruises and bite marks, leaving her to weep into her pillow.
XI. - A Change

Chapter Summary

Here we have a major change in Astoria's life and its psychological effects on her.
Same disclaimer applies.

Antonin’s black rage had not abated since the furore at the Muggle café. Two morn’s past, Antonin had commanded Astoria to pleasure him with her mouth, right then and there at the breakfast table. Astoria had foolishly refused and ran from him. Antonin had followed her calmly throughout the palace, knowing that there was nowhere for her to escape. “Come out, come out my love” he had crowed horribly after her. “Come out and let me play with you.” Antonin finally caught Astoria in the library at the end of the East wing. There, he had rammed his length into her mouth, making her gag and almost vomit. Afterward, Antonin had slammed her onto a mahogany desk, where he had bent over her and snarled in her ear, “Do you know how I served my first wife when she displeased me?” He punctuated each act of tearing her garb off with awful, terrifying words. “First, I burned out her eyes.” He tore the top of her bodice. “Then, I slashed open her throat.” He tore at the thin corset. “And then, I watched her bleed like a stuck sow” he finished, as he tore away the last of her underwear. “So, you had best learn to be an obedient little wife, or it will go ill for you.” Antonin sneered, as he pulled her towards him to take his pleasure between her thighs.

Astoria was shaking once the ordeal was done as Mary and Iddi led her, half naked to the gold wrought lift behind the stairs to take her back up to her bedchamber. When they had arrived, Iddi disappeared with a loud 'Crack!' Just after squeakily informing them that she would be fetching a calming potion. Astoria felt very odd and rather sick. "Madam, if I may I be so bold?" Asked Mary, tentatively, as she got to work on Astoria's blackened eye at the glittering crystal dressing table in her bedchamber, her hands shaking.

Astoria's lilac eyes swivelled towards her sharply from their vacant gaze across the room. "I suppose so, why not" She replied in a dead voice. "Speak what is in your mind."

"Well, it is regarding Master Dolohov, Madam" Mary said in a rush, Astoria still staring at her. "If I know, and I think I do, men of his- his, nature-"

"There is not a man like him in all of the world, Mary." Astoria said, flatly. "Say what you mean."

"Well," she said again, still very anxiously. "While I believe that Master Dolohov derives great pleasure from tears, he also likes smiles. I mean to say, he wants a wife who will laugh at his jests, bat her lashes, make him feel good and do everything he says. Even if he knows your kisses are
borne out of fear, that is what feeds his lust for power and control. What I am trying to say, Madam, is that you need to play the game; he wants you to obey him, fear him and love him. Or I dread to think what will become of you."

There was a ringing silence.

"Was that a jest?" Astoria whispered, too enraged to even shout. "How could you...how could you even suggest such a thing? Leave me. Now." Mary looked on the point of saying more, but the habit of obedience ran deep and there was something in Astoria's face that made her back away out of the room. Astoria sat there with shock, anger and revulsion coursing through her like poison. She could not believe what Mary had just said to her, how dare she? After everything she knew Antonin had done to her, she wanted her to play the adoring wife? Pretend to want him in her bed each night? And for what, to spare her life? Astoria Greengrass was not remotely afraid of dying any longer, she had now come to realise that there were worse things than death and if necessary, would see to her own deliverance, somehow. Astoria made her way unsteadily to the gilded bed. Gold brocade curtains scalloped with ivory lace framed the elaborate bed carvings in the likenesses of dragons and roses. Matching ivory, ostrich feathers spouted out of the top of the curtains, brushing the high ceiling. She collapsed beneath the heavily embroidered duvets and silken sheets. Astoria's flesh was clammy, and her breasts ached, she felt very unwell as she drifted into a troubled sleep. The sky outside was as black as pitch when Astoria woke, feeling nauseous. Mary was scurrying around the room, laying out jewels and gowns. "Mary." Astoria croaked as she attempted to rise groggily from the bed, after which she slid back down onto her elbows when the room span dizzily.

"Madam!" Cried Mary as she ran over to her. Astoria was now sweating profusely and was twitching all over. Mary felt her brow, muttered incantations and touched her everywhere. Astoria winced when Mary brushed by her breasts, they were so sore now. "Madam." Mary said again, an ominous inflection in her voice. "When was the last time you bled?" Astoria's eyes jerked open to stare, horrified at Mary. "When was the last time she bled?" She could not remember, had it been before the wedding? Yes, she had bled a dozen days or so beforehand, but since then, no. Everything had passed in such a daze that she had not noticed the absence of her moonblood. Astoria began to panic when she came to the realisation that she had not bled since she had been wed over two moons ago. No, no not this, anything but this, it could not be. "Madam, I believe you are- you are..." Mary's last words were drowned in Astoria's hysterical sobs as she flung herself over the bed, beating at her stomach with her fists. "Madam, stop, stop! I pray you!" Said Mary's distressed voice from what seemed like very far away. Astoria merely screamed into her pillow, incandescent with misery. This could not be, it was the very thing she had feared from the beginning, becoming pregnant with Antonin Dolohov's child. She would kill herself she decided, there and then, death was better than this torture. Distantly, Astoria heard a loud 'Crack!' Iddi had returned. Mary came rushing over to her and pushed a crystal goblet into her hand. "Drink this Madam, you must calm yourself."

Astoria gulped down the vivid blue potion and at once felt her tense muscles beginning to relax, her racing heart beginning to slow. She raised a tear stained face up to Mary and said, "is there naught you can do Mary?" She said in a cracked voice. "Some-some spell or-or potion to...to rid me of this-this..." Her voice trailed away as Mary looked on, anxiously, hands twisting over one another.
"Madam, I did as you commanded, and checked over the greenhouses. And I am sorry to say that while it has been left unattended, many of the plants within have perished." Replied Mary, now staring at her hands.

"Iddi," Astoria implored, "Surely there is something in the potion cellar?"

"I am sorry Madam," squeaked Iddi, looking sorrowful. "Buts the only potions we has are healing ones, those belongings to old Master Greengrass, Merlin rests his soul" said the old House Elf, bowing her head.

“Madam” Mary said tentatively. “My apologies, but it is my duty to inform Master Dolohov of your-your condition.”

At this, Astoria suddenly rushed towards the glass paned doors which looked out onto a large balcony, intending to throw herself over the edge. The doors however, did not open. Astoria rattled at them despairingly, feeling the tears pouring down her face. "Alohomora!" Astoria begged through her sobs. "Alohomora!"

"That will not work, Madam. Every door and window in the Palace has been sealed." Mary said quietly. Astoria sank to her knees and wailed, her face in her hands.

"Come, Madam." Iddi said. "Master Dolohov is wanting you to dine with him tonight in the main Dining Hall."

Astoria wept harder still at Iddi's words but offered no resistance as Mary gently pulled her to her feet, leading her to the dressing room. When all three were stood in the dressing room in front of an elaborately carved, gold leaf mirror, Mary and Iddi began to dress her. A pale pink, sweeping velvet gown was chosen with pink and white pearls trimming the sleeves, neckline and bodice, hugging every curve of her body. It was very low cut and pushed her breasts halfway up her chest, making them look even more enormous than they already were. Iddi slid matching velvet pink slippers onto her feet as Mary laced up the gown at the back.

Astoria was seated back at her crystal dressing table when they re entered the bedchamber. The chair was also done in crystal, the cushioned seat in shimmering gold velvet. Mary dripped rose scent on her neck, after which she draped ropes of pearls around it. Iddi, whom had conjured up a stool to stand on, smoothly slid an ivory comb in the likeness of a butterfly through Astoria's honey coloured hair. The comb was decorated with still more pearls, which served to sweep away a curly lock that
had been hanging over her right eye. When Mary helped Astoria to her feet, she found that she was trembling, wondering what fresh horror her husband had in store for her. Iddi hurried over and handed her a small crystal vial full of the same vivid blue calming potion as before. Astoria promptly drank it down in one fell swoop and made for the door.
XII. - Dinner with Dolohov

Chapter Summary

Here we get a glimpse of other parts of Greengrass Palace and Antonin's thoughts with regard to Astoria and her current condition and how satisfied this makes him as this gives him so much power over her. I also want to point out that Antonin does not love or care for Astoria, his courtesy is merely a sarcastic facade which is put on to play out his twisted fantasy.
Same disclaimer applies.

The trip to the dining hall passed without incident, nobody speaking. Through the corridors they went, down the butterfly staircase, left down the entrance hall, right up another corridor until they arrived outside the huge, carved cream and gold doors of the dining hall. Astoria faintly thought that this was queer and wondered why they were dining in here. The dining hall was only really used for large banquets and seated up to two hundred. The smaller dining chamber that seated up to fifty was the most often used and situated on the other side of the palace. The grand doors automatically swung open at her approach, giving her a full view of the hall. It was just as she had recalled. The mural on the ceiling depicted unicorns and Abraxan horses galloping and soaring through the starry night sky. Deep purple carpet adorned with swirling, interlocked dragons sprawled across the floor. Long golden tables and chairs were lined up neatly along the hall, with a space down the centre leading up to the head table which was on a raised plinth. As Astoria beheld the head table, its legs carved in the likenesses of a snakes entwined with dragons, their emerald eyes sparkling, sat Antonin, right in the middle. He had stood as soon as she had entered the hall, his expression triumphant.

"Ah, there is my beautiful wife" Antonin called, his voice echoing slightly in the empty, cavernous hall, a smile playing around his mouth. Astoria made her way towards him, the long train of her gown sweeping the floor. Antonin smiled and drew out the throne like chair where the Lady always sat as they had come nearer to the table. She felt inwardly outraged with the knowledge that he had been seated in the Lord's chair her Father had always occupied. When Astoria finally arrived at the back of the head table, Antonin's gaze roved up and down her form. She could tell he liked what he saw. Indeed, he then went on to say, "You look absolutely ravishing this evening my love." Antonin gave her a kiss on the cheek and lightly brushed her waist with one of his hands. His eyes seemed to pop as he began to ogle at her breasts. "Mary, Iddi you are dismissed" he went on, still staring, and Astoria heard a loud "Crack!" And a faint 'pop' as they both disapparated. Antonin himself was dressed in grand, deep green robes with golden scrollwork around the sleeves and hems. He bowed, gestured towards Astoria’s chair and pushed it in for her when she sat. After Antonin had been seated he turned to her and leaned in, giving her an unpleasant smile. "So," he said softly, reaching out to rest his hand over her belly, his fingers stroking her gently through the pink velvet. "Mary informs me, that you are carrying my child."

Astoria's blood seemed to turn to ice. She desperately wanted to knock away his hand and scream that she would rather die than have his wretched child, but she knew this reaction would only end
with her naked, bruised and bleeding upon the floor. "It seems so, husband." She replied quietly, inclining her head. With a look of the utmost satisfaction, Antonin snapped his fingers as food and wine appeared in front of them. Roasted pigeons slathered in buttered gravy took pride of place. Creamed potatoes, boiled green beans, small meat pies and honeyed turnips were all laid out on golden platters and dishes. It looked to be enough for six people or more rather than two. The sight of all the food made Astoria feel unwell, it was all so rich, and she craved something simple, but was not about to argue.

"May I serve you my lady? A woman in your...ah, condition, needs to get plenty of nourishment" Antonin said, smirking slightly.

"I should be be delighted" she murmured back, again, not daring to rebuff him.

"Water for you, I think, it will not serve for you to have wine for the nonce" he continued, with a good imitation at grace.

"As you say, my Lord" Astoria replied. At her words, his mouth gave a pleasurable twist as though he was trying hard not to laugh with glee. He served Astoria a bit of everything and laid the plate down in front of her.

"Eat up, eat up" Antonin said, serving himself healthy portions from every golden dish.

Astoria forced herself to eat the rich food, focusing on the swirling likeness of a sea serpent painted onto her china plate, as it coiled gracefully around the surface. Antonin had drunk a lot of wine, his intermittent groping of her had become more frequent with every minute that had ticked past and every goblet that disappeared down his throat. He would rub his hand up and down her thigh, grab at her breasts and give her wet, sloppy kisses on the mouth. When they rose to retire up to their chambers, Antonin had evidently decided that he could not wait any longer to bed her. As they were walking from the table, he shoved Astoria down onto it, yanking up her skirts and shoving his length inside of her. Antonin’s moans contrasted oddly with the china and goblets rattling on the table from the force of his pumping, kissing her neck hard and burying his face between her breasts. After he was done, Antonin scooped Astoria up in his arms and strode up to the large doors at the end of the dining hall. He made his way through the entrance hall and up the many stairs toward their apartments. Antonin shoved his shoulder into the door of the Lady's bedchamber to open it.

"Mary! Iddi!" He snapped. They both appeared at once as he set her back down on her feet. "Get my wife undressed and bring her to my bed when you are done." Antonin then spun on his heel and went striding through the connecting door towards the Lord's bedchamber. Minutes later, Astoria was led by Iddi and Mary through the dining chamber and into the Lord's bedchamber wearing a silken, pale blue bed robe that pooled onto the floor. The Lord’s Bedchamber was twice the size of her own with a high domed ceiling and a painted mural of a dragon flying across a black sea. The
room was extravagantly decorated in green and gold and all the furniture was carved with dragons and snakes. Antonin was sprawled naked on the Emperor bed fondling himself, his large erection jutting out from his lean body. Mary and Iddi averted their eyes as he said, lazily, "you may go." And they both vanished at once. The gate to the golden balustrade surrounding the bed automatically creaked open at Astoria's approach. She stood at the edge of the bed, nervously waiting for Antonin to tell her what he wanted her to do. Antonin had gotten up from the bed, still touching himself and walked up to her. He unknotted the tasselled, silk ropes of her robe and slid the garment off her body, bunching it up in one hand and throwing it across the room. She stood before him, naked and trembling. It revolted her to think that Antonin was going to rape her in the very bed her Farther had died in. "I wanted to see you plain." He said, stepping behind her to brush her golden hair away from her neck, nuzzling there, grasping her sore breasts hard as he did so. Astoria gritted her teeth at the pain but did not cry out. She could feel his member pressing into her backside. "You are with child, but your body shows no signs of it, soon enough though, soon enough...I do hope it is a boy" he whispered in her ear, pushing her onto the bed.
XIII. - The Attempt

Chapter Summary

Now we delve deeper into Astoria's psyche, how she feels and the steps she takes with regard to her situation. Also, there is a glimpse into what Voldemort's future plans are, now that Britain and Ireland are under his control. There is more coming with regard to this in a couple of chapters or so.
See end of chapter for notes.
Same disclaimer applies. Any similarities between this and real life cases are coincidental, inspirational and not intended to make profit from anyone's alleged story.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Astoria spent the next few days being violently sick. Mary said that this was a common side effect of pregnancy, though she could not answer all of Astoria's many questions. Having never finished her instruction in Healing, Mary did not know a terrible amount with regard to childbearing. Astoria had never known her Mother, so she had no one to ask or tell her about these things as she approached womanhood. Her Father would have probably fainted with horror if she had ever broached the subject. Though he never said it, in his view, matters such as birth and children were strictly the province of women, not to be interfered with or discussed. Antonin was not amused by Astoria’s affliction, however. In fact, he was disgusted and enraged seeing as this meant he could not bed her, which he said loudly and often, was his absolute right as her husband. He had furiously demanded that Mary fix the annoyance and declared that he would find whatever she needed to counter the effects. Thus, Iddi cared for Astoria while Mary was down in the library, frantically searching through old Healing books. Half a dozen days later, Astoria was awoken one morn by Mary coming timidly into her bedchamber, carrying a golden tray with a delicate china cup atop it which was steaming. Astoria was horrified to see that Mary's throat was covered in half healed choke marks and her hands were shaking, making the cup rattle in its saucer.

What had he done to her?

Astoria had a very unpleasant feeling that she already knew the answer to that question. One look in Mary's eyes told her all she needed to know. Evidently, Antonin had decided that if he could not have Astoria during her period of sickness, he would have Mary instead. How much more horror could she endure? Astoria thought, despairingly, wanting to weep. Antonin strode in after Mary, a look of mingled smugness and excitement upon his long, pale face, his cold blue eyes staring at her.

"Drink" Antonin had commanded Astoria, as Mary held out the tray before her. Astoria drank the vivid red liquid and felt a queer, warm feeling in her stomach as the nausea vanished. Mary took the cup back on the tray. "Now go. The pair of you." He said to Mary and Iddi in a hard voice, still not taking his eyes off Astoria. He was panting hard and fumbling at the top buttons of his collar. Once
Antonin had undressed, he had leapt onto the bed and torn off Astoria’s sleeping silks to reveal her nakedness beneath. He had taken her over and over again for close to an hour in every way a man can have a woman. Antonin wore a contented grin as he swaggered out of her bedchamber. Astoria had been left exhausted by the ordeal, too tired to even weep and gave herself up to slumber.

Mercifully, Antonin had left Greengrass Palace a week later for Eastern Europe. He had informed her over luncheon that the Dark Lord wanted to cut off any potential opposition that may come from Asia or Russia, first conquering the smaller countries first before striking at France, Spain or Germany. The Dark Lord was particularly interested in conquering France, the Muggleborn Minister for Magic who ruled there had been fiercely outspoken against the Dark Order and was planning to put up a fight should they be invaded. The Dark Lord was intent on making him answer for his behaviour; Astoria inwardly dreaded what his Lordship had in store for the French Minister for Magic.

The morn after Antonin had left, Astoria had made a decision. After breakfast, she had informed Mary and Iddi that she was going to the gardens for a walk. However, when Astoria reached the butterfly staircase, she had slowly hoisted herself up onto the edge of the velvet covered bannister, gazed at the hall below and shut her eyes. She was trembling slightly, her slippers unbalancing her a little. Was there an afterlife? Would she come back as a ghost, forced to glide throughout Greengrass Palace for eternity? If there was anything beyond death, she would meet her Mother and Brother, she would see Father again. That thought was an inexpressible comfort to her, and even if it was not so, surely it would be better to lie cold and still, where Antonin Dolohov could no longer torment her and force her to birth his children. Astoria jumped. She landed on the purple carpet with a crash, pain hitting her all over her body.

“Madam! Iddi squeaked, horrified. “Oh Madam!” Her cries echoing with Mary’s as they both converged upon her. Astoria was distantly aware of Mary mending her broken ribs and arms.

“No.” Astoria croaked. “No, let me die, let me die!”

“Madam, I cannot allow you to do this to yourself, you must not despair!” Mary said hurriedly, still mending her injuries. “In any case, if Master Dolohov returns to find you- to find you gone, he will kill us! He will kill Iddi and I!” She went on, tears now pouring down her face.

Her Mother’s likeness in the portrait was weeping. “My baby, oh my poor baby Astoria!” she cried. Her Father and Brother were yelling incoherently as Mary led her to the velvet padded lift behind the staircase.

Two moons had waxed and waned since Astoria had attempted to take her own life and she was beginning to look quite obviously pregnant by now, her stomach had a gentle curve to it and her breasts had increased in size. These changes to her body only served to make her more miserable.
This was supposed to be one of the happiest times in her life and she found it horrifying with every day that went past. One late night however, as the rain lashed the windows of Greengrass Palace, this all changed. As Astoria was staring blankly up at the gold curtains framing her vast bed, she suddenly felt a movement in her stomach. She started, surprised and unsure about what was happening, and for the first time she appreciated that she was carrying a baby. *A baby.* An innocent baby, who had not asked to be created. Even though it had been fathered by Antonin, that was something, as far as Astoria was concerned, that it could not help. Then, some of the vast, empty loneliness inside her heart evaporated. This child was hers, not Antonin Dolohov’s and she would do everything within her power to love and protect it. As the fluttering movements inside her continued, Astoria felt a warmth she had never felt before and drifted off into a contended sleep. The morn afterward, she was awoken by Antonin striding into her bedchamber from next door, charcoal robes swirling. So he had returned.

“Tonight.” He announced without preamble, “We are to attend the wedding of Elizabeth Nott and my comrade, Corban Yaxley. See that you wear something nice.” He added brusquely. After Antonin had taken his pleasure of her, as was his wont every morn, Mary and Iddi crept into the bedchamber.

“Mary,” Astoria said in a tired voice. “I need something suitable to wear for a wedding tonight. Something pretty.”

None of Astoria’s gowns were like to fit her at present, seeing as all were tightly laced at the bodice and would not accommodate her growing stomach.

“Iddi and I shall craft something for you Madam.” Replied Mary. “Do you have a particular preference?”


“I shall hasten to the fabric room below.” Mary curtsied low and left the room.

The fabric room deep below Greengrass Palace held mountains of silk, velvet, furs and jewels to make garments for the palace residents. Greengrass’ were not in the habit of travelling to seamstresses and robe fitters, such pathetic excursions were beneath them, or so Father had always said.
So I decided that Astoria would love her unplanned child, even if it was borne of rape. If she did not, then I felt this would be dull, with her eventually killing her children etc. and a recurring cycle of abuse, which we have already seen previously. My main inspiration for this was the testimony of women who were both held captive by their rapists and have indicated that they had no longer felt alone when they felt their babies move within them.
Chapter Summary

In this chapter we see more non canon Death Eaters/characters, plus we get more info on Silas Norton and his family history/disfigurement. I decided that the Norton's would be part of the Twenty Eight, taking the place of the Crouch's seeing as the House is now extinct in the original books. There is also more info on the treatment of Muggles and Voldemort's future plans for them. We also get more contact between Narcissa and Astoria.
Same disclaimer applies.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Mary had crafted Astoria a beautiful gown to wear that evening. It was pale blue just as she had asked, and its long sleeves trimmed with pure white mink and sapphires almost touched the floor. The gown was long, flowing and fitted under her breasts rather than at the waist to fall over the gentle curve of her belly. White silken gloves that finished at her wrists adorned her hands, and more sapphires encrusted with diamonds sparkled at her ears and throat. Antonin then came striding into the room clad in blood red velvet dress robes, a matching, jewelled cravat at his throat.

Antonin bowed low and said, “You look lovely this evening my lady, absolutely stunning.”

“You honour me with your sweet words, husband.” Astoria replied at once, knowing that this was what he wanted to hear. Mary had been right in urging her to please Antonin as much as possible and now, she could see that it made him more agreeable.

They were to travel to Yaxley Fortress by carriage flown by the Abraxan horses, seeing as apparition was impossible in Astoria’s current condition. Mary fastened a white mink cloak around Astoria’s neck and drew up the hood. “Your carriage awaits.” Said Antonin with a sinister smile when he himself had also been cloaked by Mary. As usual, Astoria took his proffered hand and allowed him to lead her through the palace and down to the courtyard where the large, silvery carriage was waiting on the purple marble. The horses were eager to leave, tossing their beautiful heads and pawing the ground, making their elaborate, ostrich plumed headpieces rustle softly. “After you, my love.” Said Antonin gracefully. Astoria obeyed and sat inside the crushed velvet interior of the carriage. There were no windows, but a large crystal in the shape of a dragon was in the centre of the roof, dimly lighting the space. Antonin slid in beside her, closing the door with a wave of his wand. They took off with a slight jolt and were soon soaring through the night sky, the muffled sounds of the wind filling the silence. Astoria was staring at the opposite wall when she felt Antonin lean over to stroke the swell of her stomach. It made the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. She glanced down at his lap and saw that he was becoming aroused. With an enormous effort, she forced herself to look into his face.
“So, what is it?” Antonin asked, abruptly.

“What is what, husband?” replied Astoria, taken aback.

“The child.” Said Antonin impatiently, ceasing his stroking so that his hand merely rested there. “Will I be getting a son or a daughter?” He spoke the last word contemptuously.

“I-I do not yet know.” Astoria said, starting to feel scared.

“To be sure a daughter would be disappointing” he went on. “But I hope-” he then tightened his hand over her belly. “That for your sake, you do not produce me a filthy little Squib.”

“No” she said, voice now trembling. “N-never, there has never-never been a Squib born into the Greengrass family for t-twenty thousand years.”

“Good” Antonin leered.

Antonin had begun to grope at her, but was stopped from doing more when the carriage landed on the ground with a thud. A flicker of annoyance crossed his face as he turned around to open the door with another flick of his wand. The night air was chill as they stepped outside to behold the gloomy castle that was Yaxley Fortress. It was an imposing building done in charcoal stone encircled by a moat, its high battlements lost in grey cloud. The drawbridge to the castle creaked and the spikes from the gate hung threateningly above as she and Antonin walked into the courtyard. Antonin led her right into the main hall. Astoria faintly heard the sounds of excited chatter and laughing in the distance, but it was only the two of them in the hall, their footsteps echoing slightly on the stone floor. Suits of Goblin made armour framed the long walkway and there were countless weapons adorning the walls: axes, swords, spears and picks, their metal gleaming slightly from the fire sconces set in the wall. At the end of the hall hung the Yaxley family crest, a jet black roaring Hydra on a blood red shield.

They at last came to a large chamber at the end of the entrance hall. It was decorated in red and black velvet, a massive, glittering, black chandelier in the centre of the ceiling was glowing dimly. More weapons and suits of armour were everywhere, the walls were painted with red snakes, the large windows carved elaborately with wood as black as jet. All this served to make the chamber gloomy and foreboding and Astoria did not like it at all. Cries of welcome erupted as she and Antonin both appeared in the black stone archway, and Edward Travers came striding over to them.
“Dolohov, my boy!” Travers cried, and reached up to clap Antonin on the back. His cold grey eyes then found Astoria, resting for a moment on her stomach. “And you have brought the lovely Madam Dolohov, charming!” Travers bowed low and kissed her gloved hand. “May I offer my congratulations on the child my dear. If I may be so bold, Motherhood seems to be agreeing with you my lady, you are looking most radiant.”

Astoria inclined her head with a small smile and replied, “You are most kind, Edward.”

Travers then turned back to Antonin, chuckling heartily. “You got onto that pretty quick old boy, my goodness!” he gave Antonin a good natured cuff on the arm and winked at him. “Nice work.” And Antonin gave Travers a satisfied smirk.

As they moved further into the room they came face to face with Lucius and Draco. “Ah, good eve to you, Lucius, Draco” crowed Antonin. Antonin deliberately and obviously ran his hand over Astoria’s belly and gave her a kiss on the cheek, all the while surveying Draco with a vindictive sort of pleasure, knowing how much this was upsetting him.

“As do I.” Antonin replied. He nodded sneeringly at Lucius and led Astoria further into the chamber.

Yet more wizards and their wives converged upon them, offering similar words of felicitations, the witches kissing Astoria’s cheeks and their husbands wringing Antonin’s hand. Thus, she said the words she needed to say, thanked them and smiled sweetly, all of which mercifully seemed to please her husband. Antonin led Astoria towards where Corban Yaxley was stood, clad in bridegroom robes and surrounded by family members. Antonin let go of her hand, and he and Yaxley embraced like brothers. Astoria paid no mind to their chatter and was then approached by Adelaide Yaxley, Corban’s younger half sister. Adelaide was at least two decades younger than Corban’s forty or so years, and had been fathered by Corban Yaxley Senior with his second wife, Agatha. Adelaide was a fairly pretty witch, she had long blonde hair, was tall and slender with pale green eyes and very good teeth. Though Astoria rather thought that the arrogant expression constantly worn upon Adelaide’s face, for all its beauty, still made her resemble her hard faced brother, Corban.
After they had kissed one another’s cheeks, Adelaide said, “Ahh, you are so lucky you know, I can scarcely wait to be married myself and do my duty for the Dark Order by giving my Lord husband a son.” Her pale green eyes looked dreamy for a moment. Astoria inwardly grimaced and was bursting to say that she very much doubted that Adelaide would appreciate having her garb being ripped off by a crowd of drunken wizards, or else being the personal property of a husband who could do whatever he pleased with her, whether she willed it or no.

“Indeed.” Astoria lied. “I am sure your noble brother shall find a suitable match for you soon.”

Adelaide sighed passionately. “I do hope it is Josiah Zabini” and she shot a quick glance over the room at Josiah, elder brother to Blaise Zabini. Josiah was chatting animatedly to Silas Norton, a goblet of wine in his slender hand. “I know the Zabini’s aren’t in the Twenty Eight, but their bloodlines are impeccable.” She gushed, rapturously.

Astoria privately felt that Adelaide would most like be matched with Travers, Jugson or some other top ranking Death Eater who was unwed. Only the longest serving Death Eaters would get first pick of the youngest, most beautiful witches for their wives. ‘The spoils of war, just like myself,’ Astoria thought bitterly. To be sure, Josiah, a tall, handsome black skinned man of twenty five years was comely enough, but Astoria had heard tell of his cruelty. He had been among those, Antonin included, who had burst into a Muggle school and murdered all within, torturing them for a sustainable amount of time beforehand. Afterward, they had piled the bodies in a bloody heap outside the school entrance and set them alight. Astoria shoved away these ugly thoughts and continued to talk with Adelaide.

“I have heard some witches try for half a year or more before they are blessed with a child. How did you become with child so quickly?” Adelaide then asked, curiously.

‘Repeated rape.’ Astoria thought, grimly. Astoria was groping for an answer but was spared having to reply as Antonin was beckoning her over toward him, still talking and laughing with Yaxley. She muttered a hasty farewell to Adelaide and stepped towards them, catching the last of their conversation.

“…I shall just have to take a leaf out of your book Antonin!” Yaxley chortled. Hopefully Elizabeth and I will have a son within the year.”

“Come,” Antonin said to her. “We must make haste to the Binding Chapel.” He gave Yaxley a pat on the shoulder and took her hand, as they all made for a second stone archway at the back of the chamber.
The Binding Chapel of Yaxley was floored in red marble and had walls made from jet black stone. The cavernous, rafted ceiling was made from dark wood, a steel throne at the head of the room. The throne gave a full view of everything, the alter, the guests, all of it. Astoria noticed that the same Binder who had been at her own wedding was waiting at the end of the aisle, once again in grand, burgundy robes and propped up by his dragon cane, standing next to Yaxley. Astoria was seated in the front row between Antonin and Bellatrix Lestrange. No sooner had Bellatrix had greeted them, everyone rose to their feet at once when the Dark Lord came sweeping into the room, his black robes streaming out behind him, having only just arrived. Saying nothing, he strode past Yaxley and the Binder, making for the throne, and not until he was seated, did anyone else take their seats.

A hush fell over the room as Elizabeth Nott and her Father, Edgar appeared at the archway. Elizabeth looked stunning in a dress of ivory silk with beautiful illustrations of butterflies and flowers embroidered on the bodice and skirts. Her shiny, chestnut hair was done up in a French twist and rubies glittered at her neck and ears. They made their way rather slowly up the aisle. Elizabeth’s Father, Edgar Nott was well over sixty years and had been injured fighting the First Uprising. As a result, he was stooped and could only take slow, shuffling steps. Elizabeth looked nervous but excited as she approached her husband to be, and Astoria vaguely wondered how she would take the bedding ceremony.

The nuptials were barely distinguishable from Astoria’s own. After the Binder declared them ‘Bonded Forever’ the Dark Lord then spoke some similar words regarding his ‘New World,’ Yaxley and Elizabeth took their first dance together as husband and wife, then all proceeded to the feast. The dining hall, like the rest of the Fortress was dark and threatening. The walls were panelled in deep mahogany and draped with deep red silk hangings with enormous likenesses of the Yaxley Family Crest upon them. The room would have been pitch black if it were not lit by candlelight, which shone off of the stuffed heads of hydras, sphynxes, minotaurs and other various monsters mounted on the wall. The effect was almost frightening and served to twist their horrid features even more than they were already.

As Astoria was being served the first course, a fillet of Flying Fish slathered in a creamy sauce, she caught her first glimpse of Muggle slaves. When she was looking curiously at a dozen, frightened looking men and boys who had come scurrying into the room to line each side of the hall, Antonin had leaned over and told her that was what they were, smirking slightly. Astoria knew that all Muggle men and boys had been castrated and enslaved, serving in the homes of wizards, toiling in Goblin mines for precious stones or to do ought else that was commanded of their Masters. The women and girls had all been forced into brothels, there to be used to fulfil every conceivable erotic desire of any wizard. Any children they birthed as a result were taken away at once. If they proved to be magical, they were institutionalised under the tyrannical rule of Victoria Avery at the Purification Institute. If not, the girls were sent straight back to the brothels and the boys were put to work. Muggle women not deemed comely enough to keep in the brothels served as witch’s handmaids.

The Muggles had taken away each of the silver platters with each course that had passed, pouring wine and serving up extra portions of food, no one paying them any mind. Astoria and Antonin were seated on the left side of the Dark Lord, Bellatrix to his right. Opposite were Silas and Victoria, with
Adelaide seated on Astoria’s right. The Dark Lord ate nothing and was not speaking. He sat as still as a statue, his catlike, red eyes gazing blankly up the hall, though he would occasionally take a sip from his goblet of wine.

“So, Victoria.” Antonin said. “How fares the Purification Institute?”

Victoria gave a smug smile. She was a pretty woman of thirty years with red hair and blue eyes, but she had a sadistic demeanour which served to make her incredibly ugly. Before Victoria answered, she drew out a cigarette in a short, elegant cigarette holder crafted from gold and jewels, exactly matching the gown hugging her curvaceous figure. “Better every day, Dolohov.” Victoria replied, pluming vivid blue smoke in the air. “Though some of the elder brats can be troublesome, it is nothing a few good bouts the Cruciatus curse or an old fashioned beating will not solve.”

Bellatrix chortled at her words. “I believe you have the right of it, Victoria. The Dark Lord—” she glanced worshipfully in his direction, “—was most correct to entrust these good works into your hands.” The Dark Lord himself gave no sign he had heard their conversation and was still staring up the hall.

Astoria knew that the Purification Institute was a large stronghold in London, built in place of the Muggle building called ‘Buckingham Palace’ after the Dark Lord had set it ablaze and razed it to the ground. It was here that the offspring of the Muggle and Half Blood women were sent should they prove to be magical. As long as they were not Mudblood’s, any children left orphaned by the war were also sent there. Astoria could not say who had it worse, the Muggles or the Half Bloods. Half Blood women, like the Muggles were imprisoned, only in their case they were kept for the sole purpose of being deliberately impregnated by Pure Blood wizards. The reason for this practice was to eliminate all Muggle blood among the magical community for good and all. Astoria had heard the horrifying tales from Adelaide at the dinner table and had no trouble in believing them. It was said that below the Institute there were dungeons where the witches were kept and repeatedly raped by Pure Blood’s until they became pregnant. Once with child they were chained to their beds until it was time for them to give birth, after which their babies were also taken away at once to be housed upstairs. Those who did not prove fertile were either killed out of hand or sent to the Muggle brothels. The children were to receive magical education in the Dark Arts as soon as they were able, before being sent to Hogwarts at the age of eleven. Astoria shuddered to imagine what it would be like for the children growing up in a place like that, presided over by the cruel Victoria Avery whom had been named Head of the Institute. Once the children had finished Hogwarts, they were to be branded with the Dark Mark at once to serve in the Dark Lord’s army. Astoria had to admit that Half Blood wizards had it easier than the witches, for them the choice was simple, join the army or be killed.

“The Purification Institute?!” came Silas’ high cackle. “I am most eager to visit there Victoria, the dungeons in particular” he said with a salacious smile, his face alive with a wild, devilish glee.
Antonin laughed and gave Silas an indulgent smile. “Now, now my boy, slow down. You need to get yourself a wife first before you start siring bastards all over the place.” He glanced at Astoria with a half smile as he finished.

Astoria gazed at Silas from across the table, wondering how one so young could be so twisted and evil. Silas was a petulant youth of sixteen years with hazel eyes and sharp features. His rich brown hair was short and wavy, finishing in a cropped fringe at the top of his forehead. Silas was of middling height and had a small build, a common trait in the Norton family. He may even have been good looking, if it were not for the deep red scar that ran from the beginning of his left eyebrow and over his eyelid, finally ending at the top of his cheekbone. The wound had caused his iris to become misshapen and turn a weak blue with a pale milky film over it. This made Silas look incredibly sinister, especially when he smiled. Combined with his bloodthirsty inclinations and wicked nature, all this served to make Silas Norton downright detestable. Silas' disfigurement had apparently been courtesy of Kingsley Shacklebolt, or so she had heard tell. Indeed, Astoria now recalled Silas intimating in grisly detail of what he would do to Shacklebolt when they caught him, as they surely must soon. Silas was the sole heir to the Norton family fortune after his Father had been killed by Order members. His newly elevated position only served to inflate his already over exaggerated sense of self. Though the Norton's were Pure Blood family, they had sought to make themselves even wealthier by producing gin, which was aptly named 'Norton's. The Norton's had crushed all their rivals for the sale of gin with a mixture of threats, violence and copious amounts of gold. They would burn down rival breweries and poison their stock, or else curse the latter's family; all the while managing to stay out of Azkaban by handing out hefty bribes. Thus, the Norton’s vaults flourished, and they prospered. Nobody drank any other gin but ‘Norton’s.’

Astoria's musings were cut off as Silas' voice pierced through the air. “I grow tired of feasting!” Screeched Silas, in his cold, reedy tone to the room at large. There was a slight dip in the babble of chatter at his words and everyone looked at him. Silas had gotten to his feet and there was near silence now. He drained his goblet in one and flung it away, hard, to shatter on the mahogany wall. He exchanged a gleeful look with Antonin whom was also grinning. “I think it is fitting that we bed them, my Lord!” Silas shrieked, glancing at the Dark Lord, who gave him a curt nod.

As expected, the dining hall erupted with shouting and cheering, all the wizards charging toward the bride. Antonin had gotten to Elizabeth first after leaping up from his chair, his face filled with malicious excitement. He had torn her gown right down the back so that she had to hold the fabric to her chest to prevent her from being completely exposed. At this, Elizabeth had burst into tears. Astoria gazed at the scene with a mixture of shock and sympathy. It was odd to see Elizabeth's usually cold, proud features crumble like that as all the wizards converged upon her, proceeding to rip the gown from her body, and Astoria was revolted to see that Theodore, Elizabeth’s own brother, was joining in. Yes, Elizabeth was cruel and had a nasty nature, but no woman deserves to go through this horrific ritual, Astoria thought, as she saw Edward Travers and Josiah Zabini dragging the sobbing, half naked bride out of the room. The Dark Lord had also taken his leave after the bedding party, Bellatrix trailing after him. His Lordship was not about to join in, Astoria knew, but he was not about to stay out here with all the witches either, who were not permitted to join the bedding ceremony and were now all happily chatting to one another.
“…She will get over it.” Astoria heard Victoria say casually. Astoria looked up at her. “Yes,” she went on, giving a toss of her scarlet tresses and lighting up another cigarette. “Astoria is fine now, are you not dear?” she asked with a slight smile.

“Yes, to be sure.” Astoria lied.

“I daresay I was rather impressed with the grace and composure that you comported yourself with during your own bedding, Astoria. No silly mewling and shrieking from you was there?” Victoria went on, taking a sip of wine from her goblet. “Nevertheless, I am glad that it is unlikely that I shall be wed anytime soon, age does indeed have its compensations!” she laughed.

Astoria merely inclined her head in reply. In truth she had been too petrified to even scream or cry at her own bedding. She knew that Victoria was now a widow, and had once been wed to Felix Selwyn, younger brother to Walter Selwyn, but he had been killed in battle less than half a year ago. Victoria did not seem to be taking the loss of her husband to heart. She had given Felix one son named Frederick, Astoria knew. It was said the boy, who was now eleven years, was growing up headstrong and disobedient, often causing havoc at Hogwarts, where he now attended. Though Victoria, who had been proven to brutalise the children in her own care at the Purification Institute, was said to do nothing to try and curb Frederick's wild behaviour, merely calling him 'spirited'.

Astoria was then distracted by another voice behind her, soft and quiet. “May I have a seat?” It was Narcissa.

“You may,” Astoria replied, privately feeling that she had no choice. She was not about to argue or make trouble after all, Antonin would be enraged.

Most of her anger at Narcissa had abated by now, it would do her no good holding onto it. Being angry all the time was like drinking poison and expecting the other to die. Astoria surmised that Narcissa was still abusing opium. She was skeletally thin with sunken eyes, her skin was very pale, the glittering black gown was hanging off her gaunt limbs and she was sweating bullets. Narcissa’s diamond necklace glittered in the candlelight over her sharply defined collarbones as she sat, and Astoria could see the top of her ribcage between her breasts

“We have not yet had a chance to speak.” Narcissa said, glancing about the room. “I wondered if there was anything you wanted to ask about…about… bearing children.”

Astoria stared at her. “Well, I am anxious to know what is in store for me when the time finally comes.” She replied.
“There will be pain.” Narcissa said seriously. “Terrible pain. But the end result will be worth everything you will have suffered a thousand times over.” She lowered her voice considerably. “I know you do not love Dolohov. And though you may not love him, you may find that you love his children, you-“

Astoria cut her off. “I do love the child already, and I am determined to keep it safe and happy with every bone in my body.” She said firmly. “This baby is mine not his, no matter what anyone may say.” She finished.

Narcissa gave her a small smile. “Well, I am glad for you, Tori, at least that is something.”

Yes. Astoria thought, at least that was something.

Chapter End Notes

As stated before, one of my inspirations for this/The Purification Institute are the Serbian wars where women were locked up and forced to become pregnant as a form of ethnic cleansing. Other inspirations include the Nazis/Hitler Youth. I think this chapter also shows how deadened Voldemort is to social interactions with 'normal' (if somewhat evil) people and how inhuman he is. I have always tried to keep Lord V more or less canon compliant.

Hydra - A mythological monster from Greek mythology. It is a sea serpent which was said to have seven to nine heads and a double tail.
Astoria had hoped that her rapidly growing stomach would discourage her husband’s desire for her, but no. If anything, her pregnancy only seemed to inflame Antonin’s passions even more. He would continue to bed her over and over, constantly asking her the sex of the child as he had done so previously, annoyed when she could not give him an answer. Antonin was often away campaigning for the Dark Lord in Europe, but every so often he would come back to Greengrass Palace for a weekend or so, and Astoria would have a visitor in the night. When she was in his presence, the baby would move restlessly within her, as though it could sense her fright.

Near three lunar cycles had passed since the Yaxley wedding and an eighteen year old Astoria was now heavily pregnant. The child moved within her constantly and often kept her awake at night. One morning when she was sewing in the drawing room she called Mary over after a particularly hard kick.

"Mary! Come, come feel it." Mary came over and tentatively touched the large curve of Astoria's belly. 'Do you feel it? It is as though the child is talking to us. Oh, dearest Mary, I am going to love this baby so much...I love it already." She sighed, weakly.

"I am happy for you, Madam." Mary replied, with a slightly odd expression on her face as she turned and took her place back by the wall.

Astoria knew what Mary was thinking; how could Astoria possibly love the child of a brutal monster like Antonin Dolohov, a child who was a product of rape. She could not expect Mary to understand. Astoria knew that Mary too had also been raped by Antonin on several occasions, but had never quickened. Mary had not felt the mix of emotions Astoria had when the baby had first moved inside her, how it felt as it began to grow, making her feel far less alone. Astoria sighed and called for Mary once again to help her to her feet.

As December dawned, Astoria began to grow nervous. Mary had concluded that she would most likely give birth sometime in December. Astoria was eager to meet her child, but was still frightened of what would happen when the time came to bring it into the world. She had flipped through some
of the old Healing books in the library and discovered sketches in the chapters on childbearing which depicted women screaming in pain. Horrid metal instruments were also pictured, which were used for when complications arose, seeing as it could be extremely harmful to both Mother and child to use any magical interference and could even result in Squibs.

Astoria had stayed slender throughout her pregnancy, but her belly was now enormous. Her naval had popped and she could no longer see her feet when she stood. As a result, she needed help to do most everything. Stairs were now impossible, and she had been forced to go into confinement because of her inability to walk more than a dozen steps due to her constantly aching back from the heavy weight of the baby inside her. Her breasts, which had almost doubled in size now, would often leak milk, ruining whatever she was wearing so that she had to change. She tired easily and felt unwaveringly big and uncomfortable. This was not helped when Antonin had returned to the Palace and paid her a twilight visit half a dozen nights ago. He had been drunk and rather rough, and she had pleaded with him to be gentler.

“The baby, Antonin! The baby, please! Don’t!” she had protested weakly.

Astoria’s protests had only earned her the back of Antonin’s hand, and she merely lay there, allowing him to pull her legs apart and have his way so he would not be any more violent and harm the child within. The next morn, Antonin had run a hand over her large stomach. “So, how long until it is time for you to push that thing out?” He had asked sleepily, propping himself up onto his forearm so that he was looking down at her. Antonin reached out with his free hand to trace her naval idly with a slight frown on his face, looking thoughtful. The baby began to move, almost as if mirroring her own anxiety as he began to touch her stomach all over. For one horrifying moment, Astoria thought Antonin was considering whether or not to cut the baby out of her, right then and there, it was the sort of monstrous thing he would do. But no. He merely sighed, rolled her onto her side so that her back was to him and jerked up her leg to take his morning pleasure. Afterward, Astoria was struggling to get up. Antonin glanced over at her and not bothering to help, he merely barked, “Mary! Iddi!” They both appeared at once. “Help my wife out of bed, see that she is washed and returned there at once to continue her confinement. Now!” Mary and Iddi jumped at the snap in his voice and hastened to obey immediately.

Antonin had not stayed long at the Palace on that occasion, in fact he had left that very same morn after giving Astoria a sloppy kiss on the mouth and saying he wanted his son ready and waiting for him when he returned. Antonin seemed to have convinced himself that she was carrying a boy and she was dreading what he would say or do if the baby turned out to be a girl. Astoria had been relieved when he was gone, she had known that her baby could have come any day soon and she had not wanted him to be there when she finally gave birth. She did not think she could stand it if Antonin were to insist on being in the actual room when it happened if he was in residence.

By mid December though, Astoria had still not given any signs she was fit to birth. By this point she was huge, it was as though she had been pregnant forever and she just wanted it over and done with, the waiting was killing her. One crisp winter morn however, as Mary and Iddi were leading Astoria to her bathing suite, she suddenly went rigid and stopped dead. “Madam?” Mary asked. “Madam
what is it?” Astoria did not answer but began to shake violently, clutching at her belly. Warm liquid was gushing between her thighs and the muscles of her enlarged stomach hardened. Mary gave a gasp of shock as the fluid pooled on the carpet, darkening the pale gold colour. “Madam, Madam! You must get back into bed at once!” Astoria grabbed Mary’s arm as she staggered back to the bed. Astoria was unable to breathe properly, taking in great mouthfuls of air rapidly and began to weep. The room span out of focus and she was in a whirl of blind panic. “Madam!” Mary cried, grasping her by the shoulder, “Madam, you must breathe!

Astoria attempted to get her breathing back to normality, the sharp pangs in her belly getting stronger and more frequent. She tore at her sleeping shift, trying to get it off as she found she could not stand the feel of anything on her skin. Mary hurried over and pulled out a small silver knife from the pocket of her robes to cut it off her, leaving her nude. An hour later she was openly wailing as the pain slammed her womb over and over again. Every time she tried to speak, she only managed to utter a strangled moan of pain. It felt as though she was being stabbed in her stomach, as if someone was twisting her womb with cruel clawed hands. The agony from her contracting stomach hit her all over her body in waves, each one more terrible than the last. This was more agonising than any curse. It went on for hours and hours, Astoria squirming and moaning upon the bed all the while. She was drenched in sweat and breathing heavily, her legs wide open and shaking as Mary and Iddi peered between them periodically.

The next morn, Astoria had still not birthed her child, she was exhausted and very distressed. “I cannot!” She cried to Mary, “I cannot bear this any longer, I will die from this pain!”

“There, there Madam, I do not think it will be long now. You must push! Hard!” Replied Mary in a shaky voice.

Iddi dabbed her forehead with a wet cloth, looking worried. “Madam Dolohov, you musts tries you musts! Justs like your Mother dids, Madam Greengrass!” The old elf squeaked.

Astoria gave another moan of pain as she pushed again. She felt her folds burning as they widened, the child’s head beginning to protrude out of her. She gasped as she heard Mary say, “Yes! I can see it! Push again, Madam!” Astoria pushed harder, throwing her head back into her pillow, moaning still louder, it hurt so very much. She screamed and wailed with the effort of pushing as the baby finally slid from her body. The next thing she knew, Astoria heard the desperate crying of her child. “A boy! You have a boy Madam!” Cried Mary, as she laid the baby upon her chest, covered in blood and Merlin knew what else. Her baby’s cord had still not been detached and it was vaguely uncomfortable sticking out of her as she held her son, but she did not care, all the suffering of a few moments ago seemed to vanish. Astoria was sobbing, shaking, elated, shocked, her emotions were all over the place as she held this precious, screaming bundle in her arms. She could not believe that this was real, her heart would surely explode. Astoria had never loved anything so much, she would lay down her life for him, do anything to keep him safe. He was the most beautiful thing in the world. Her son, her son. In the bed where her own Mother had once died, there was new life.
At last, her son’s cord detached, and the afterbirth slithered out of her. Mary came over and asked tentatively if she might clean up the baby who had finally stopped crying. Astoria gave a nod of assent and handed him over, still trying to process everything. Iddi meanwhile was dabbing at the dried blood and mucus on Astoria’s chest. She was now a Mother, a Mother. It was all so much to take in, she could not quite believe that the child now being patted down with a warm cloth in Mary’s arms was hers. It truly was incredible. When Mary handed her son back to her Astoria got a better look at his face and was pleased to see he had a great resemblance to her and not Antonin. Her son’s hair was spun gold, as he began to blink confusedly up at her she saw that his eyes were lilac like her own, and his nose seemed to be of a similar shape. Indeed, the only thing that distinguished his features from hers was his skin. It was still golden, but quite a few shades paler than her own, this seemed to be the only thing that Antonin had given him. Astoria was still gazing at him, awestruck, when an uneasy thought came to her. Yes, the child did not look like Antonin. Would this make him angry? And if so, how angry? His rage could be a terrible thing, she knew. But it did not matter, she then thought fiercely, she was prepared to take any number of punishment beatings and rapes if that was what kept her son from harm. The baby was half asleep, but was now making movements with his hands towards her breast and licking his lips.

“Go on Madam” urged Mary as she watched on.

Tentatively, not sure if she were doing it right, Astoria slipped her left nipple into the child’s mouth. As he began to nurse, the warm feeling of love intensified inside her, she had never felt so happy and contented in her life. When she looked up, she saw Mary smiling, the first time she had seen her do so in what felt like forever.

“What will you name him Madam?” Mary asked.

Astoria looked down at her nursing son for a moment. “Leonidas.” She said softly. “His name, is Leonidas.”

When Astoria felt strong enough she got out of the bloody bed and stepped into a wide, ornate silver basin, she did not want to bathe, she wanted to get back to her son who had been laid down in a crib in the Nursery next door. Mary and Iddi sponged soap and water between her legs. She shuddered a little, still raw from the birth. When they were done they garbed Astoria in a new silk sleeping shift and bed robe of deepest blue. She made straight for the Nursery where Leonidas was sleeping. It was a small room which was light and airy now the sun was out, decorated in white and gold. The golden crib was shrouded in lace curtains and the brightly painted mural on the ceiling depicted woodland creatures gambling about a magical forest. There was a small nurses bed furthest from the door and closest to the crib, a daintily carved rocking chair beside it. Astoria went over to Leonidas and merely stared at him stirring feebly, contented and innocent in slumber. Not knowing his Father was a monster, not knowing that he would not even exist if his Mother had not been raped, not knowing that she loved him more than she had loved anyone in her life. Eventually, Astoria began to feel her lids starting to droop. She slipped off of her bed robe, flung it over the rocking chair and made for the nurse’s bed, wincing a little as she clambered in. The birth had left her exhausted both in her mind and body and it was not too long before she herself drifted off to sleep.
Over a moon’s turn had passed since Astoria had given birth to Leonidas and her body had returned to just as it had been before. She spent every waking hour with her son and would often call him “Leo” fondly when she spoke to him. Leo could recognise her now, he would gurgle and smile happily, attempting to grab at her golden tresses, so like his own, with his chubby fists. He would cry sometimes, but not often, in the night and he usually settled once Astoria gave him her breast.

Antonin had still not returned, but Mary had informed Astoria that she had sent word to him informing him of the birth with his Sea Eagle, a recent acquisition he had dubbed Vlad, so he must know by now. The eagle was pure black with evil, orange eyes and had a viscous temper to match his Master’s. The creature was quite huge and stood at three feet tall with a sharp, curved beak and lethal, four inch talons. Indeed, Astoria had noticed half healed scratches and cuts on Mary’s hands. As far as Astoria was concerned, the longer Antonin stayed away the better. One morn however, as the door to the Nursery swung open at her approach, Astoria let out a shocked gasp. There, standing by the crib and actually holding Leonidas, was Antonin, a look of mild curiosity upon his face as he stared down at the baby. He contrasted starkly in the light room in his black, Death Eater robes. The sight filled her with abject horror and she went cold all over, wanting nothing more than to snatch her son out of his arms, but she did not dare such a thing. When Antonin looked up at her, he gave her a cold sneer, his face full of gloating satisfaction.

“Ah, there she is, the blossoming new Mother” he said, his mouth twisting slightly.

Astoria struggled to find her words, such was her terror. “As-as you say husband.” She replied.

“This son pleases me,” he said after a small pause, glancing down again at Leonidas who was, mercifully, asleep. Astoria knew his temper would not tolerate endless wails and crying. “Though he favours you in looks…” She tensed. “…At least he shall grow up handsome.” Relief broke over her, she had expected a far worse reaction.

Astoria desperately wanted Antonin to put Leo down. No matter what he said, his moods could change quicker than a flash of lightening and she did not want him anywhere near the boy. She knew of only one thing that might work. Astoria swept across the room and when she reached him, began to stroke Antonin’s forearm suggestively, reaching up to touch his face. “How long has it been husband? Would you not like to spend some time with me?” For a moment he stared at her, as though unable to believe what she had just said and for an instant, Astoria thought that he would not take the bait. However, his face split in a smug grin, the satisfied expression he had worn before even more pronounced and he laid Leo back in the crib, watching her expectantly. Astoria slowly and deliberately let her bed robe slide off in a river of silk, she was naked underneath. Antonin was breathing very hard and began to caress her all over. She drew his face down to hers for a kiss and he responded aggressively, kissing her back hard as their tongues ran over one another’s. He gave a muffled groan as she grasped his crotch and buried his hands in her honey coloured hair. ‘All for Leo’ Astoria thought to get herself through it ‘I must do this for my son.’ Suddenly, Antonin scooped her up in his arms and strode out of the Nursery, through the Lady’s bedchamber until they arrived in the Lord’s. He laid her naked form down on a vast green and gold sofa and began to undress, ripping his garb in his eagerness to get at her.
“Come and sit in my lap” Antonin panted, sounding as out of breath as though he had been running. Astoria obeyed at once. She straddled his member and he grasped hard at her round backside, pushing her downwards to fill her and she dutifully began to ride him, vaguely remembering how this position had been a favourite of the Durmstrang boy who had taken her maidenhood. He grunted and groaned as she pretended to squeal and shudder in pleasure, which seemed to please him a lot, kissing her hard and taking her nipples in his mouth. As Astoria grasped behind his neck with her hands, Antonin then shifted his grip to behind her thighs and stood, thrusting hard so that he was impaling her freely with her legs wrapped around him. She imagined that he enjoyed taking her standing up because it gave him utter control, having the power whether to drop her or not. Indeed, he seemed to become even more excited by this position. Then, it came on her sudden and without warning. *She* was the one climaxing this time. Horrified, she attempted to stifle her moan, but Antonin had felt the sudden rush of wetness on his length, had felt her back beginning to arch. He gave a delighted laugh and ground himself harder into her, she moaned still louder, both pleasure and horror crashing over her body in waves. “That’s right” Antonin growled “That’s right you little nymph, you love it. Sing for your Master.” Astoria did, though the pleasure was now ebbing from her body to be replaced with shock and confusion. “Louder” he commanded, breathing rapidly. Again, she obeyed and moaned louder. Antonin carried on in this fashion before walking over to the side of the bed and laying her there on her back. He spread her legs, held them open and began to pump at her. To Astoria’s dismay it happened *again*, she began to climax just at the same time as Antonin, and had to work incredibly hard not to break down, knowing how furious he would be. The sleeping baby a few rooms away was the only thing that helped to keep her composure. Afterward Antonin gestured for her to get in bed with him. As Astoria lay at his side, he drew her to him to hold her in his muscular arms. As her head was resting on his chest, he kissed her on the forehead and began to stroke her hair, as she willed herself not to shudder in revulsion. “I do not think I have ever enjoyed you more my darling” Antonin said, his voice thick with pleasure. “You as well I think” he went on, smirking as he glanced down at her. “With any fortune you will give me another child soon.”

“Of, course husband,” Astoria replied at once with a small smile. Inside her head she was mortified, ‘*another child?’* She felt certain that she would love any other child as much as she did Leo, but so soon after? Her body had gone through so much, carrying him, *birthing* him, caring for him and all the emotions that came with it. No, she could not go through that again for another year or so, and besides, she thought angrily, she was not some damned broodmare to be impregnated over and over again until she was too exhausted to have any more children. But she did not really see how she could stop this from happening with no access to preventative potions such as Tansy Tea. Astoria sighed inwardly, she supposed the best she could do would be to finish Antonin with her hand or mouth, if he would allow it that is.

Antonin had played the perfect gentleman for the rest of the day. He courteously inquired how Astoria was feeling after the birth and generously complimented her on how fine her figure was looking so soon after having Leo. When Leonidas awoke later he cooed over him, so over the top that it was sickeningly sweet, praising Astoria on the name she had chosen and calling him “my boy.” She knew that it was all an act, he was in a high mood because she had pleasured him so much earlier and he was no fool, he now knew that he had the ultimate power and control over her now that Leonidas had been born. He knew she loved the child, and there was nothing that she would not do to protect it. Mary’s words had drifted back to her then.
“He wants you to obey him, fear him and love him. That is what feeds his lust for power and control.”

Yes, Mary had been right on that score, Antonin was far more bearable if she played the dutiful wife, though when he flew into one of his rages, nothing would abate his anger, no matter how much she batted her lashes. Astoria supposed that Antonin viewed her and Leonidas like trophies, his personal possessions to posture his power to the rest of the world. That evening, when Astoria walked into the Lord’s bedchamber robed for bed, she was startled to see an enormous, dragon shaped urn filled with at least a hundred giant, lilac roses. They had always been her favourites. She approached the urn, looking at it curiously.

“Iddi told me lilac roses were your favourite, my love.” Came Antonin’s voice, softly.

Astoria started and looked up. Antonin was leaning on the doorframe that led to the Lord’s solar, also dressed in a bed robe of wine red with black swirls, his bare chest exposed slightly. “That was—was most kind my Lord, I am honoured by your sweet gesture.”

Antonin then walked over to her and when he was stood above her, he smiled and touched her hair. “You pleased me greatly this morn.” He whispered. “I am glad that you are at last learning what I expect from my wife.”

“I am pleased to have pleased my Lord husband.” Astoria replied as she brushed his chest with her soft fingers.

Just the lightest touch from her had seemed to arouse him, Antonin inhaled deeply and walked behind her, sliding the bed robe from her shoulders and placing his hand between her legs. “Come, come show me again what a lovely wife you can be.”

Chapter End Notes

As I’ve stated before, i think it's a more interesting dynamic for Astoria to love her child because now she has something to lose. I also want to point out that this is not heading for Stockholm Syndrome or anything like that. Astoria still hates Antonin and is merely doing what she has to so he will not hurt her baby. Also, even though Antonin has a fair
idea of what she is doing, she also has a certain power over him when it comes to sex as he can't resist her, she is his perfect woman/he is sexually obsessed with her etc. Even though he takes pleasure from raping Astoria he also gets off on the fact that he now has even more power over her and having 'normal' sex with his 'adoring wife' which is part of his fantasy. Though Astoria still views herself as being violated as she doesn't want to sleep with him. Also regarding Antonin giving her flowers, he's one of those abusers who will give their victims gifts/occasional acts of (false) kindness to try and emotionally manipulate/confuse them for control and to create a constant climate of fear for when they inevitably start beating them again.

Re Antonin's eagle, Vlad - Stellers Sea Eagle: the heaviest eagle in the world with a wingspan of 2m and can inflict horrific injuries.
XVI. - The Hunted

Chapter Summary

This covers more of the Death Eaters activities and shifts from Britain to other places, and highlights how powerful Voldemort's regime is becoming. More Non-Canon Death Eaters/Characters added. Warning: graphic material. Same disclaimer applies.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Just under a moon’s turn had passed when Astoria and Antonin were commanded to travel to Holland. The Dark Lord had received word that the last of the Prewett’s were hiding out there in the countryside. The Death Eater’s had been commanded to slay them all, none were to be taken alive as they could not risk any of them escaping again. Less than half a year past, the Death Eaters had succeeded in capturing Dorothy Prewett on the outskirts of Belgium. She was witch in her middling twenties and a cousin to Ronald Weasley, another Blood Traitor, but it was said that she was powerfully magical. Their intention had been to subdue Dorothy and drag her back to Britain to be imprisoned at the Purification Institute, seeing as she was a Pure Blood, but no wizard would ever consent to wed her. Thus, the Dark Lord thought it fitting instead that she produce some Pure Blood children who would one day swell the ranks of his army. Astoria rather thought that death would be preferable to that fate. However, something had gone awry during the fight and Dorothy had escaped. Astoria naturally had not taken part in this as she was pregnant at the time, though she had heard enough to guess what had happened from Antonin’s drunken screams as he raged about the Palace not too long after this had occurred. He had flung urns, smashed mirrors and yelled threats and promises of retribution.

“That. Filthy. Blood Traitor. Whore!” Antonin had spat, striding about the Lord’s bedchamber, a bottle of half empty ‘Norton’s’ gin clutched in his hand. “When I get my hands on that bitch, ohh… she will regret it, I shall make her wish she had never been born!” He had gone on in this fashion for half the night getting drunker and drunker, making Astoria incredibly anxious. Soon or late Astoria had thought, she would have ended up being the target of his rage as usual. However, she need not have worried, by the time Antonin had finished shouting and screaming, he was so drunk that he was not capable of even hitting her. He had been swaying heavily, and it took two attempts for him to get into the bed. True, he had been sloppy and rough when he had eventually managed to bed her, but he was not brutal or violent as was his wont when he was angry.

Thus, Antonin was particularly excited about going after the Prewett’s, Dorothy in particular. Astoria wondered what horrors he had in store for the witch and shuddered inwardly. Also, as was common knowledge, Antonin had killed Gideon and Fabian Prewett during the First Uprising, resulting in his imprisonment in Azkaban and his Father’s death. Killing the last of the family was a twisted sort of revenge for him, though he had no one but himself to blame for his incarceration. Astoria doubted that Antonin had loved his Father, she did not think Antonin was capable of loving anyone, though
his Father’s death at the hands of the Ministry would have touched upon his pride. Indeed as they were walking along the courtyard towards the gates in order to disapparate, Antonin said “I can scarcely wait to obliterate the last of those filthy Blood Traitors and avenge my Father, justice at last.” He gave Astoria a gleeful grin which she only returned half heartedly.

“As you say, husband, I am glad this pleases you.” She automatically replied, though inside her heart was breaking. Not so much for the Prewett’s, their fate had been sealed for years now, but for her son. She did not want to leave him, Leonidas was still so small and very attached to her. Astoria had been up half the night tossing and turning wondering what would happen if she were to be killed in battle and Leonidas was left to be raised by Antonin. It was a dagger in her heart, constantly stabbing her with worry and fear. Antonin would most like brutalise the boy as he had brutalised her. He was singularly unfit to parent, he had no patience or warmth, he would become enraged when Leo would cry in the night and wake them, so there was now a silencing charm on the door to the Nursery. Astoria had found this most distressing, not being able to go her son when he was upset. Antonin had forbidden her to get up in the night to feed Leo in case he wanted to bed her, and she was not there. Indeed, Astoria was not permitted to give Leo her breast at all, forthwith. One morn, Antonin had come in to find her nursing the boy, and there was distinct envy in his cold eyes. After she was done he had declared that Mary would bottle feed Leo from now on. Astoria did not like this at all, feeding Leo naturally gave her a connection with him that words could not describe, but as always, she did not dare argue. Antonin permitted her to spend time with Leo in the daylight hours, however, if he was present and the baby started to cry, he would call for Mary and Iddi at once to take Leo back to his Nursery. It took all of Astoria’s strength not to burst into tears as she kissed Leo goodbye when they had left that afternoon.

Astoria pushed away these troubling thoughts, knowing that it would not do to carry on fretting. What Antonin said was law and woe betide her should she disobey, and as for her dying while out campaigning, she would just have to do the best that she could to stay alive. Indeed, Astoria rather felt that her magical power had increased tenfold since she had become a Mother. She felt ‘as one’ with her wand in a way she had never done beforehand and could now perform spells without saying the incantations aloud. The golden gates of the palace swung open with a slight creak when she and Antonin finally reached them. Wordless, Antonin held out his arm. She grasped it and they both turned on the spot, appearing at once on a pebbly beach, the waves crashing on the rocks, salt spray hanging in the air.

“West Sussex.” Antonin announced when he saw Astoria peering around and he began to conjure up two brooms. “We are to wait here for the others.” He finished, a look of poorly concealed, malicious sense of anticipation upon his face.

Astoria was glad she had worn her warmest cloak over her Death Eater robes, it was lined with black fox fur to match the leather gloves on her hands. It was much colder by the sea and the late February wind was icy as it blew cruelly on her face. It was beginning to grow dark as the iron grey clouds swirled over the sun, and Astoria heard faint ‘pops’ as the other Death Eaters began to apparate onto the beach. Avery, the Carrow siblings, Silas Norton, McNair and at least fifty others were jostling on the bleak coastline, talking excitedly and clutching brooms. Astoria glimpsed Draco’s face and quickly turned away, her stomach had given a horrid twist and she could not bear to even look at
him, such was her grief.

Antonin had climbed up onto a small sort of rocky cliff so that he looked down on everyone. “Right, I shall have silence!” he roared, and all fell quiet at once. “The Dark Lord says that I am in charge of this mission, so you shall all report to me and none other, is that understood?” He asked commandingly, the corner of his mouth giving a pleasurable twist, delighted to be holding the power.

“Yes, Dolohov!” they all cried back in unison.

“Good,” Antonin said softly. Then, in a much louder tone he went on, “Our orders are to enter Holland as quickly and quietly as is possible, however, we should expect a fight from German and French forces, they are working very hard to prevent us from infiltrating Northern Europe. We shall enter through North Holland and apparate to the countryside to find them in the South. It should not take more than a day for us to reach the Prewett’s, the Dark Lord has divulged their exact location to me and they will not be expecting us, though they may have some Ministry protection.” At his words, Avery spat on the sand. Antonin smirked and went on. “There can be no question that there will be Ministry officials and aurors buzzing about the coastline when we arrive, so be prepared. Your orders are to kill on sight, we shall be taking no prisoners on this occasion, but—” he gave a broad grin, “Boys, you may do as you please with any witches or women we come by on this campaign.” There was general laughter from the wizards and Astoria heard Silas give a loud screech of delight. Antonin chuckled softly and pulled out his wand and placed it on his palm. It spun wildly before stopping with a jerk, pointing west. “Mount your brooms!” Antonin then shouted. All the Death Eaters drew out their masks, raised their hoods and slid onto their brooms.

As one, they all rose into the air and before long they were soaring over the swirling, crashing sea. It had begun to rain, lightly at first, but it began to get heavier and heavier, smashing into the sea, making a terrible roaring noise, soaking them all to the bone. It was so dark now that Astoria could barely see anyone else, though she was distantly aware of flying between Theodore Nott and Josiah Zabini. A little over two hours later, it happened. There were shouts over the noise of the storm and a flash of blue light came streaking through the sky, narrowly missing someone in front of Astoria. She drew her wand at once.

“Kill them, kill them all now!” Astoria heard Antonin bellowing from far away.

Suddenly, out of a black cloud to her left burst three wizards, also mounted on brooms. Astoria and the others scattered as all three of the unknown wizards yelled together “Impedimenta!” Theodore’s mask slipped as he half fell off his broom, shouting, but Silas, who had also lost his mask, zoomed over to push him back on.

Astoria was firing hexes in every direction of what must be Ministry officials and aurors who had come to defend Northern Europe. She suddenly felt a sharp pain in the back of her shoulder, and
whirled around angrily, ripping off her mask as she did so. She hated people who attacked from behind. A mature, hard faced witch was throwing curses at her through the rain and screaming in a heavy French accent. “Whore! Death Eater whore! Be gone from these shores!” Astoria tightened her grip on her broom handle with her left hand and sped forward, still dodging all the curses. She pointed her wand straight at other witches face. A burst of green light erupted from her wand and blasted the witch straight off her broom, she toppled out of sight and plummeted down to the churning sea below.

Astoria briefly felt shaken, she had killed before, but never using *Avada Kedavra*. She flew through the battle which was lighting up the night sky with all the jets of light flying everywhere. Suddenly, something heavy slammed into her and she knew a moment of terror as she almost slipped and fell, this intensified as strong hands grasped around her throat. Astoria tried to make a sound but could not utter, her vision grew misty and she distantly heard someone snarl in her ear, “Scum, scum, die you bitch!” He sounded German. The wizard who had hold of her had clearly lost his wand. *No, no! You cannot die you cannot! Think of Leo, think of Leo!* Astoria thought fiercely, though now she was starting to feel drowsy, the rain lashing her face. With an enormous effort, she grasped her wand tightly and shoved it into the wizard’s stomach. Her curse ripped straight through the wizard, causing his entrails to fly everywhere, he did not even have time to yell. Astoria gasped as she took great breaths of cold air as his grip released and felt blood spatter her face. The wizard’s broom and his mangled remains span downwards through the sky. She looked up, shaking, and saw Antonin duelling three at once, Blaise Zabini and Adelaide Yaxley were locked in combat with a group of at least six, and she saw Rodolphus Lestrange battling an elderly wizard; the two seemed to be equally matched. These seemed to be the only combatants left who had not yet been killed or fled, the rest of the Death Eaters were swirling around the sky, looking to see if more defenders would return.

Astoria surmised that they were not interfering in the duels in case they hit one of their own, so she proceeded to do the same.

At last, when the elderly wizard who had been duelling Rodolphus went flying through the clouds, shrieking, there were no more defenders left. Silas gave his high pitched cackle and began to do loop the loops in the air, laughing still more madly with each loop. Astoria could see his disfigured face through the gloom, full of malicious delight at their victory. “Enough!” barked Antonin, and Silas stopped at once. Antonin was breathing hard, bending over his broom slightly, and he had a gash across his forehead, but otherwise seemed unharmed. “They will be back and undoubtedly they will bring more when they find all the corpses in the sea below. We must make for the coast at once, now come! All of you!” he shouted.

They all dived and pulled up short of the sea, speeding towards the coastline, though they veered right when they saw another group of wizards standing on the beach. Astoria heard distant yells and more jets of light flew towards them, but they were too far away to make any impact. She and the other Death Eaters landed further up the coast, many falling and getting entangled with one another, such was the force of their landing. Silas was in a crumpled heap, moaning, but was roughly dragged to his feet by Josiah. With over fifty of them, it was a scrum getting themselves into some semblance of order. Indeed, Antonin set off several bangs of red light into the air from his wand. “Quiet!” He bellowed. “Quiet I say! I will have order! Now!” and all stopped moving at once. “Now, there is a forest not many leagues from here where we shall set up camp tonight, I want you all in fighting form tomorrow, we-“ But Antonin was cut off. More wizard defenders were apparating all around them, encircling their group on the beach. Antonin looked momentarily caught off guard, but then
roared with laughter and struck down a wizard closest to him. After all, there were only twenty of these other wizards and they were completely outnumbered. Astoria could not be surprised that the wizards had appeared, they had been making such a racket. However, the duelling that followed went on for close to an hour, these had clearly been some of the best wizards Holland had to offer, come to defend their homeland. When they all lay dead, Antonin commanded them to clear away the bodies, not wanting anyone to know that they had been here. They did. Silas was very amused as he hurried around the grisly scene, setting the bodies alight, which disappeared almost at once in a puff of smoke, while McNair lazily transfigured them into rocks and branches. “Now, to the forest!”

They all disapparated at once to arrive in a large clearing in a remote forest, which was deathly quiet, the wind whispering gently at the tree leaves. “We must use Muggle repelling, silencing and disillusionment charms to ensure that we remain undiscovered for the nonce.” Said Antonin, speaking into the quiet. “We shall remain here until just before break of day and leave when it is still dark.” He then gave an awful smile, “and then, we go and get them.” There were murmurs of assent after Antonin’s pronouncement and everyone began to move to the perimeters of the clearing to cast the charms, with these many wands, their protection would be almost unbreakable, Astoria thought vaguely. Antonin then swept his wand slowly in an arc over the clearing and many tents appeared there at once, with a larger black one looking down upon them all. Astoria made to go to the perimeter to help with the charms, but Antonin caught her by the arm. She looked at him, apprehensive. “No, no, my wife can come have some rest.” He said with a slight smile. Astoria knew she was unlikely to get any ‘rest’ whatsoever, but took his hand all the same and allowed him to lead her up to the large black tent.

When they entered the tent, Astoria saw that it was sumptuously decorated in black and silver velvet hangings. The plush rug in the centre was emblazoned with the Dark Mark, as were all the silver carvings on the gilt bed. There was a large mirror in the centre of the eastern wall, and further to the left there was a door which Astoria assumed must lead into the bathing suite. Astoria gasped when she saw her reflection in the mirror. Dried blood covered the left side of her face and was matted into her French braid. There was a graze on her right cheek and ugly, black choke marks where the wizard had tried to throttle her were littered over her neck. Antonin looked at her and chuckled softly. “Only battle marks my love, we shall be able to fix those in no time.” Undoubtedly, the battle above the sea and on the beach had been the most gruelling ones Astoria had ever fought thus far with the Death Eaters. Antonin then led her to the bathing suite. Once inside, he waved his wand carelessly and her sodden robes vanished, leaving her naked, and the silver bathtub filled with hot, bubbling, sweet smelling water. “Get in my dear,” Antonin said softly, and Astoria obeyed at once. He waved his wand again so that he was dressed only in a dark green bed robe. Antonin crouched down beside the tub, conjured up a wet, soft sponge and began to dab at the blood on the side of her face and hair, smirking slightly. “We must do something about these unsightly marks” he said, still speaking in that soft voice, ceasing his dabbing and running his fingers through her wet hair and stroking the back of her head gently. “Drisella!” Antonin barked suddenly, making Astoria jump.

Drisella Selwyn suddenly appeared in the bathing suite, ignoring Astoria’s nakedness and curtsying for Antonin. “How might I serve you, Dolohov?” Drisella asked respectfully.
“You know some Healing do you not?” Antonin demanded, getting to his feet.

“That is correct, Dolohov.” Drisella replied.

“In that case, I command you to fix these blemishes upon my wife’s normally perfect visage.”

“At once, Dolohov.” Drisella said, and knelt down by the tub, taking Astoria by the chin, not ungently, moving her head from side to side, evaluating the damage to be fixed. Finally, she pulled out her wand and began to wave it in an odd, figure of eight movement, her deep grey eyes narrowed in concentration. Astoria gazed at Drisella as she worked. Astoria knew little of the girl. In truth, she had barely uttered two words to her before, as Drisella had been a year below Silas at Hogwarts, making her sixteen years by now. All she knew of Drisella was that she was daughter of Walter Selwyn and had a twin brother named Dashiell. “There, that is all done with, Dolohov” she said at last.

“Good, you have pleased me, I shall be informing your Father of this.” Antonin said, eyeing Astoria closely, just to be sure that Drisella had not missed anything. Drisella bowed her head and vanished at once. Antonin drew Astoria to her feet and led her to a mirror and stood behind her. He gave her a firm kiss on the cheek and whispered, “There, beautiful and clean once again.” She was still soaking wet, but the water was beginning to dry, and she began to shiver. Antonin laughed and picked her up in his arms, “Have no fear my love, I shall have you all warmed up soon.” And he carried her back into the bedchamber.

The sky was still very dark when all arose the next morn, the sun had not yet shown itself. Antonin gathered all the Death Eaters before his tent and Astoria slipped into the crowd. “You are all to perform disillusionment charms upon yourselves. We are to approach the Prewett hideout from afar, as it will not do for fifty of us to be spotted, skulking around there. I want the entire perimeter encircled so that none can escape. There is a chance that there may be Ministry interference, so I want the place surrounded for three leagues. You shall go in groups of ten at each league, the other twenty or so of us will surround the place and put an end to this for good and all.” He finished, with a sneer. As the protective charms still held, the Death Eaters cheered and shouted, shooting bursts of light from their wands into the dark morning air. Once this had subsided, Antonin breathed, “Let us go.” His eyes gleaming with a sinister excitement.

One by one, the Death Eaters all vanished as they performed their disillusionment charms, and there were faint pops as each wizard disapparated. They apparated to the top of a hill overlooking a valley as the sky began to lighten, all still invisible. There was a thin river running through the valley and it was littered with trees and hedgerows. Right in the centre, surrounded by more trees, Astoria thought she could make out a house.

“Is that it?” Came Adelaide’s excited whisper somewhere to her right, “Do you think that that is
where they are?"

No one had a chance to answer, for then Antonin’s voice cut through the air. “That is the place, down in the middle.” Astoria could tell he was trying hard to keep the excitement out of his voice and sound cool and commanding. “Mulciber, you shall take nine and remain here, Avery and Carrow, you are to do the same further down the valley. Do NOT reveal yourselves until you see my spell break the protective charms around the house, understood?” There were murmurs of “At once Dolohov” and “Understood Dolohov.” “Good, now, the rest of you, come with me” he almost whispered.

The soft padding of footsteps on grass were the only sounds as Astoria and the others made their way down the valley. It was further than it had looked, and they were walking for what seemed like an age as she heard the other groups of Death Eaters take their positions around the valley. Finally, they arrived at the farmhouse. It was larger than it had seemed from the top of the hill, but it was crumbling and in ruins. The windows were grimy and cracked, there were tiles missing from the roof and the paving stones leading toward it were crooked and broken. The door appeared to be hanging off its hinges, but Astoria knew this was part of the magic of the protective charms, to make the place seem disused and empty. Antonin suddenly appeared and walked closer to the house, so that he was now twenty feet away. He slowly raised his wand and pointed it straight at the roof of the house. A blinding flash of silver light seemed to light up the valley and the spell made a screeching sound, like a thousand nails on a chalkboard. Astoria could almost feel Antonin’s spell ripping through the protective charms and all the other Death Eaters appeared everywhere at once.

Astoria could hear screams of terror and crying from within the farmhouse. “Come out!” Antonin roared, “Come out now and you will not have to die the hard way, choose to fight, and I promise you, I will make your dying last half the night.” Antonin had his back to Astoria and the others, but she could tell he was smiling. “You are surrounded by more than fifty Death Eaters, there is nowhere to run, I have cast an anti disapparition charm over this area. Come. Out. NOW! Or I will make you.” Ten wizards in official looking, navy blue robes suddenly came pouring out of the door, their wands raised, staring around the valley at all the Death Eaters surrounding them. These were clearly Ministry of Holland Wizards. Antonin laughed, “Fools! Now, fellow Death Eaters! Take them!”

The fight burst out at once in a sort of explosion. Two of the wizards aimed curses at Antonin, but he waved his wand casually at them and they were thrown high up into the air. One smashed through the rickety roof of the house on his way down, and the screaming within increased in pitch. The other landed with a splat on the paving stones, his body breaking on impact. Blood, brains and innards splattered everywhere, including the hem of Antonin’s robes. Suddenly a young, red headed woman came hurtling from the house into the fray. This must be Dorothy Prewett, Astoria thought fleetingly, as another wizard lunged toward her, sending a jet of orange light in her direction, but she deflected it easily and began to duel him. They seemed to be at it for an age, the wizard was incredibly skilful, and Astoria could not seem to touch him. Her wand arm was growing tired when suddenly the wizard was knocked off balance by Josiah who had backed into him as he was fighting another. Astoria did not have the time to conjure Avada Kedavra so she used a spell Antonin had shown her of his own invention, Purpura Morta. She made a slashing movement with her wand and purple flame burst from it, hitting the wizard right in the face. He was dead before he hit the ground.
Astoria looked around wildly, everyone was still duelling, and as she gazed up the valley she saw that a full scale battle had broken out between the Death Eaters who had been stationed up the valley and more Ministry witches and wizards who had apparated to the scene. Other Death Eaters had burst into the house to drag the Prewett’s outside. There looked to be about nine of them. A red headed boy of about ten years had made a break from the group for the river, terrified at the carnage. Silas pointed his wand at the boy’s back, “Avada-” he began, but Silas never got a chance to finish the spell. The next moment, Silas was flying through the air, screaming, and was smashed into a tree, sliding, apparently unconscious to the ground, blood pouring from his nose and mouth. Dorothy Prewett had directed a powerful curse at Silas to prevent him from killing the boy. At this, Astoria, Antonin, Blaise and Adelaide pointed their wands at Dorothy, but she repelled them. Adelaide was blasted off her feet and landed with a loud splash in the river, Blaise spun in the air over and over before slamming into the ground, and Astoria herself was thrown thirty feet backwards.

Only Antonin had managed to stand his ground. He snarled at Dorothy as they began to duel one another. “You cannot defeat me, you bitch!” He screamed. “When I have killed you, I am going to torture your filthy family to death!” Indeed, Walden McNair, Josiah Zabini, Corban Yaxley, Theodore Nott and five others were all torturing the other Prewett’s over and over, their yells of pain echoing with the din in the valley. Evan Rosier had continued the pursuit of the boy who had ran away and was hexing him, so that deep slashes appeared in his back as he screamed in agony, writhing upon the grass by the river bank.

Astoria suddenly shrieked as a curse hit her in the chest, one of the surviving Ministry wizards had charged down from the valley and caught her off guard. She crumpled to the floor, sobbing, her hand clutching her heart. She he felt as though her chest were aflame, but before the wizard could deal her a fatal blow, Augustus Rookwood shot a killing curse at him and the wizard fell instantly, dead. Astoria merely lay upon the grass, dazed and hurting. Soon though, through a haze of pain, Astoria heard dimly that the sounds of curses and shouting had subsided. She forced herself to look up and saw it was only Antonin and Dorothy still duelling and the others still torturing the Prewett’s. Corpses were strewn all over the valley and many Death Eaters had come to watch the fight.

Astoria propped herself up against a tree and looked up, blearily, just as Antonin got his chance to finish Dorothy. A moment’s hesitation from Dorothy had allowed him to perform his signature spell, Purpura Morta. Dorothy fell, hard, her wand flying out of her hand, but the spell had not killed her. Antonin grinned down at the witch with a look of savage triumph upon his face, and pointed his wand at her. Dorothy’s clothes vanished and for a moment Astoria assumed he was going to rape her for all to see, but no. It was worse, a thousand times worse than that. Once again, he pointed his wand at her and directed it at her left arm. Dorothy gave a terrible scream as her arm was severed from her body. Astoria closed her eyes tightly as Dorothy screamed and screamed combined with the jeers of the other Death Eaters ringing in the air. For what seemed like an hour later, Astoria’s eyes jerked open automatically as she felt someone shaking her shoulder, roughly. It was Thorefin Rowle, most like checking to see if she was still alive. Astoria wished he had not, for she beheld a truly horrific scene. The naked head and torso of Dorothy Prewett was squirming on the ground in a pool of blood. Antonin had severed her arms and legs, yet she was, incredibly, still alive. Antonin was howling obscenities incoherently in the background and the heads of the rest of the Prewett
family had been impaled on the dead branches of the burned trees. Astoria stared for a moment, horror struck, and fainted.

Chapter End Notes

'Purpura Morta' means purple death. It's the name I gave to Antonin's unnamed curse in the original books.
Chapter Summary

This covers the aftermath of the Holland attack and we see the Death Eaters going abroad again.
Same disclaimer applies.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Fragmented images were shattered across Astoria’s mind as she dipped in and out of consciousness. She was flying across the sea, but no, that could not be, she did not remember mounting her broom, she could not fly of her own accord… the wind rushed in her ears. It was all so confusing. A bloody torso writhed upon the floor, wizards were flying everywhere, everything was ablaze, the fire consuming all in its path. A young witch was dragged from a river, her face as white as chalk. Blood, destruction and screams…what was going on? Astoria’s chest was in so much pain, she surely must be dying. What was that now? Strong arms bundled her into, what? A carriage perhaps? Then there was the feeling of soaring again, soaring and soaring through the air…

When Astoria opened her eyes, she gave a muffled moan of pain and stirred feebly. It was as though someone had cut open her chest, carved out her heart and torn her ribcage in two. The next she knew, a withered old warlock was leaning over her muttering, wheezily, “Now, now Madam Dolohov, you must be still, you have been seriously wounded and have been incapacitated for two weeks. I shall give you something for the pain shortly.”

Astoria hazily took in her surroundings and realised that she was back in her bedchamber at Greengrass Palace. “Who…you?” She croaked at the warlock, barely getting her words out. “Where…how? My son…I”

But the warlock did not have time to answer, for at that moment, the door of her bedchamber creaked open and Antonin came slouching into the room, clad in a black bed robe. “Ah, she is awake, finally.” He said with a sinister smile. Antonin came over to the bed and bent to kiss her on the cheek. When he straightened, he announced, “This is Healer Rathburne, my dear. He has been given to us by the Dark Lord as a present to show his gratitude for the successful campaign I led in Holland.”

Astoria swallowed hard and replied, “His Lordship is most generous.” To be sure, she knew that Healers were hard to come by in these dark times. Many had been killed or fled when the chaos of the Dark Lord’s reign of terror had descended on Britain, and St. Mungo’s had fallen into disrepair and ruin. Any remaining Healers were rounded up and forced into servitude to treat wounded Death
Eaters, hence, they were few and far between and many had to wait to be healed. Indeed, Astoria herself had given birth to Leonidas with only the assistance of the half trained Mary and Iddi the House Elf.

“Yes,” Antonin went on, smirking slightly, “Rathburne is one of the best.” The Healer merely stood there, looking meek and subservient. “When shall my wife be recovered?” he demanded of Rathburne.

“No more or less than a week Master Dolohov” Rathburne replied in his quavery voice. “And there shall be no lasting damage, seeing as it was a non verbal curse.” He looked down at Astoria. “You mentioned your son when you awoke. The child thrives Madam, I have looked in on him already at the request of your husband and you will be pleased to know that the boy is indeed a wizard, he shows signs of magic already.” A mixture of relief and a mad desire to hold Leo in her arms again broke over her, but she knew better than to beg for her baby. “I shall give you something for the pain now, Madam Dolohov” Rathburne went on, “I have examined you and have determined that you are not pregnant, so will opium serve?”

Astoria inwardly grimaced, thinking of Narcissa. Her emaciated appearance, sunken eyes and gaunt, once beautiful face; opium had made her a walking corpse. But the pain was so bad, and Astoria was sure Antonin would want to bed her later, regardless of what Rathburne counselled, so she did not see how she could refuse. Astoria gave a small nod, “Just a touch Rathburne, I do not want to become fond of opium, in case—” she glanced at Antonin “In case I should give my Lord husband another child any time soon.” This was a lie of course, but she did not want Antonin getting any ideas with regard to opium. Having her hooked on the foul stuff would be another way to control her, so she said what she needed to, knowing that this would please him. Sure enough, Antonin gave a smug smile at her last words. Healer Rathburne then put a few drops of opium from a crystal vial into a goblet of steaming black liquid. Astoria drank the potion down in one and felt the awful pain in her chest vanish, along with a curious, warm sensation in her head. She handed the goblet back to Rathburne. Oh, how she wanted to see her son.

“Good, you may go, Rathburne.” Antonin said, carelessly. Rathburne gave them both a creaky bow and shuffled out of the bedchamber. Antonin came over to the side of Astoria’s bed and held out his hand, she took it and he pulled her to her feet. Astoria was a little unsteady and Antonin grasped her by the waist to keep her from toppling over. He led her to the crystal dressing table which was sparkling in the afternoon light, gesturing for her to sit. “I have something for you” Antonin said softly, and he conjured up a square, red velvet box, placing it on the dresser. Slowly, the box began to open, and Astoria let out an involuntary gasp. She could not help it. Resting on more red velvet was the most magnificent diamond tiara she had ever seen, and she had seen a fair few. Astoria had an entire vault of fantastical jewels beneath the palace after all. This tiara however, was the most elaborate and sparkling Astoria had ever seen. It was Goblin made, and there was a huge, white, pear shaped diamond in the centre. Rows of more pear shaped diamonds adorned the headband, and the crown piece was elaborately filigreed with yet more diamonds shaped like flowers, giving the tiara an almost unearthly glow. “Do you like it?” Antonin whispered, he had knelt behind her chair and was gazing at the reflection of the two of them in the dresser mirror, his head resting on her shoulder.
“I – I…” Astoria could not seem to get her words out, such was her confusion. Then she remembered her courtesies. “Its beauty takes my breath away, husband, I thank you.”

Antonin smiled and looked oddly satisfied. “Yes well,” he said, “A beautiful tiara for the most beautiful witch in the world, I am sure this will become you far more than it did that old harridan.” Astoria felt her insides clench, she looked in the mirror at Antonin in what she hoped was a quizzical fashion. “The old Prewett hag, Muriel.” He said in answer to her look. “After we slew them all, I plundered the house and found this tiara, though they did their best to conceal it.” He smirked.

Astoria went cold all over, and suddenly the tiara did not seem so beautiful anymore. It seemed to sparkle up at her, accusingly. “That was most gallant of you” Astoria forced herself to say, in her sweet, well practiced voice to mask her horror.

“It would please me to see you wearing this” Antonin said. His voice was still low, but Astoria could hear his breathing becoming deeper.

“Certainly husband.” Astoria replied at once. “Do you wish me to wear it when we dine this eve or-“

She was cut off by Antonin’s chuckle, and he was shaking his head. “It would please me to see you wearing only this.” Astoria sighed inwardly. Of course. You should know him better by now. She thought. Antonin picked up the tiara and placed it upon her honeyed curls, smirking broadly. He drew Astoria to her feet and she shrugged out of her sleeping silks to stand there naked before him, clad in only the tiara. Antonin grabbed her by the shoulders and began to kiss her forcefully, pressing his body hard against hers. When they broke apart, he fumbled at the tassels of his bed robe until the fabric parted to reveal his rock hard shaft pointing at her. Antonin seized her arm roughly and pulled her over to the bed, where he sat on the edge. “Knees.” He grunted. Astoria knew what to do, she dropped to her knees at once, and wrapped her full lips around the end of his member. Antonin let out a groan as she began to slide her mouth up and down his length, and he grasped the back of her head so that she might take him deeper down her throat. Antonin stared down at her, his tongue moistening his lips, his free hand touching her face and occasionally brushing the glittering tiara. Astoria pleasured Antonin with her mouth for some time before he laid back on the bed and gestured for her to get on top of him. She did. As she guided him inside her, she gave an affected little moan and bit down on her lip, as though in pleasure, knowing how much this would please him, and so it did. Antonin began to grind into her, his groans becoming louder and reaching up to grab her breasts. Astoria then felt the familiar tingling feeling between her lower lips, not again, she thought. She could never seem to keep herself from climaxing when she was on top of him. Antonin began to rub her delicate centre with his thumb as he felt her walls tighten around him, and there was no stopping it. She could not stop the moans from escaping her lips, her body trembled with the invading pleasure, the warm liquid from her womanly folds gushing all over him, her nails digging into his chest... betrayed by her body yet again. At this Antonin growled, “You look such a pretty thing in that tiara” He was panting and breathless, touching her face and grabbing at her backside. Astoria kissed his fingers and Antonin tensed, which she took to mean that it was nearly over. Indeed, Antonin then flipped her onto her back to pump inside her, hard, finally spilling his seed in her womb.
The rest of the night passed without incident, Antonin even allowing Astoria to look in on Leonidas after dinner. Leo had grown considerably, even though it had been just under a moon’s turn since she had last laid eyes on him. “He grows,” Astoria murmured, as they both stood over the crib. “I daresay he shall be as tall as you one day husband.” Antonin gave a satisfied smile but said nothing. Leo began to stir then, and opened his large, lilac eyes to stare at them. When he saw Astoria, he gave a happy gurgle and raised his arms towards her, she thought her heart might burst. But instead of picking him up, she kissed Antonin instead, not wanting his jealousy to erupt. “I am sure he will be a great wizard” She whispered in Antonin’s ear.

“Indeed,” he replied, Astoria’s kiss had stirred him, she knew. “You may bid the boy goodnight and join me in the Lord’s bedchamber.” It was just what Astoria had intended. She picked up Leo, gave him a quick hug and a kiss, and laid him back down, grateful for at least being able to touch him, however briefly.

The next morn, Antonin informed Astoria that they would be going riding as he had matters of import to discuss with her. Astoria did not see why he could not just tell her over breakfast, but was not about to question him. Thus, Mary had brought out her riding habit to wear that day, a cumbersome garment consisting of a jacket, shirt, waistcoat and long skirts. It was scarlet velvet, heavily embroidered with gold rope and thread on the cuffs, lapels and on the hem of the skirt. White lace from her shirt spilled from the sleeves and her collar, the waistcoat crafted from pure gold brocade. Mary had done her hair in a low, elegant bun and placed a matching scarlet topper upon her head, adorned with white ostrich plumes and real roses. Finally, Mary slid delicate white kid gloves onto her hands and tried to offer her a golden riding whip, but she refused. Astoria did not and would not beat her animals to bend them to her will.

Antonin was waiting for her at the foot of the staircase, dressed in a black velvet riding tailcoat, dark breeches, and shiny, high topped boots. “Ah good morn my lady, you look beautiful, such a charming habit you have on today.” He called. When she reached him, Antonin kissed her full on the lips and Astoria took his proffered hand, allowing him to lead her to the back of the palace to the stables.

Their unicorn mounts were already saddled and bridled when they arrived. Nero, the black stallion and Solaris, a pretty pale golden mare who had a shining white mane and tail with a matching horn. They were pawing the ground restlessly as she and Antonin both approached. Astoria always rode side saddle, Father had never allowed her to ride astride as he felt it was ‘unbecoming’ and ‘sluttish’ for a witch to do so. Antonin grasped her by the waist and easily lifted her up onto Solaris’ back, her long skirts draping over the unicorns quarters. Nero was huge, at least eighteen hands high, but due to Antonin’s own great height, he mounted him easily from the ground, despite Nero constantly moving about, such was his nervoussness of Antonin. A few vicious bangs from Antonin’s wand seemed to be enough to cow the poor animal and make him more docile. They set off at a brisk canter towards the grounds, and Antonin said nothing until they finally slowed to a walk when they reached the forest.
“The Dark Lord is making preparations to conquer the rest of Europe” Antonin said without preamble. “He hopes that the next to fall will be France, that is where he plans to strike first. That Mudblood French Minister has slighted him and the Dark Order far too many times to go unanswered for this long, and his Lordship intends to make him pay.” He smirked slightly and went on as the unicorn’s hooves thudded softly upon the leafy ground, “The Dark Lord knows that France will not be easy to conquer, so he has declared that much of his forces will be stationed over there for a minimum of two years. That includes us.” Astoria looked at him, trying to conceal the shock on her face, two years? Antonin then answered her unasked question. “We shall leave three lunar cycles from now, while all his plans are set in place and – and the boy shall join us a moon’s turn after, accompanied by Rathburne. He informs me that it is unwise for the boy to be apart from his Mother for such a long period while his magic still develops.” Astoria was still trying to take this all in when Antonin continued on, relentlessly. “Headquarters in France,” he then gave an evil smile, “Shall be at the Castle of Count Dracula. He is most sympathetic to the Dark Order’s aims and shares a hatred for the Mudblood Minister who has been trying to capture and kill him for years.”

Astoria’s insides seemed to have frozen. Raise Leo in a war zone and in the home of a murderous Vampire? It was repugnant, it was grotesque. Yes, she wanted to be with her son, but she would rather he be far out of harm’s way if this was how things were going to be. Count Dracula for Merlin’s sake! Count Dracula was the most notorious and feared Vampire in all of France, it was said he had bitten more people than any other, and had evaded capture for centuries. No one had yet succeeded in finding his elusive castle either, which was rumoured to be hidden deep within the gloomy Dauphine Alps. Astoria merely sat there, horror silently crashing over her as they rode on for over two hours. She looked without truly seeing as Antonin made short work of six red wolves, a white elk and a golden bear, the latter of which had come charging down a hill at them, thoroughly terrifying the unicorns. Antonin had summoned Iddi to the grounds and commanded her to skin and gut the elk for meat. As they were riding back did he asked, “So, does my lady have a taste for roast elk tonight?”

The days rolled by far too quick for Astoria’s liking, and she spent as much time as Antonin permitted her with Leo, dreading the day when they had to leave for France. Too soon though, the day finally came when their trunks were packed, and a portkey awaited them in the Lord’s bedchamber. Mary was holding Leo in her arms as Astoria gave him a firm kiss on the forehead, fighting back the tears. She turned away as the portkey began to glow blue, touched her finger to it and was instantly whirl through a scene of colour and light, Antonin beside her. Seconds later, they were standing at the foot of twenty roughhewn steps, an imposing stone castle looming above, set between two mountains. Astoria looked around her, it was a dark, bleak place. The mountains surrounding them were black and smoking, some of them slightly aflame and oozing lava. Acrid smoke hung in the air, the sky was a charcoal grey and there was no sign of the sun. Dragons wheeled high above the castle and Astoria saw one break away from the group to land on a distant, fiery mountain, spreading its wings with a roar that was audible even from here. There was a bubbling black lake to the right of the castle, but Astoria doubted that anything lived within, and even if it did, she dreaded to think what manner of creatures they may be. She glanced over her shoulder. There was no greenery in sight, only high jagged bits of rock littered the ground, which necessitated the need for the black bridge that joined up to the stairs, stretching far away into the smoke.

Antonin waved his wand and their trunks vanished, she took his hand and they began to walk up the
astoria steps toward the forbidding castle. The doors were fifty feet high and done in black steel, the knocker in the likeness of a Vampire’s snarling face, fangs bared. As Astoria looked up, she saw two crow cages hanging from the castle filled with human bones, they were creaking as if in a breeze, though there was no breath of wind to be felt. The turrets of the castle were merely masses of twisted, black metal spikes. This was also true for the highest, largest point of the castle, except this turret had a queer red glow in the centre among all the metal. They waited at the doors which slowly swung open, and Astoria barely stifled a gasp. She could not help it, she had never seen a Vampire before, let alone four Vampires. The Vampires were waiting in the long narrow hallway for them, one male and three females behind him.

They were all pale as snow and skeletally thin with dark shadows under their eyes. The effect was eerie, almost frightening. The male with the grey streaked dark hair must be Dracula, Astoria thought. Indeed, he stepped forward and said in a raspy French accent that sounded like death, “Ahh, Monsieur Dolohov, Madame Dolohov, you are being most welcome at the Castle of Count Dracula.” Dracula planted a kiss on her hand which felt like a shard of ice through the leather of her glove. He shook Antonin’s hand, showing lethal looking fangs in what may have been a smile. “The Dark Lord is speaking to me most highly of you Monsieur. I look forward to knowing you better.” He said to Antonin, who looked smug and not the least bit afraid of these strange beings. Dracula waved a bony hand in the direction of the women standing behind him. “My I present, my wives. This is Valeria.” A blonde Vampire woman stepped forward and curtsied. “And here we have Natalia and Zinnia.” Two other dark haired Vampire women stepped forward and followed suit. “Now, I shall be having someone show you up to your rooms…Jinky!” And the queerest House Elf Astoria had ever seen appeared at once by Dracula’s knee. Jinky, like her Master was pale, thin and had shadows under her eyes. Jinky was dressed in a black linen toga, and Astoria thought the creature looked like a corpse.

“Yes, Master Dracula” she squeaked in a croaky French accent.

“Show our guests to their rooms and see that they do not want for anything.” Dracula commanded. He turned back to Antonin, “Dinner will be served at eight, and I am sure by that time the rest of your fellow Mangemorts-” Dracula was suddenly brought up short, “Ah, my apologies, your fellow Death Eaters, will have arrived.”

“You are most kind Count Dracula, my wife and I thank you” replied Antonin, inclining his head toward the Vampire as they both swept down the hallway after the undead House Elf.

The interior of the Castle was just as unpleasant as the exterior. The fire sconces set into the wall were human skulls, flames gushing out of the tops of their heads, frozen smiles and empty eye sockets seemed to follow them as they went past in mute appeal. There were many dreadful tapestries and paintings littered about the corridors too. Astoria supposed they were meant to be erotic, but she found them vulgar and disgusting. Many depicted Count Dracula ripping out the throats of beautiful, naked girls, or else entwined in love with his three wives after sacrificing a virgin, all of them covered in blood. The apartments where she and Antonin were situated were decorated in black, charcoal and blood red. The ceilings were high and there was a large window at
the centre of the bedchamber, which gave a horrid view of the blazing mountains and flying dragons outside. A large fireplace was crackling twenty feet or so opposite the bed. Without it, the room would have been desperately cold seeing as there was no carpet, only hard stone. She supposed vampires had no need for warmth. The bathing suite was spacious, but again it was dark and imposing, done from floor to ceiling in black marble. There was also a small seating area and dining chamber, though Astoria rather thought that the Dark Lord would insist that everyone eat downstairs while they were staying here. Every room and corridor in the place had to be lit by candlelight, as there was no sun. She hated it, she hated everything about this foul Castle and could not believe that she would have to spend at least two years or more living in a place that looked like hell itself, not to mention having to raise her son here when he finally joined them. It was a most rancorous prospect.

After Antonin had bedded her, it was almost time for dinner, so Astoria summoned the House Elf, Jinky, to help her dress. Tonight, she was wearing a gown of Antonin’s choosing, he would often insist on selecting what she wore, particularly in the evening. The gown was very revealing of course, crafted from black lace and decorated with silken, royal blue bows. It came off the shoulders and was cut so low and laced so tight that her breasts were practically spilling out. The back came down in a ‘V’ shape exposing more of her flesh. The skirts were fitted but the train flowed out three feet behind her, the black lace gathered in pleats, at least fourteen of them, each pleat accented with a bow, each bow becoming larger until the last one that trailed on the floor was the size of a dinner plate. A whore’s dress she thought. Antonin had commanded Mary to craft it not too long before they had left. Jinky, like Dracula, had an ice cold touch, and Astoria could not help but shiver as the Elf fastened sapphires and black diamonds to her ears and neck. Astoria’s hair was so long now, almost to her hips, so Jinky fashioned it into a half updo, her long loose curls cascading down her back, the front of her hair swept out of her face into a twist. As Astoria drew on long black silken gloves that came up to her elbows, Antonin came into the room clad in royal blue robes, a lewd smile twisting his face at the sight of her in the gown.

“You look magnificent this eve my love, shall we?” He said, holding out his hand. Predictably, all the Death Eaters were downstairs in the blood red dining hall when they walked through an archway shaped like a monsters mouth. This was easily the brightest room Astoria had seen thus far in the Castle; the red seemed to hit the eyes and one could not help but think about blood. Astoria and Antonin were greeting everyone when they came face to face with Silas Norton. When he looked at Astoria, Silas’ jaw dropped, and he began to ogle at her chest, his mismatched eyes popping. Antonin burst out laughing. “My wife’s eyes are up here Silas!” he said, gently touching Astoria under her chin. He gave Silas' brown hair a good natured ruffle, still chortling. Silas hastily bowed over Astoria’s gloved hand to kiss it, grinning somewhat sheepishly.

Suddenly, a loud dinner gong reverberated around the long, cavernous hall. It was an ominous sound, not at all inviting. Everyone made for the table to stand behind their seats, all knowing where to go due to the floating bits of parchment hovering above their plates bearing their names. The Dark Lord came sweeping into the room and sat at the head of the table. As usual, no one sat until he did. Astoria and Antonin were once again seated to his Lordship’s left and Bellatrix to his right. Astoria was sat directly opposite Dracula, flanked by two of his wives, the third seated a little further down and looking sulky. This seating arrangement made her very uncomfortable. As they were served bloody beef, live oysters, chicken hearts and half raw swordfish, Astoria was acutely aware of Dracula’s eyes constantly upon her breasts and travelling up to her neck, a hungry look in his yellow eyes, as if longing to plunge his fangs into her. Astoria was sure that Dracula and his wives were not
drinking the red Elf made wine like everyone else, but blood. The sight sickened her more than she could say.

At last, dessert was finally served, Ortolan birds glazed in honey. Astoria could hardly be surprised at this repulsive dish being chosen by Dracula. The Ortolan bird was blinded in order to make it feed excessively so it doubled in size, after which it was then drowned alive in brandy, then roasted for a few minutes before eating; head, bones and all. Astoria forced herself to eat the vile thing, not wanting to anger her husband. She wanted to vomit as the little bones of the bird crunched between her teeth and its lungs exploded with brandy in her mouth. After she had choked down the bird, there was an upswing of jeering and yelling. Fenrir Greyback was hauling over two score weeping Muggle slaves into the dining hall, bound in chains.

“Ahh, Fenrir” said the Dark Lord, speaking for the first time in his high, cold voice. “I see that you have brought our gifts for our noble host, Count Dracula.” Fenrir Greyback gave an amused grunt and rattled the chains, provoking more laughter.

“I have more than this lot, Count” growled Fenrir, giving Dracula a clumsy bow.

“You are being most generous, my Lord.” Called Dracula in his raspy, French accent. “Fenrir, you may take them to the dungeons where, I shall…eh sample them later.” Everyone laughed as the Muggles were dragged out of sight, but none louder than the Dark Lord, his high cold cackle piercing the air.

Afterward, the witches had departed to one side of the Castle, and the wizards to another to engage in drink and merriment. Antonin was very drunk and had one massive arm flung around Silas, who was cackling shrilly at some unknown jape as they staggered out of the room. Adelaide Yaxley, who seemed to be fully recovered from her trip into the river, slipped her arm into Astoria’s as they left for a chamber on the West side of the Castle, chattering excitedly about the Vampires and how curious she found them. No sooner had Astoria disentangled herself from Adelaide when they arrived in the chamber, she was roped into conversation with Elizabeth Nott Yaxley, whom she had not seen since her wedding to Corban. Elizabeth had recently given birth to a daughter and was harping on about how disappointed she and her husband were. All Astoria had to do was nod and look sympathetic, offering meaningless words, privately feeling that Elizabeth should be glad to be a Mother at all, regardless of the sex of her child. However, Astoria could imagine how angry Antonin would have been if their first child had ended up being a daughter rather than a son.

After a time, Astoria had grown tired of Elizabeth’s whinging and Drisella Selwyn’s crude jokes which she was shouting to the room at large, such was her drunkenness. Astoria had been grateful to Drisella when she had healed her in Holland, but the more time she spent in the girl’s company, the less she liked her. Truly, the only attractive things about Drisella were her black curly hair and deep grey eyes, her features were marred by her sadistic expression and that unfortunate Selwyn nose. Astoria muttered her farewells to the witches on her way out as she took her leave. Her footsteps
echoed as she swept up the grim, stone staircase adorned by more skulls, through the corridors and up another small staircase to reach her and Antonin’s apartments. Once again, she called Jinky to help her undress. After the Elf had left, Astoria slid naked onto her stomach upon the bed. She occasionally sipped some wine and swung her legs absentmindedly, steeling herself for when her husband finally came upstairs.

Chapter End Notes

With regard to Antonin giving Astoria the tiara, it is a common trait for rapists/murderers to take trophies from their victims and it gives them sexual gratification to see their partner or whatever wearing said trophies as it's like re living their crimes. That's what I was going for in that respect.

Ortolan birds: considered one of the cruelest cuisines in the world as outlined in the chapter and banned in many countries.
XVIII. - Beauxbatons

Chapter Summary

This chapter covers more of the Death Eaters activities abroad and some original characters coming back who have only been mentioned briefly in previous chapters. There’s also a character who appears in the films but not in the original book. Warning: graphic material. Same disclaimer applies.

*Edit* - I am currently working on the next chapter as up until now I have been reworking skeleton chapters that I’ve already written, so from now on everything is completely new and I will try and post one a week. The next one should be finished later tonight or tomorrow. Thanks for reading and the Kudos’ :)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next week or so spent at the Castle of Count Dracula was a fairly tedious one. Astoria and her fellow Death Eaters would spend their days in a gloomy stone chamber on the Eastern side of the castle, overlooking the hideous black lake outside that the Dark Lord had dubbed, the ‘War Room.’ They would spend hours at a time in there listening to the Dark Lord outline his plans to crush France, as Dracula’s House Elves refilled their goblets of wine. Astoria glimpsed Severus Snape, who had arrived at the Castle a day late. She knew that he had been heading the campaign to suppress Poland for over a year, and he looked dreadful. His sallow skin was tinged with grey, his greasy hair was thinning, and the harsh lines on his face were deeper than ever before. The other Death Eaters that had joined him in Poland were also in attendance; Crabbe, Goyle, Hestia Carrow and many others who she had not seen since she had been living at Malfoy Manor. All of them looked as dishevelled and tired as Snape, though none more so than Hestia, niece to Alecto and Amycus Carrow. It was said that her identical twin sister, Flora, had been blown to smithereens by Polish aurors when they had attacked the capital, Warsaw. Flora’s death had apparently driven Hestia half mad, and she was now uncharacteristically bloodthirsty, whereas before she was not particularly battle orientated. Astoria could believe that, Hestia’s brown eyes were now cold and dead looking, not curious with a hint of mischief as Astoria had remembered them.

On the eighth day of these meetings in the ‘War Room’, the Dark Lord gave them all some news. “It seems that one of my many spies has given me some very interesting information” he said in his high, cold voice. His Lordship was seated at the Head of the long table, every eye upon him. “Yes, very interesting indeed. My source informs me that one Kingsley Shacklebolt is currently hiding out at the Palace of Beauxbatons and intends to lend his…talents to that filthy Mudblood Minister Gustave Clement to try and prevent us from conquering France.” The Dark Lord tightened his white hand into a fist in anger, and Astoria could almost feel his rage pulsing through the room. “So, I have decided we should strike first at Beauxbatons and capture Shacklebolt. Not only to prevent him from reaching the Minister, but I am convinced that he will have information on Potter that may well lead me to finding and killing him at last. He is one of the last remaining Order members and I feel sure Potter would have sought aid from him. So, you are to restrain Shacklebolt when you find him, do
“Not kill him until I have had the chance to force information out of him, is that understood?” There were murmurs of assent at his words. Silas looked eager, his disfigured face shining with cruel enthusiasm at the prospect of torturing Shacklebolt. Astoria knew that he wanted to pay Shacklebolt back in kind for this maimed eye. “We shall strike at Beauxbatons two days hence, I shall inform you of my exact commands and battleplans at noon, you are all dismissed for now.” The Dark Lord finished.

After the Dark Lord had taken his leave, all streamed out of the chamber, through an antechamber and into a cavernous throne room, a grotesque throne made from human bones and skull drew the eye, positioned upon several steps. Many Death Eaters were now talking excitedly in groups, discussing what had been covered in the meeting. Silas then came darting over to Astoria and Antonin.

“Shacklebolt.” Silas breathed at her husband, a sinister look in his mismatched eyes. “I can scarcely wait to turn my wand on that filthy Blood Traitor. I can only pray that the Dark Lord will give Shacklebolt to me once he is ready to dispose of him, then he will be very sorry indeed for what he did.” Silas gestured at his scarred eye, now looking murderous.

Antonin clapped him on the shoulder “I understand your need for vengeance my boy, but do not forget, this scar merely proves that you are brave, you…” The rest of his words were lost as he and Silas started to walk to the other side of the throne room.

Antonin and Silas now seemed to be inseparable. A perfect match Astoria thought, revolted. Though she could not be surprised, they were both as wicked and cruel as one another, Antonin seemingly viewing Silas as his sort of protégé. This filled Astoria full of disquiet when she thought of her innocent son back home. She was determined do anything and everything within her power to ensure her husband did not corrupt Leo to become a monster like himself or Silas. Indeed, Silas seemed to idolise Antonin in turn. He now wore his hair in the same slicked back fashion as her husband, would listen avidly whenever Antonin recalled brutal campaigns to him over dinner, and would laugh loudly and sycophantically at his lewd jokes. Well, Astoria thought, Silas was welcome to her husband’s company if he desired it so much, the less time she had to spend with Antonin, the better. Astoria saw Hestia Carrow leaning on a stone wall with her arms folded and staring blankly across the hall. She decided to approach her. After all, Hestia and her sister had also been quiet at school and Astoria had gotten on with both of them. She wondered if Hestia was as truly changed as people whispered.

“Good morn Hestia, how-how are you fairing?” Astoria asked, tentatively.

Hestia turned her head slowly towards Astoria and said, “Fine.” Her cold eyes then swivelled back to stare across the hall.
Astoria forced herself to make more conversation. “I daresay, this siege of Beauxbatons, I feel it may be.”

But Hestia cut her off “I can scarcely wait Astoria” and a demonic smile twisted her once expressionless features so quickly, it was alarming. “The students, the aurors, we are going to kill them all. I can almost hear their screams of pain. No amount of blood and terror will ever bring Flora back, but every traitor struck down for the Dark Lord gives me sweet vengeance when I lay my head down to sleep at night. It keeps me warm I tell you.” Hestia’s eyes were shining with such crazed bloodlust and enthusiasm, it was disturbing, almost frightening.

“As you— as you say, Hestia.” Astoria replied, backing away from the leering face of Hestia Carrow, this girl who she now scarcely recognised. A girl who had now been twisted into a brutal monster by the War in mind, body and soul.

There was a riotous feast the night before they were to lay siege to Beauxbatons and the anticipation in the air was palpable. Like all the meals Astoria had taken thus far at the Castle, most of the food was foul and not to her taste at all. Roasted pelicans lined the table with their heads, beaks, feathers and all. Frogs whose stomach’s had been cut open to reveal their innards twitched horribly on platters, and Astoria was revolted when Antonin served her a slice of jellied eel pie which was bad enough in itself, but was made worse by the fact that the baby eels within were still squirming, alive. The veal was passable, but very rare and Astoria could not finish her own portion due to Antonin constantly offering her morsels of the meat to nibble off his dining dagger. Silas was practically bouncing with excitement, thickly spreading foie gras over his food and quaffing copious amounts of wine, his reedy voice becoming louder and louder.

Astoria could have almost thanked the Dark Lord when he screeched across the dining hall, “Right! That is enough! I command you all to retire to your chambers! At once!” Everyone fell silent and took their leave as soon as the Dark Lord swept from the room.

As Astoria got up to leave, Dracula addressed her. “Good fortune to you for tomorrow, Madame Dolohov.” Dracula was still seated, and he had a hairless cat with pale green eyes lying in his lap, scratching the creature behind the ears with his long, pointed fingernails. Antonin, who had been in conversation with Yaxley, looked around. “I hope you will be taking care of your lovely wife at the siege of Beauxbatons tomorrow.” Dracula said to Antonin as he bared his long fangs in a horrible smile, his yellow eyes swivelling from Antonin back to Astoria, and he continued to fix on her intently. “She is...ah, most beautiful. I am thinking I would not let her out of my sight if I were you.” Finished Dracula.

Antonin gave Dracula a satisfied smirk. “I rarely do, good Count.” Astoria took Antonin’s arm and they both swept from the hall.
When they were back in their chambers Astoria said, timidly, “I do not like the way that Vampire looks at me, it fills me with fright.”

Antonin stared at her, then laughed. “Do not be such a little fool, wife. Count Dracula was merely speaking the truth and you know it.” Antonin then approached her, his eyes travelling up and down her form, “And what is more” He whispered, “Dracula is right, you are so very beautiful, I am unable to keep my hands off of you. I doubt I will get much rest this eve, my darling, I am going to fuck you all night.” And Antonin drew her in forcefully for a kiss.

The next morn, everyone gathered in Dracula’s throne room to receive their final instructions from the Dark Lord. The Dark Lord himself would not be accompanying them to lay siege to the Palace, he would not come until he had confirmation that they had captured Shacklebolt. Snape was to be in charge of them all on this occasion, and Astoria rather thought she saw a flicker of resentment cross Antonin’s face when the Dark Lord announced this. He clearly wanted to head this campaign as he had done so in Holland. They were to take as many prisoners as possible which were to be given as gifts to appease Count Dracula, preferably young girls, but boys would be acceptable too. Other than that, they were to slay all within the Palace, especially the Professors and aurors, so Minister Clement could not utilise their powers in his fight against the Dark Order. If anyone were to be injured, then they were to summon Healer Charles Beckwith, who had been captured in Britain when the country had been in open warfare, and had been brought to France by Corban Yaxley. Astoria had already met Beckwith briefly two days past, he had been hurrying through the castle corridors and had almost ran past her before hastily giving her a low bow and introducing himself. Beckwith was young for a Healer, he was a nervous looking wizard in his middling thirties, with dirty blonde hair and slightly shaky hands. Astoria wondered how many would need Beckwith’s remonstrations before the day was done.

"Do not fail me Death Eaters!" Shrieked the Dark Lord, as they all departed from the throne room once dismissed.

The Death Eaters stepped out into the gloomy morning air, thick with smoke and cloud so that the black, flaming mountains surrounding the castle were barely discernible. There were cries of surprise as the massive, dark shape of a dragon appeared thirty feet above, gliding along in the air serenely, but it made no move to attack them. Two hundred strong, they began to walk along the bridge, away from the castle in order to disapparate beyond the magical bonds that kept Dracula’s abode hidden and safe. After crossing the bridge, Astoria gazed around the mountain range, it was barely distinguishable from whence they had just come. Black cavernous mountains and abysses stretched out as far as the eye could see. The scene was utterly desolate.

“We are to apparate to the Pyrenees mountains South-West of here, and approach the Palace by stealth.” Came Snape’s voice from the swirling smoke. Astoria could just about make out his hook nosed profile as he spoke. We are to approach from afar, it is likely that there will be Ministry protection and aurors around the perimeter, so we shall put our efforts together to incapacitate and kill them as discussed previously. Now, on my count. One, two, three!”
They apparated to a scene vastly different from the one they had just left. There was grass carpeting the hills and mountains, with small wild flowers littering the surface, sparkling with early morning dew. The sun was rising gently in the sky, song birds could be heard twittering in the trees, and white rabbits scattered at their appearance. *This place has life, it is pure, uncorrupted.* Astoria thought, *but not for long.*

Snape stood in front of the group of Death Eaters. Clad in black robes, they seemed to be blotting the beautiful landscape around them, like a large black bruise. “Bubble Head charms.” Snape said in his cold voice. As one, Astoria and her fellow Death Eaters raised their wands and conjured up the charm, their heads all magnified oddly, but they would need the protection. “Now, the gas.” Continued Snape, and once again, all raised their wands to emit colourless, odourless Mustard Gas into the air. At once, birds began to drop out of trees, flowers wilted, and the grass turned brown, the gas destroying everything in its path. They all waited for close to an hour, some Death Eaters sitting down on the dead grass and talking to one another quietly. At last Snape checked his watch and said, “That should be enough time by now.” He waved his wand to clear the air and his Bubble Head charm vanished, the other Death Eaters following suit. “Now, let us go. I want you all to spread out to make sure there are no stragglers who may have escaped, we do not want the Ministry alerted to our presence until we have got Shacklebolt.” They split into groups of fifty, with two groups apparating further afield to carry out Snape’s instructions. As they crept down the mountain, Astoria began to see more of the devastation that the Mustard Gas had caused. A wizard in plain, dark green, Ministry of France robes was twitching on the ground, still alive, but barely. He had vomited up half of his lungs, the pink, bloody, cauliflower like pieces had been spewed all over his front and were dripping on to the dead grass. Red froth and mucus bubbled from his mouth and his skin was covered in large, pus filled blisters. Josiah Zabini raised his wand and pointed it at the wizard, but Snape caught him by the arm and said “No. He will be dead in minutes, and I do not want any magic used until it is time to break through Beauxbatons perimeters.” More bodies of wizards who had coughed up their own lungs were littered all over the mountainside as they drew nearer to Beauxbatons. Finally, they reached flatter ground and came within sight of a forest. All the other Death Eaters who had canvassed the area then apparated back to the rest of the group. “In there. You know what to do.” Said Snape, pointing a yellow finger at the trees.

Snape raised his wand and a smoky, black snake burst from his wand tip. The other Death Eaters followed suit, their own smoking snakes coiling through the air to join Snape’s, to form a single, enormous cobra, which let out a ghostly hiss. The sound chilled Astoria to the bone as the cobra glided through the air toward the forest, filling it with black smoke which rose to permeate the sky with its dark tendrils. It was as though the trees were smouldering without fire. Then, without warning, there were innumerable snapping sounds, like a thousand mousetraps going off over and over again. The sound reverberated ominously in the still morning air as the magical perimeters broke. Snape said nothing but strode forward into the forest, all the Death Eaters spreading out behind him to follow. After trudging through the trees for a time, Astoria saw it. The Palace of Beauxbatons was more like a traditional château rather than a Palace, though it was vast and flanked by two large turrets. The Death Eaters kept to the trees in the gardens that surrounded it, not coming out into the open. They were to wait for Snape’s signal and apparate straight into the dining hall, which is where all of the Palace occupants would be at this time. Astoria pressed her back flat into a large redwood, heart hammering. She then saw green sparks appear above the smoking chimneys of the Palace, and knew it was time. Astoria turned on the spot and heard many other ‘pops’ as her fellow Death Eaters did the same.
When they all appeared in the dining hall within the Palace of Beauxbatons, there was an ear splitting burst of noise. The screams and yells of terror from near three hundred throats echoed off the sparkling walls, and the hall seemed to explode with movement as china plates and glass goblets smashed all over the floor as the students scattered. But there was nowhere to run, the Death Eaters were blocking all the escape routes. The Professors on the other hand, all raised their wands, Olympe Maxime shouting out instructions to them in French. Astoria was plunged into the fray at once, a curly haired witch of an age with herself shot a spell at her, narrowly missing her cheek. There was not even a duel however, Astoria had struck the witch dead before she could even utter another incantation. At this, she heard a scream of rage and anguish to her left. Olympe Maxime was charging toward her, wand raised, and a flash of white light grazed her hip. Astoria staggered slightly, but pointed her wand back at the huge woman. Black ropes burst from the end of her wand tip to wrap around Maxime’s body, pinning her arms to her sides and forcing her legs together, causing her to topple and smash into a nearby dining table. Maxime screamed as the broken glass and china tore the flesh of her face to red ribbons. Astoria had no time to contemplate what she should do with Maxime, for her left ear suddenly stung with a scorching pain. She whirled to find herself face to face with Gabrielle Delacour, her beautiful face filled with rage. Astoria began to duel the younger witch, their gold and silver hair flying respectively as they whirled, ducked and dived. Gabrielle was skilful enough for one her age, but she only seemed to be avoiding Astoria’s curses by very quickly dodging them and her own spells, excepting the first, could not touch her.

Adelaide Yaxley then came hurtling out of nowhere at Gabrielle, screaming obscenities and firing hexes all over the place. “Half breed Veela whore! Harpy! Slut!” Caught off guard by Adelaide’s sudden appearance, Gabrielle turned. Astoria took her chance and shot a jet of blue light at the younger witch, and though it had only hit her in the arm, Gabrielle screamed and fell. Adelaide gave a nasty smile, “Nice one Astoria-” But before she could say any more, the two of them were knocked back in opposite directions as a spell hit the wall they had been standing next to.

Astoria struggled to her knees and peered out from behind an overturned table. Chaos reigned in the Beauxbatons hall. Antonin was laughing as he shot stunning spells at every young witch in sight. As he did so, each girl was automatically clapped in chains and fell with a crash to the floor. Rowle waved his wand so that the daggers from the dining table soared at an older wizard, who looked to be a Professor,impaling him against the wall, rivers of blood running down his cream robes where each of the blades had struck. Silas meanwhile was capering wildly on the spot, firing out curses with reckless abandon and cackling madly, looking like some demented imp. Clarence Avery seemed to be enjoying himself hugely as he blasted off the limbs and heads of the scattering, terrified students. Amycus Carrow was setting them alight, watching with glee as they ran about the hall on fire, screaming in agony. William Jugson was also killing all within his reach using the Expulso curse, blowing his victims to pieces, their innards flying everywhere.

Suddenly, Astoria heard the other Death Eater’s yells of “Shacklebolt! Shacklebolt!” She leapt to her feet and saw that Kingsley Shacklebolt had burst into the hall, his face harsher and harder than Astoria had recalled, but his expression of cold hatred was just the same. Shacklebolt pointed his wand at her but she deflected his spell, causing a fire sconce on the wall to explode, the flames licking at a portrait. He then shot a hurling hex at Augustus Rookwood, who was lifted thirty feet into the air and went smashing through one of the stained glass windows out of sight. Fenrir
Greyback then charged at Shacklebolt, but he made a sharp movement with his wand and the werewolf’s side was slashed open, dark blood spilling everywhere. Greyback gave a howl of pain as he staggered and fell, clutching at his wounded side.

At this increased din, Silas whirled around wildly, and upon seeing Kingsley, his mismatched eyes seemed to pop with rage. He let out his high pitched screech which seemed to rip through the air. “SHACKLEBOLT!” And Silas hurtled towards the older wizard, brandishing his wand, screaming incoherently and looking utterly crazed. Mulciber also seemed to be running in Shacklebolt’s direction to back up Silas.

Astoria’s view of Silas and Shacklebolt was blocked as Alecto Carrow pointed her wand at table nearest the wall which flew up into the air in a cloud of black smoke. It began to melt and leak with what must have been acid as it began to melt the flesh of the pupils who had been cowering underneath. Horrible shrieks rent the air as the students tried to crawl away, but now some had their eyeballs running down their faces and others were no more than congealing pools of entrails and bone upon the floor. Alecto cackled wheezily as she beheld her horrific work. Snape paced backward across Astoria’s path, he was duelling two wizards who looked to be in their twenties, they all moved so fast that their wands appeared blurred. Try as they might though, neither of the wizard’s curses could touch Snape, he was far too skilful. At the far end of the hall, Astoria glimpsed Hestia Carrow. She had lined up eight students who seemed to be rooted to the spot by enchantments, screaming and crying. Hestia then made a slashing movement with her wand and all the students were decapitated at once, their knees buckling, their heads rolling, and blood spurted all over Hestia’s face as she laughed and shrieked like a maniac, seemingly overjoyed.

Olympe Maxime meanwhile, had been freed of the spell Astoria had cast upon her before, however, Astoria now felt she should have just killed her on the spot. The Zabini brothers and Theodore Nott had stripped Maxime naked and put her in a cage that was too small for her great height so that she was hunched. They appeared to have added to Maxime’s disfigurement from her collision with the table before, and blinded her. Two red, angry, bleeding holes were where her eyeballs should have been, and all three were hexing and cursing her over and over, leaving bruises and welts all over her body. The Zabini’s and Nott were howling with derisive laughter as Maxime begged and screamed for them to just kill her. Astoria turned away and her lilac eyes swept the scene to behold the carnage. At least eighty girls and thirty boys were chained up on the western side of the hall. There were no more than half a dozen duelling pairs left now and many Death Eaters merely leaned against the wall watching, knowing that they had won. Bodies of young and old alike were strewn everywhere, some charred and blackened beyond recognition. Blood spattered the walls, most of the furniture was smashed, and Astoria could scarcely take a few steps before coming across mutilated limbs.

At last, blue-grey smoke hung in the air and the only sounds being made were the sobbing of the chained Beauxbatons students, the moans of those who had not yet succumbed to death, and the low mutterings of the Death Eaters. Maxime slumped, dead, in her cage, her skin so battered that there was nought left of the olive colour it had once been. All were now converging around Rookwood and Greyback who had been the worst injured. Rookwood, who got priority over the werewolf for Healing, was bleeding heavily from his head and had broken almost all of his bones. Healer
Beckwith was tapping him with his wand all over, though Astoria could see that hands were shaking worse than ever as he took in the sight of the hall around him. Greyback meanwhile, was twitching feebly in a pool of his own congealing blood, clutching at his side.

Silas had still not returned from his pursuit of Shacklebolt. Avery had just been suggesting that a few of them should follow, when Silas’ shrill, reedy voice rang out from the entrance hall. “He is gone! He is gone! Shacklebolt is GONE! He has ESCAPED! Mulciber is DEAD!” Everyone froze and fell silent at once.

Silas then came skidding into the hall, covered in cuts and welts, looking completely deranged. His usually sweeping, shiny brown hair was singed and unkempt. Blood oozed from his maimed eye and his face was covered in grime. Silas was beside himself with rage and was shaking violently. He began screeching and running all over the hall, foaming at the mouth and ripping out his hair. No one could seem to get a word of sense out of him. Silas blasted craters in the walls, set an overturned table on fire and pointed his wand at a chandelier to bring it crashing to the floor, crystals and candles flying everywhere, still screaming with fury. Astoria had never seen anything like it in her life. The other Death Eaters were also staring at Silas, and the prisoners began to sob even harder at his insane rampage. Antonin looked faintly amused as Silas destroyed tapestries and blew apart ice statues. Snape, who sported a nasty gash across his hooked nose was gazing at Silas, his black eyes unreadable. Suddenly Silas was knocked over as though from a strong gust of wind and his screams became shriller still. He was back on his feet in no time however, looking furiously around but then froze, staring at something just ahead of him.

“That will do, Norton.” Said a high, cold voice.

As one, all of the Death Eaters spun around to see the Dark Lord standing in the archway to the hall, the fire from the blazing table shining in his red eyes and illuminating his chalk white skin. Astoria wondered if he had been standing there the entire time. Silas fell to his knees. “My Lord!” he cried. “My Lord, that Blood Traitor coward, Shacklebolt, he killed Mulciber and ran like a whipped cur into a vanishing cabinet and I could not follow I-”

But the Dark Lord held up a pale hand and Silas stopped speaking at once. “Enough, Norton.” Said the Dark Lord. “Enough.” Silas was trembling as the Dark Lord began to walk slowly toward him. There was total silence apart from the crackling flames from the table and his loud, clear footsteps. “I did want Shacklebolt yes, but Shacklebolt with Beauxbatons Academy behind him is one thing. Shacklebolt alone and friendless in a country that we shall soon conquer, is quite another. Without them, it shall be almost impossible for him to reach the Mudblood Minister.” Silas raised his disfigured, dishevelled face to stare up at the Dark Lord’s snake like one. The Dark Lord’s lipless mouth curved in a half smile and he stroked his chin. “Still,” he went on softly, still smiling slightly. “I would not want you to fail again so…” The Dark Lord raised his wand, “Crucio.”

Silas shrieked in pain and began to writhe and jerk upon the floor, his mismatched eyes rolling back
into his skull. Astoria knew exactly what he was going through, but she felt no pity, if anyone deserved to be *Cruciated*, it was Silas Norton. It was past time that he got a taste of some of the horror he had inflicted upon countless others. When the Dark Lord had finished torturing Silas, he lay spluttering and gasping on the ground. As he regained his breath, Silas crawled up to the Dark Lord’s robes and kissed the hem. “My Lord is merciful!” he cried. “Thank you, my Lord, thank you! It’s more than I deserve, I shall never fail you again!”

The Dark Lord gave a curt nod and turned to the rest of the Death Eaters, making no comment on the bloodied forms of Rookwood and Greyback who were both breathing raggedly. “We shall return to Headquarters at once before the Ministry gets wind of what has happened here, bring the prisoners.” The Dark Lord proclamation in his high, cold voice. “And as for you *Snape*, I shall deal with you later, you were supposed to be in charge here.” He went venomously. Snape’s skin had turned the colour of curdled milk at his Lordship’s words. “But first.” The Dark Lord then pointed his wand at the ceiling of the hall. “*Morsmordre!*” He screeched. Half the roof was blasted open and debris rained down on all below, with many conjuring shield charms to protect themselves. The windows were all smashed, the glass blowing out into the night air as the jet of green light flew up into the sky to form the glittering Dark Mark. The Dark Lord began to laugh his high, cold laugh over and over and all the Death Eaters joined in then, Astoria included as she knew she must. Snape was the only one who was not laughing. “Now, let us go!” The Dark Lord shrieked.

**Chapter End Notes**

Regarding Silas, he is not crazy, just rotten to the core. One of my inspirations for his character was Joffrey Baratheon, owned by George RR Martin, creator of *ASOIAF/Game of Thrones*. I killed Mulciber because I felt it was time that one of the Death Eaters died. There will be another member (or more) of the Mulciber family showing up later on the story (non-canon).
XIX.- Dracula's Dungeons

Chapter Summary

This chapter covers the aftermath of the siege of Beauxbatons, the fates of the prisoners and more humiliations that Antonin inflicts upon Astoria.
Same disclaimer applies.

*Edit* I'm battling with the plot right now trying to get things in order so the next one will be may be just over a week away, perhaps longer, but I don't intend to leave massive gaps between new chapters.

*Edit* I am roughly halfway through the next one, hope to get it out by the weekend.

As Astoria and the Death Eaters trooped back across the bridge toward the Castle of Count Dracula, a fierce, rushing wind whipped at their cloaks and robes. Antonin and Corban Yaxley were supporting a grey faced Augustus Rookwood between them, and Drisella Selwyn had cast a hover charm on Fenrir Greyback, who had collapsed after apparating while so badly wounded. A hover charm had also been cast on the dead body of Robert Mulciber, who had seemingly died from having the left side of his head blasted away, his brains oozing out of his skull and his right eye dangling out of its socket. All of the combatants bore marks of the battle, excepting the Dark Lord of course, who had not taken part, and was striding ahead of them at the head of the grim procession. Adelaide had two black eyes, Theodore was limping, and Blaise was bruised and swollen on the right side of his usually, perfect face where Healer Beckwith had mended his shattered cheekbone. Astoria thought it unlikely that she looked any better, both her forearms were covered in hex marks and she was bleeding from her right temple. Silas looked just as bloody and dirty as he had done so at Beauxbatons. He had attempted to attack Healer Beckwith when he had tried to fix his injuries, such was his fury, and was now glowering at the ground as he walked. Astoria rather thought that she could almost feel the waves of rage pouring off of him. Travers and Avery brought up the rear and were dragging the chained Beauxbatons students, some of whom were screaming openly at the sight of the castle and all that surrounded it.

When they reached the entrance hall of the castle, Jinky the House Elf was waiting for them. “Master Dracula is waiting for you’s down in the dungeons My Lord.” She informed the Dark Lord, curtsying deeply with her head bowed.

The Dark Lord said nothing, but swept past the elf, Astoria, the Death Eaters and their prisoners in tow. They walked for a considerable amount of time toward the far East side of the castle until they came to a black metal door covered in spikes. Astoria had never been this far into the castle and did not want to go any further, there was an unnatural chill in the air and her breath was misting. She immediately thought of Dementors, but that was impossible, she had not seen, nor sensed any of the foul creatures since she had taken up residence in the castle. The Dark Lord pointed his wand at the spiked door and it creaked open, the ice cold air hitting them so hard that Astoria had to work furiously to stop her teeth chattering. The Dark Lord strode down another corridor which smelled damp, done all in stone, moisture sliding down the walls. There were no tapestries, fire sconces, or
artwork here, all was dark and still. The corridor widened to an archway, almost one hundred feet across, to reveal the steps which led down to the dungeons. Down the steps they went, the cold now permeating Astoria’s very bones, the cries of the Beauxbatons prisoners echoing off the stone walls. When they reached the dungeons, they were met with a grisly scene. Though the corridors and stairway had been dark, the main dungeon was lit by hundreds of skull fire sconces to illuminate every horrid detail. The dungeon was large and cavernous with individual cells lining the walls, and Astoria thought she could hear muffled shrieking drifting from the bars from one of the six, cylindrical oubliettes that were lined up on the Eastern wall. There was an array of shackles, hooks, clamps, screws, and all manner of cruel steel objects lined up on a scarred wooden table, torture machines littered everywhere. The body of a naked girl hung upside down from a wooden structure and she looked to have been sawn in half, the jagged blade stuck between her mid section, as congealing blood dripped onto the floor. Her skin was chalk white and her innards appeared to be gone, she looked like she had been carved up and gutted like a freshly hunted deer. Dracula and his wives were grouped around a racking table where there was another dead girl sprawled upon its surface. She had been partially disembowelled, and her head lolled to the side, her blank, empty eyes looking at Astoria accusingly, unseeing. Valeria was devouring the girl’s heart and chewing on her intestines, which she held in each hand respectively, blood spilling over her chin and running down the sleeves of her pale blue gown. Zinnia had her fangs in the girl’s neck, sucking the blood from her, the body growing paler and paler as she drank. Dracula meanwhile, was feeding Natalia a strip of skin and flesh that had clearly been torn from the girl’s thigh, his expression rapturous and aroused. At the sight of the Dark Lord and the Death Eaters, they all ceased their gruesome feasting.

“Ah, my Lord.” Dracula rasped, blood bubbling between his fangs as he spoke. “Forgive us, we were just tasting some of the delicious gifts you have provided for myself and my wives.” At this, one of the chained prisoners, a young witch, fainted, dragging several others down with her, as the others wept and embraced one another, utterly terrified.

“I have fresh meat for you good Count, I feel certain that they will also please you.” replied the Dark Lord, his high, cold voice echoing in the cavernous dungeon. “Bring them forward!” He suddenly shrieked, and Avery and Travers obliged at once, shoving and dragging the prisoners toward the Vampires.

Dracula then gave Natalia a passionate kiss, blood dripping from both of their lips as they joined, and he proceeded to walk around the racking table to scrutinise his fresh prey. One by one, Dracula looked into the faces of the petrified Beauxbatons students. When Dracula came to Gabrielle Delacour, who had survived Astoria’s curse, he grasped her under the chin and turned her head from side to side, smearing her porcelain skin with the blood from his hands and taking a long, deep sniff. “This one, is part Veela.” Dracula announced and turned toward the Dark Lord. “Veela are looking very sweet, but they are tasting bad. Still-” He smiled, baring his long fangs and running his greying tongue over them, “I am sure me and my wives will be getting much pleasure from her all the same.”

At this, Silas pushed forward, seemingly uncowed from his public torture, and said in his reedy, petulant voice, “I shall take her, if you do not have any further need of her, Count.” Silas then seized Gabrielle’s arm and there was a horrible hunger in his mismatched eyes as he beheld her form.
“Norton!” Snapped the Dark Lord, whirling around, outraged. “This half breed whore is now the property of our noble host, Dracula. Hold your filthy little tongue, unless you want to feel the wrath of Lord Voldemort once again!”

Silas shrank away from his Lordship’s fury, but Dracula laughed, spraying blood all over Gabrielle, who flinched, but did not look away, her expression defiant. “I am not being offended, my Lord. This boy is merely giving in to his baser instincts, this creature is most _jolie_ after all.” He said, smiling unpleasantly at Gabrielle. Dracula turned to Silas, still smiling. “You may take this _petit fleur_ for your own once I have finished with her, Monsieur Norton. I am sure she will be ah... useful. We do not need to be devouring her to enjoy her.” He finished, cruel amusement upon his deathly white face.

“My good Count is most generous.” Replied Silas, bowing low, unable to stop the evil grin twisting his mouth.

The Dark Lord was still looking murderous, and looked as though he were going to reprimand Silas again. But he was stopped from doing so by Dracula, who was now surveying a slender girl who looked to be of about sixteen years with long brown curly hair, her dark eyes huge with fear. “I am thinking, we shall start with this one.”

At once, Avery and Travers strode toward the girl, wands raised. They tapped at the shackles to release the girl and dragged her, one on each side of her toward Dracula as her friends wept and screamed. “Silence!” screeched the Dark Lord, and he raised his wand, presumably with the intention of casting a silencing charm, but Dracula interrupted him, yet again.

“Do not trouble yourself my Lord” Dracula called, as Avery and Travers forced the girl onto the racking table, shoving the other corpse roughly aside where it fell upon the stone floor with a sickening thud, its remaining innards spilling everywhere. “I am enjoying the screams, I find it most...stirring” Dracula finished, baring his long fangs once again in that terrible smile of his.

A spasm of rage flickered across the Dark Lord’s serpentine face before turning back around to face Dracula. No one _ever_ interrupted the Dark Lord, not _ever_, but his Lordship needed Dracula’s help to crush France, so he needs must appease this foul Vampire. “Quite,” the Dark Lord replied, with an even nastier smile back to Dracula. “I daresay you will be able to fulfil your every whim with this rabble.” He jerked his hairless head back in the direction of the chained students. “They are Blood Traitors, Mudbloods and filth. This is their fate, to be used and exterminated by superior beings.” The Dark Lord said, inclining his head by a _whole inch_ in Dracula’s direction.

Dracula laughed and strolled over to the racking table where his next victim was struggling, fruitlessly. The girl was now naked and had been bound by the wrists and the ankles by yet more shackles, sobbing, shaking and screaming with terror. Astoria rather thought that the girl had soiled
herself, judging by the smell now permeating the cavernous dungeon. Indeed, she saw that Blaise and Theodore had wrinkled their noses, looking revolted. “Are you knowing my Lord, that a Vampire bite takes a day to take effect the one bitten?” The Dark Lord gave a curt nod in answer. “Yes,” Dracula rasped deeply, running a long fingernail down the girl’s nude body. “So, we shall have a lot of time to be playing with her.” Dracula then leaned over, and bit off her right nipple.

The girl screamed in anguish, and the Dark Lord turned away, indifferent to her suffering, and the Death Eaters parted at once to let him pass through. “Snape, come with me.” He said, menacingly, as he strode through the archway to the stairs. As Astoria turned to leave, she saw Zinnia plunge a rusty knife right into the girl’s stomach, as her shrieks increased in pitch. When they had gotten back upstairs into the main castle, the Dark Lord led them to the throne room. There, he had tortured Snape with the Crucius curse for close to an hour, Snape’s yells of pain reverberating off the grim, stone walls. When his Lordship had finally finished, he gazed pitilessly down at Snape. “You shall not fail me again Severus, I expect you to be more faithful in future. I am most displeased that the filthy Blood Traitor, Kingsley Shacklebolt, though considerably weakened, has escaped me once again. It was most short sighted of you to let that little fool, Norton, to pursue Shacklebolt alone. I would have expected you to do the deed yourself, you lazy lackwit.”

“M-my Lord I c-crave your p-pardon. A-a thousand apologies my Lord, I crave your-your forgiveness.” Snape gasped, fighting to get his knees, his greasy black hair was bedraggled, covering much of his face, and what little skin Astoria could see was starkly white.

The Dark Lord merely let out a cruel laugh, “Forgiveness, Severus? Lord Voldemort does not forgive, he does not forget. The only way for you redeem yourself in my eyes is by bringing me Shacklebolt, fool.” The Dark Lord then suddenly and unexpectedly whirled around to face the watching Death Eaters, screaming at the top of his voice, looking utterly insane. “And as for the rest of you! You still have not found me Harry Potter!” Many of the Death Eaters jumped, Astoria included, his Lordship’s screeches cutting through her like a knife. “How hard can it be, to find one filthy little Half-Blood boy!? I have most of Europe under my control but when I ask about Potter, oh no, you give me nothing, NOTHING!” He strode up and down the throne room, breathing hard, until he suddenly started screaming again “Get out! Get out all of you! Now!” As she fled with the others, Astoria saw the Dark Lord gave Snape a kick as he was getting up, causing him to howl in pain.

Unsurprisingly, the Dark Lord’s black rage had not abated by the evening. He was not there to preside over them at dinner and everyone ate in silence, the only sounds were the chinks of knives and forks, the occasional clearing of throats, or else goblets being placed on the blood red tablecloth with light thuds. Silas looked irritated and sullen at this dismal atmosphere as he shovelled steak tartare into his mouth, looking resentfully up and down the table. Dracula was not in attendance either. Undoubtedly, he and his wives preferred to gorge themselves on the Dark Lord’s new ‘offerings.’ Astoria merely picked at the many courses served up to her, she did not have much of an appetite after what she had seen and done over the past couple of days. Her mind was at war. You are a monster, how could you? How could you sit back and allow these things to happen, how could you kill boys and girls who are scarcely more than children? You have a child of your own! But another part of her thought, I had no choice, the Dark Order are too powerful, they will kill me and
my child at the slightest sign of disloyalty or protest, you must think of Leo at these times. Think of Leo. Astoria was relieved when the meal was over, and all the Death Eaters rose, the sounds of chair legs scraping the stone floor, low murmurings of chatter breaking out among them as the witches and wizards drifted to opposite ends of the castle as usual.

Astoria did not attempt to engage in conversation with any of the other witches as they all began to gossip with one another. She merely sat on a black velvet sofa, gazing into the spitting fire, a goblet of wine clutched in her hand, the images of mutilated girls and the burning Beauxbatons dining hall swirling round her mind’s eye. Astoria usually found she could tolerate being in here for a few hours, only to keep up appearances of course, but tonight she found it galling. It irritated her when she heard Adelaide complaining loudly to Drisella and some of her cousins about her blackened eyes, which incidentally were almost healed now. Bellatrix’s harsh cackle grated on Astoria more than usual, and Elizabeth was gleefully recounting the siege of Beauxbatons with Hestia Carrow, their voices full of callous pleasure, filling her with revulsion.

Astoria was just about to make her excuses and leave for her bedchamber, when Narcissa suddenly sat down next to her on the sofa. “How are you Astoria? How is your son?” She asked quietly. Narcissa looked worse than ever before, and Astoria rather thought that she was beginning to resemble one of Dracula’s wives. Astoria had not spoken to any of the Malfoys since the Death Eaters had taken up residence in the castle. Indeed, she had barely seen them at all, as she and Antonin would be seated at the top of the table and the Malfoy’s right down the bottom to reinforce their low status. Narcissa rarely attended the after dinner drinks either, presumably to dash upstairs to get her next fix of opium.

“I cannot complain.” Astoria lied. “But to the best of my knowledge, Leonidas is thriving, he is now in the care of Healer Rathburne, who shall be bringing him over here toward the end of this lunar cycle. How are you faring?” She asked, slightly concerned, in spite of herself.

“Oh, I am well.” Narcissa said, though she fiddled with one of her diamond earrings and averted her eyes as she spoke. Then Narcissa quickly changed the subject and asked in a low voice, “What happened at Beauxbatons, Astoria? I tried to question Draco when he returned, but I could barely get a word out of him.”

Astoria glanced around nervously before she answered, but the other witches did not seem to be paying them any mind, chattering away in small groups. “It was-” She whispered… but she could not seem to find the words to describe the horror that had taken place at the school, it had been so very disturbing. Astoria let out a deep sigh and shook her head. Narcissa seemed to understand and grasped her wrist briefly, her skeletal hand burning hot. She must need another dose of opium soon, Astoria thought, dully. “Pardons Narcissa, I am so very fatigued, I think I shall retire for tonight.” Astoria said, suddenly.

“Oh,” Narcissa replied, looking a little upset. “Oh, well- I- I hope you have a restful evening. Good
eve to you… Tori” She replied with a little smile.

Astoria gave her a swift, sad smile in return and said, “And a good eve to you too… Cissa.” And she swept from the chamber, cerise gown swirling.

Astoria walked slowly through the vast corridors, there was complete silence apart from the clicking of her silken slippers on the rough stone floor, and her gown softly trailing out behind her. She had thought that she knew the castle corridors by now, but she seemed to have taken a wrong turn. *Merlin, where was she now?* She sped up the pace of her walking, hoping to eventually find a staircase, but there was nothing. As she strode through grim passageways, she heard drunken yells and raucous laughter from a parlour to her left, one of its doors wide open.

Astoria did not pay the noise any mind, and strode past the doors, until she suddenly stopped dead at the sound of a drunken, sneering voice that she had no trouble in recognising. “Ah, there she is, my gorgeous wife, why do you not come in and join us my darling?” Astoria stood there for a moment, paralysed with fear. Then she took a deep breath, and forced herself to turn around and walk through the high doors. As she entered the room she saw Corban Yaxley, Thorefinn Rowle, Silas Norton, Edward Travers, Theodore Nott, Walter Selwyn, and Antonin himself slouching lazily on chintz covered armchairs and sofas in the large parlour. “Come here sweetheart.” Antonin said in his most dangerously soft tone, his cold blue eyes heavily bloodshot. Astoria could smell the scent of gin coming off all of them from the other side of the room. They were all smoking, clouds of vivid blue smoke coiling in the air above them, the whole place stinking of burning tobacco. Antonin was flicking ash into a black marble ashtray that was hovering by his elbow, and extinguished the cigarette as Astoria obeyed and came toward him, his eyes never leaving her. When she reached him, Antonin pulled her into his lap and kissed her on the neck, smelling like the ashtray next to him. “Is she not so beautiful boys?” He said to the surrounding wizards, laughing. “Am I not so lucky to get to fuck this sweet little thing all night and all morn?” Yaxley laughed coarsely and Silas let out a screech of malicious laughter, while the other wizards chuckled in unison.

“She is most exquisite, Antonin.” Replied Silas, his reedy voice thick with excitement. “I have always wondered what she was hiding beneath those gowns.” He surveyed Astoria with a yearning lust, his mismatched eyes hungry as he gazed at her cleavage. “I can scarcely wait to ravage that Delacour creature and claim her for my own before Dracula kills her.” Silas finished, gleefully.

Antonin looked amused. “Silas, are you sure you even know what to do with a woman? Have you ever claimed one?” As Antonin spoke, he had gotten to his feet, taking Astoria with him, rubbing her shoulders gently.

“Of course, I have!” Silas replied, defiantly. Though his cheeks had had flamed red and his disfigured face was contorted with fury. Indeed, when Theodore laughed disbelievingly, Silas gave a snarl of rage and his hand flew towards the pocket of his robes, as though he were about to draw his wand, but was stopped from doing more as Antonin spoke again.
Antonin chuckled softly. “No need for any of that, Norton. There is no shame in admitting you have not yet, shall we say... crossed the barrier into manhood. However, I think it fitting that you should see how things are done first.” Antonin then shoved one of his large hands between Astoria’s breasts, partially ripping the fabric of her gown in the process and groping at her roughly. Astoria was filled with fear as she saw the gleeful faces of the wizards surrounding her, their expressions lecherous. Astoria flinched and took a step back, frightened, as Antonin began to make grabbing movements toward her, his face full of lustful pleasure. “Oh, do not be so coy my darling.” He sneered, turning to the other wizards. He then grasped her arm with iron fingers, holding her firmly where she stood. “You should see the way this little nymph moans and squeals when she is bouncing on my cock, she cannot get enough, can you my dear?” Antonin asked, tauntingly. Travers’ hand was moving, almost unconsciously towards his crotch and he began to touch himself there, his tongue moistening his thin mouth as he looked at her. Rowle meanwhile was trying to disguise how heavily he was breathing and was biting down hard on his lower lip. Selwyn and Yaxley exchanged amused looks as though they knew what was coming, and Theodore was gazing at her with the faintest half smile upon his weak, cruel face. Antonin then pulled Astoria to him and gave her a sloppy kiss, he was so drunk that he had difficulty in standing straight, swaying slightly. When they broke apart he continued, “It would be most unjust for me to keep her charms hidden from you all, so I think I will have to fuck her right here in front of you all tonight.” At his words there was an upswing of jeering and laughter from the surrounding wizards, and Yaxley slammed his goblet down onto a small table, spilling half its contents in the process. Astoria would have run if she had dared, but Antonin loved a chase and she was not going to give him that gratification. She would let him have his way and then hopefully he would let her go and would not start hitting her, as he surely would if she disobeyed him. “Come my sweet, show my good comrades what a beauty you are you-”

But Antonin was cut off by an angry voice cracking through the air like a whip. “Stop!” It was Draco. Draco, her shining white knight, had come to attempt to save her, though Astoria knew in her heart that there was nothing he could do. He was no match for the likes of Antonin. Antonin was taller, stronger, and far more powerfully magical, as were the rest of his comrades, excepting perhaps Silas and Theodore. Draco had come striding into the parlour and had drawn his wand, shaking with fury. Yaxley and the others jerked their heads around to stare as Draco made his way toward Antonin, watching in total astonishment. Theodore looked amused at Draco’s interference, Travers, coldly surprised, and Silas looked indecently excited, both his maimed and good eye darting from Draco to Antonin as Draco moved further into the room. “She is your wife, Dolohov! Have you no regard for her honour?” Draco asked angrily, now a couple of feet away from Antonin, glaring at him.

Antonin had let go of Astoria. His cold blue eyes had widened, and he stared at Draco for a second, seemingly unable to believe that he was being told what to do by the likes of Draco Malfoy. Antonin Nikolai Dolohov was a man who took what he wanted, and everyone else be damned, and he was not used to anyone commanding him other than his Master. Then, quick as a flash, Antonin shot out a massive fist, seized the front of Draco’s robes and yanked Draco toward him so that he was glowering down into his face, incandescent with rage. “How dare you command me, idiot boy!” Antonin snarled. “You should be thankful that I am not Cruciating the hell out of you, you foolish pup! But I have a job to do just now” Antonin smiled down unpleasantly at Draco, still holding him in a vice like grip. Astoria was scared for Draco, scared of what Antonin might do, regardless of what he said. “Though you are right on one score,” he went on, “She is my wife, she is my personal
property for me to do as I please with, and it pleases me to strip her bare and fuck her, right here and right now. So, you are going to shut your mouth, sit over there and watch, or I might just have to drag your opium loving bitch Mother in here as well. I know the Dark Lord will not give a shit what we do with her, you and your pathetic family are nothing now.” There was laughter from the other Death Eaters and Antonin gave Draco a nasty leer, “Do you understand me?” When Draco did not answer, Antonin shook him very hard and repeated, almost shouting now, “Do you understand me!?”

“Yes- yes, Dolohov.” Draco choked back, his voice constrained with suppressed anger and emotion. Antonin then threw Draco from him with as much force as he could muster, so that Draco stumbled and fell before the fireplace. Silas gave a shrill cackle, leapt up from his seat and began kicking him, Draco rolling away from the blows. Finally, Draco managed to stagger to his feet, and flung himself into an armchair, his face flushed and furious.

Antonin gave a soft chuckle and turned back to Astoria. “Now, where were my sweet? Ah yes-” He laid hands on her once again and tore the silk of her gown even further, the rip coming down to her naval. Antonin jerked the fabric open so that her breasts spilled free, and Selwyn whistled appreciatively. Astoria flinched as Antonin laid his hand on her left breast, chortling. “See what did I tell you!?” He said gleefully to the room at large. “Bigger than my whole hand, and she is the tightest fit I have ever had!” There was more whooping and laughter from the wizards as Antonin peeled the gown from Astoria’s body, leaving her naked apart from her garter belt, lace knickers and stockings. All the wizards were staring at her, their hungry eyes crawling over her flesh. Astoria desperately wanted to cover herself, but she knew better than to attempt such a foolish thing. She chanced a glance at Draco, he had now gone white and he seemed unable to look away, such was his horror. Astoria tore her eyes from him, surely, he would never want to be near her again now. She felt dirty and used, he must view her in the same way now too, a whore she thought, despairingly.

When Antonin made to take off the last of her garb, breathing hard, Yaxley said “Leave that on if you do not mind Antonin, I like stockings, I find them most stirring.” Antonin laughed and jerked down her knickers. Though there was a roaring fire, Astoria shivered as she was fully exposed. Antonin waved his wand, and he himself was now clad in breeches and a silk shirt, half the buttons undone as sweat glistened on his heaving chest. He began to touch her all over, squeezing at her breasts and backside, or else tracing a finger up her spine. It took all of Astoria’s resolve not to shudder in disgust.

As Antonin groped at her, the surrounding wizards began discussing her as though she were a piece of meat, and under her blind horror, Astoria felt a stab of rage. Comments such as “Those legs are perfect… and that waist!” or else, “She’s got no hair down there! Do you get her to shave it off?” Astoria did her best to block them out, filling her head with thoughts of her son, she just wanted this to be over. She was revolted to see that Silas had actually drawn out his member, his hand rapidly pumping up and down his length, his expression eager.

Antonin then hauled Astoria off her feet and onto an empty sofa, spreading her legs with his knees to reveal her pink, womanly folds. “She has got a very pretty cunt.” Announced Rowle, smiling slightly
and grasping his crotch. “Very nice indeed.”

Antonin laughed, “I have always said that it is like a little pink rose, it is still so tight, even after birthing my son.” The wizards all roared with laughter as Antonin began to rub her sensitive centre, his breathing rapid. Astoria let out a little moan, determinedly staring at the high ceiling as she saw all the wizards crowding around the sofa out of the corner of her eye.

“Oh, she likes it well enough!” cried Travers, from what seemed a very long way away as the others chuckled.

Silas made to reach out to touch Astoria’s breast, still fondling himself, but Antonin forestalled him. “Now, now Silas, your time will come in due course, but this is my wife” He laughed. “You may look, but you may not touch.” Silas retracted his hand hastily, and the laughter increased in pitch as he suddenly gasped and spilled his seed all over the floor.

As Silas collapsed into a chair, his breathing ragged, Antonin pulled Astoria closer toward him, held her legs open, and did something he had never done before. He lowered his head between her legs and licked her right up the middle of her folds. Astoria gasped, and her hips jolted involuntarily, she had never before experienced a sensation like this. She could not help but moan as Antonin’s tongue darted in and out of her, the jeering of the wizards even louder than before. As Antonin began to suck on her centre and grabbed at one of her breasts, her chest heaved and her back arched, unable to prevent the powerful climax surging through her body, as her female juices squirted from her. “Beautiful…” murmured Selwyn breathlessly after Astoria had ceased moaning from the unwanted climax. Antonin then clambered on top of her, a few quick thrusts were all that were needed to finish him, he groaned loudly as he spurted inside her, and Astoria dully wondered whether this encounter would result in another baby.

As Antonin straightened, his member still dripping with seed, Yaxley spoke. “Well, that was most entertaining. I need to find my wife to cure me of a rather urgent need.” He finished, smirking slightly. The other wizards laughed and began to drift away back to their chairs, as casually as if they had just watched a mildly interesting opera.

Antonin waved his wand again and Astoria was clad in a silken, midnight blue bed robe, covering her nakedness, though she could still feel his seed dampening the garment as it continued to dribble out of her. “I shall summon that beastly little Elf to take you up to my chambers.” He said. “Jinky!” Antonin shouted. The House Elf appeared at once by the sofa, her expression indifferent as she surveyed the scene. “Take my wife upstairs, and see that she is washed and ready for me when I return.” Jinky grasped Astoria’s hand with an ice cold grip and helped her off the sofa to get her to her feet. “I shall be seeing you later.” Antonin said, with a lascivious wink at Astoria. “Ensure you are awake for me.” And Astoria allowed the House Elf to lead her toward the doors of the parlour, thinking faintly that she would ask the Elf to provide her with a very strong drink.
XX. - Trains and Turks

Chapter Summary

More Death Eater action in this chapter, and we see some main characters from the original books making an appearance. Also a Cursed Child character. Same disclaimer applies.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The next two weeks that Astoria spent at Dracula’s castle were incredibly chaotic. The Dark Lord had gone abroad, nobody knew not where, and no one was foolish enough to ask. Therefore, all the Death Eaters were cooped up in the castle, as France was not yet in open war and they had been commanded to stay hidden. With nothing else to do, many got drunk in the daytime, and as a result, fights broke out. No one bothered to interfere, seeing as Dracula spent much of the day asleep, and his nights down in the dungeons with his victims. Thus, the combatants avoided Dracula’s wrath at having half of his castle smashed to pieces by hastily clearing up the ruins before he emerged. Silas had given William Jugson a nasty slash on his shoulder when the latter announced that he wanted to bed the Delacour girl, and Dashiell Selwyn sported a bloody broken nose after duelling Theodore Nott over some trifling matter. Silas, incidentally, had finally gotten his heart’s desire. One afternoon, Valeria had led a naked, sobbing and bleeding Gabrielle Delacour into the dining hall to ‘hand her over’ to the male Death Eaters, who had been drinking heavily all morn. Silas had not even the decency to take her up to his chambers. When presented with Gabrielle, he gave a shriek of delight and leapt upon the girl, raping her right there in front of everyone, though nobody could have cared less. The Zabini brothers laughed and Elizabeth had looked cold and indifferent when Gabrielle screamed and cried as Silas pumped into her, making indecent noises of pleasure. Astoria had been mortified to see Gabrielle’s appearance scarcely a few days later. Her silver hair was bedraggled, there were various cuts on her face, and her whole body was covered in bites, bruises and hex marks as she ran naked through the corridors from Silas who was chasing her.

“You cannot evade me forever pretty!” Silas had screeched after Gabrielle, his cold, reedy voice full of callous pleasure as he flew past Astoria, his maimed face alight with malice. “Silas is coming to get you!” Silas vaulted over an unconscious Rowle, who was sprawled upon the floor in a wine soaked sleep, before finally cornering the girl further up the corridor. Astoria could almost see herself being raped by Antonin for the first time as Silas tackled Gabrielle to the ground as she screamed and begged. Astoria felt desperately sorry for the girl, who could not have been more than fifteen years, but there was nothing she could do for her. Even so, a nagging voice in the back of her mind said, That was you. That is, you. Antonin meanwhile, scarcely let Astoria out of his sight and would not leave her alone. When he was not drinking himself into oblivion with his comrades, Antonin would insist on staying in bed for half the day, bedding Astoria over and over again, drunkenly telling her that he wanted another son. The encounters left her exhausted, and once Antonin had given her the back of his hand after he was rendered incapable of ‘performing’ after too much wine, as if it were her fault. Astoria found herself thinking, almost longingly, for the Dark Lord’s return, as he would surely put an end to this mess at once. She prayed that he would come back before her Leo arrived, who would most like be here any day now. This toxic, drunken environment was no fit place for
anyone to live in, let alone a baby.

Three days later however, as Astoria swept down the grim staircase, she beheld a group of people talking quietly in the hall. Rathburne, Elizabeth and a short, stout witch Astoria did not know, broke off their conversation and looked up at her as she descended toward them. Leonidas and another, smaller baby were dozing peacefully in a large pram and a small girl of about two with silvery hair was capering around wildly as the witch struggled to keep hold of her hand.

When Astoria reached them, Rathburne inclined his head toward her. “Madam Dolohov” he said wheezily. “How are you faring this morn?”

“I am well,” Astoria lied, despair crashing over her as she looked at her sleeping son. Too soon, she thought. Too soon, it is not fitting that he should be here just now.

When Astoria looked inquiringly at the stout witch, Rathburne hastened to make introductions. “This is Nurse Bernadette Clayden, Madame Dolohov, she will be assisting me with the infants while you reside here. Beckwith shall continue to treat any of the wounded.” He shot a slightly nervous glance at Elizabeth who was standing coolly by the pram and had not yet spoken, arms folded.

Nurse Clayden gave Astoria a strained smile and greeted her. Astoria was not fooled; the Nurse was plainly terrified, and Astoria felt certain that she was being forced to care for the babies against her will, just like so many other Healers. Aside from that, this grim castle and its surroundings were enough to frighten anyone, it had certainly frightened her. Astoria turned to Elizabeth and opened her mouth to speak, but Elizabeth forestalled her. “My daughter, Guinevere” she said coldly, pointing at the smaller baby in the pram. Astoria rather thought that Elizabeth was jealous and angry about the fact that Astoria had a son and she did not… the cold hearted bitch had complained about it enough after all. Astoria found her attitude disgusting.

But Astoria did not care about Elizabeth’s pathetic resentments, she wanted to hold her baby. “Give Leo to me, Rathburne” Astoria commanded the Healer. Rathburne hastened to obey and at last, at last, she held her son in arms again. Leonidas stirred slightly but did not wake, his head resting on her shoulder and automatically grasping one of her fingers when she held one out for him. At this, Elizabeth turned on her heel and strode away, but Astoria ignored her and addressed Rathburne again. “I assume you know where they shall all be housed?”

“Indeed, Madam Dolohov, I believe the elf, Jinky will be showing us upstairs shortly.” Replied Rathburne with an odd expression on his face as he watched Elizabeth’s retreating back up the hall, her grey silken robes swirling.
Before Astoria could say any more, the small girl who had continued to fidget in the background throughout their conversation, burst out in a shrill voice, “Mother! Me want Mother! Now!” She stamped her foot and thrust out her lip, trying to disentangle herself from Nurse Clayden’s grasp. Astoria looked at the child properly for the first time, and knew at once who she was. Delphini, daughter of Bellatrix Lestrange and the Dark Lord himself. Other than her silvery hair with blue tips, Delphini resembled Bellatrix to a tittle, there was no mistaking those carved, haughty features so often found in the House of Black.

“Mistress Delphini please!” Began Nurse Clayden, sounding scared and glancing around the hall nervously. She was clearly afraid of reprimanding the girl.

Then suddenly a harsh, female voice rang out across the room, cutting through the air like a sword. “Delphi!” Bellatrix cried as she came striding into the hall. The girl wrenched herself free from Nurse Clayden and ran towards Bellatrix, hugging her around the legs when she reached her. Astoria was surprised at the look on Bellatrix’s face, she was wearing a broad smile that she customarily reserved for the Dark Lord. Was that, affection? Bellatrix swept over toward Astoria, Clayden and Rathburne, paying absolutely no mind to the latter two. “Good morn Astoria.” She said, still smiling slightly, as Delphini clutched at her skirts. Bellatrix glanced at Leo, who was laid across Astoria’s arm now. “You two!” She suddenly snapped at them. “Why are these infants not up in their chambers?”

Nurse Clayden had gone white and began to shake with terror. “M-madam Lestrange we…I…the elf…she-” Clayden spluttered.

But Bellatrix cut her off, a menacing look upon her gaunt face. “Be quiet!” and Clayden fell silent at once. “Take my daughter and these babes upstairs immediately… Jinky!” She called, and the House Elf appeared at once. “You foolish little beast, why have you not done as you were commanded?” The elf did not have a chance to respond, for Bellatrix had stooped and hit the creature across the face.

Being undead, Jinky could feel no pain, but she still stumbled and fell at the force of the blow. The elf righted herself and straightened her black toga “A thousand apologies Madam Lestrange, Jinky is doing better in future.” Squeaked the elf, unperturbed by Bellatrix’s attack.

“You shall.” Bellatrix snarled, and she watched with narrowed eyes as the Elf beckoned to the Healers to the staircase. “You too, Delphi” she went on in a slightly softened tone, as Astoria handed Leo over to Rathburne. “Go with your servants.” Delphini took Nurse Clayden’s hand and followed Rathburne up the stairs, who had conjured up a basket to carry Leo and Guinevere. Bellatrix turned back to Astoria. “The Dark Lord will be returning this eve, I daresay we shall be sent out to do his bidding soon, he has informed me that he has something of great import to share with us. I can scarcely wait to be freed of this foul castle and continue to serve him.” Her eyes gleamed and she
gave a nasty leer. “I needs must inform the others, Astoria. Good day to you.” And with that, Bellatrix turned on her heel and strode across the hall through a nearby set of double doors, her long black hair rippling behind her.

Bellatrix was as good as her word, for the Dark Lord did indeed return that evening. As they were all waiting behind their seats at dinner time, he strode into the dining hall, flanked by two wizards Astoria had never seen before, but she had a shrewd idea of who they may be. One looked to be in his fifties, whereas the other was younger, in his middling thirties or so. The younger wizard was most definitely a Nott, or at least closely related to one, and may have been considered handsome by many. He had the same cold, proud cheekbones as Elizabeth, and a chiselled jaw, but this did not quite conceal his weak face, making him resemble Theodore and Edgar Nott strikingly. The elder wizard had to be some official from Turkey, for he was wearing bright red dress robes with the crescent and star of the Turkish flag emblazoned in white thread above his heart. He may even be the Minister, Astoria thought. His hair was greasy and black as ink, his complexion was olive and swarthy, and he had a large hooked nose, not unlike Snape’s. Astoria knew that Turkey had not even attempted to fight the Dark Order when they had invaded. The Turkish Minister was said to be a cruel and oppressive dictator who was infatuated with the Dark Arts and had welcomed the Death Eaters in with open arms. Indeed, when the Dark Lord and his two companions arrived at the head of the table, his Lordship finally spoke. “For those who do not know, we have honoured guests here tonight.” He announced in his cruel, clear voice. “Here, we have Minister Hakan Yildriz of Turkey, who has been helping us to supress much of Eastern Europe.” The Dark Lord gestured at the elder wizard, who bowed extravagantly to the murmurs of greeting that echoed through the room. “And here, we have the noble Lyle Nott, who has been overseeing the campaign alongside the Minister to prevent forces from the Middle East and Russia from interfering with our aims.” A round of applause greeted Lyle Nott as he followed suit and bowed, unsmiling. Dracula, who was in attendance tonight, smiled and bowed at the pair in turn, opening his arms in a gesture of welcome.

There was an explosion of chatter as they were all seated, the Death Eaters surveying the visitors with great interest. “Cousin!” Elizabeth Nott Yaxley cried across the table as everyone was served raw scallops with hot peppers. “How has your campaign fared thus far?”

Lyle Nott took a healthy swig of wine and gave a twisted smile, his cold grey eyes exactly matching Elizabeth’s. “Things have gone well thus far, good cousin. It is said that the Chinese are making plans to move against us, but I daresay they shall be overcome by our forces by the time they are ready to attack… Fools.” Lyle smirked, setting down his goblet.

“Slit eyed abominations!” Interrupted Dashiell Selwyn, a look of contempt upon his hard face.

Antonin laughed at the offensive jape. “Who have you left in charge?” He asked Lyle, one of his hands was resting on Astoria’s thigh and he grasped it slightly.

“Dorian Prince.” Lyle replied, glancing briefly down the table at Snape, a close relative of Dorian,
but he seemed not to have heard. “Yes, Dorian is young at twenty eight years to be in such a position, but he has excellent battle instincts and knows how to keep everyone in line.”

“A worthy choice.” Antonin replied, inclining his head and toasting Lyle.

Lyle gave Antonin a sadistic leer in response and then turned his attention upon Astoria. “Madam Dolohov, you are just as lovely as everyone says, a true beauty.” Lyle’s eyes gave her the once over, lingering on her small waist and big breasts in the tightly laced gown she was wearing. “I have not seen you since you were a mere child, but I find you much changed, all to the better I think.” He went on, still smiling unpleasantly.

“I think it is time that you put your eyes back in, Nott, she is mine after all.” Antonin replied. His voice appeared jovial, but Astoria could hear the unspoken menace beneath it. Antonin was clearly not amused with Lyle’s attentions toward her, as opposed to Silas or one of his other Death Eater comrades. Perhaps with Lyle’s moderately good looks, Antonin saw him as competition.

Astoria had no memory of ever meeting Lyle Nott, she must have been so young that she could not remember. She groped for an answer but was spared having to address him, for Minister Yildriz had cut into their conversation. “This is your wife?” He asked Antonin in a thick Turkish accent, smiling lecherously. “Such a lovely specimen.” He said, ogling Astoria hungrily and just as quickly directing his attention back to her husband. “Seeing as you have such an affinity to beautiful witches, you may be pleased to know that my men shall be bringing several, ah… gifts for our noble Dracula and your Death Eaters to use at your leisure, and there is something else I think you shall be most interested in.” Yildriz finished, as a sinister shadow passed across his face.

“So kind of you Minister.” Antonin smirked, nodding in Yildriz’s direction as dinner concluded.

The first of Minister Yildriz’s ‘gifts’ were revealed the next morn after they had all had breakfast. The Dark Lord had led them all out to the back of the castle to step outside in the smoky, gloomy air, Yildriz at his side. Nobody uttered a word as they surveyed the grim scene and Astoria could feel the heat from the lava off the mountains even from here. Then, Yildriz stepped forward and pointed his wand in the air in front of him, conjuring up a powerful shield charm, a sign Astoria found most ominous. Then, he directed his wand at the sky and cried “Advocabit!”

Then, there was a rushing hot wind that felt as though it would melt the flesh from Astoria’s very bones, making her shudder. At once, fifty or so wizards appeared, clutching heavy iron chains which were restraining the largest and most fearsome dragon Astoria had ever seen. The creature had cream, black and orange scales covering its body. Two black spiked horns sat on the top of its huge head, and more spikes lined its back, travelling all the way down to the end of its sharp tail. The dragon gave an ear splitting roar that shook the very mountains around them, and as the wizards struggled to keep it in hand, the dragon spat out green flame rather than orange, its rows and rows of
pointed, razor sharp black fangs bared in rage. One of the most frightening things about this dragon were its eyes, which had no pupils. They were vivid green and blank, though its eyeballs rolled in all directions as the dragon thrashed around, furious to escape the bonds that held it to the ground. “An Amazonian Vipertooth” Declared the Dark Lord to the group at large, his voice triumphant as the dragon flexed its wings threateningly, which were at least two hundred feet across. “I thank you Minister for this gift. This creature shall be most effective in the wars to come.” His Lordship seemed in an unusually high mood this morning, and nothing that made the Dark Lord happy could possibly be good, Astoria thought, apprehensively. Many of the Death Eaters gave impressed murmurs at the sight of the creature. Blaise was staring awestruck and transfixed at the dragon, and Silas nudged Jugson in the arm, whispering excitedly in his ear. Antonin had a horrible smile upon his face, and Astoria could just picture him imagining the horrific destruction that the dragon would inflict upon the people of France. Dracula meanwhile, was drawing, almost unconsciously, toward the creature as he watched with rapt attention. “Now!” The Dark lord cried, “You shall all hasten to the War Room at once!”

As the Death Eaters filed back into the castle toward the War Room, everyone was talking excitedly, and Astoria heard Travers say from behind her, “What a magnificent beast, I have never seen one of its like, Amazonian Vipertooth’s are supposed to be really rare, I wonder how Yildriz managed to procure one? I mean to say, I feel certain that this creature will prove useful to the Dark Order’s aims in supressing the rest of Europe, as his Lordship so eloquently outlined.” Bouts of malicious laughter followed Travers’ words as they were all given permission to take their seats in the War Room.

Once in the War Room, the Dark Lord could not seem to keep still. He was pacing up and down at the head of the table, his face alive with savage pleasure. The horrid snake Nagini, who had rarely been present as she was so often sent out to do his bidding was draped over his shoulders, hissing softly. Finally, he spoke. “It – it has finally happened.” He announced to the silent room, breathlessly. “Yildriz has informed me of the exact location of Potter at last.” He inclined his hairless head toward the Turkish Minister, and Yildriz looked smug and satisfied. “Which is more than any of you have ever done!” the Dark Lord snapped, suddenly sharp, as the whole room looked apprehensive and jittery. “In any case,” The Dark Lord continued in a softer tone. “It is reported that Potter is attempting to flee the country via train, now that he knows of our presence here, the coward. The news of the siege of Beauxbatons will have undoubtedly reached him by now, and the French Prophet is aware that we are planning to conquer their pathetic country.” At this news, there was a sudden upswing of jeering and yelling, Bellatrix let out a shriek of delight and McNair banged his goblet down onto the table, while Avery shot a Dark Mark up toward the ceiling where it swirled eerily, unable to reach the sky above. “Potter will be easier to take out in the open, though undoubtedly there will be aurors on the train as a precaution, that filthy Mudblood Minister has been most vigilant now that he knows we are here. Your orders are as usual, you are to kill them all, the more the better. Potter is said to be travelling with three companions who are known to us …some more than others.” He finished, and for some strange reason, his Lordships livid red eyes fell upon Antonin, and Astoria saw his jaw clench for a fraction of a second. She pondered on this for a moment, but then hastily brushed away the thought, knowing better than to ask what this meant. Once again, after hours in the War Room, their plans were set, the preparations had been made; they were to ambush Potter two days hence on a trainline to the far West of France near Strasbourg.

Astoria was unsurprised to find that Minister Yildriz took the after dinner congregations that evening to present the rest of his ‘gifts.’ There was a score of half naked, exotic looking Turkish Muggle
women, all with dazed, unfocused expressions upon their faces as they lounged about on armchairs and chaise longues in a large parlour. Astoria’s suspicions were confirmed when Yildriz led them into a parlour and announced, “They are Imperiouslyed. I find it much easier this way, do what you will with them my friends.”

At once, Dracula rushed toward one of the women with honey coloured hair, not unlike Astoria’s, and plunged his fangs straight into her throat. The woman did not even scream, she merely made a horrible gurgling sound as the blood bubbled from her mouth and her eyes rolled back into her skull. Yaxley meanwhile, seized a dark haired woman with full breasts and deep olive skin, kissing her aggressively. Elizabeth let out a shriek of fury and made to rake the woman across the face with her nails as Lyle Nott laughed, but Yaxley shoved her back. “Mind your place wife!” he snarled menacingly.

Enraged, Elizabeth then made to go after her cousin Lyle, who was still laughing. “Cousin, why do you stand there? Stop this at once!” As she raised her hand to strike him across the face, Lyle grabbed her wrist and twisted it around. Elizabeth however, did not cry out in pain, she merely grimaced and glared.

“I suggest that you obey your husband, Cousin, or it shall go ill for you. Furthermore, I am your elder male relative and permitted to chastise you.” Whispered Lyle menacingly, still grasping her tightly as Yaxley began to rape the woman, who lay, indifferent, staring at the ceiling. “Boys!” Lyle called in a louder tone. “I think it fitting that the witches retire for the night while we have our fun.” There were murmurs of assent and Elizabeth wrenched herself free of Lyle’s grip, looking thunderous. As Astoria turned to leave, she saw Adelaide looking jealous and angry as Josiah Zabini began to caress the flesh of another of the women, the other wizards closing in around them. Antonin and Rowle meanwhile, had already engaged in sex with a single woman, one at the front and one in the back. Well Astoria thought, disgusted, at least this shall keep my husband busy for most of the night.

The morning they were to capture Potter dawned dark and bleak as usual, even though it could not have been more than ten hours since midnight. This time was different though, the Dark Lord himself would be joining the campaign himself. Indeed, he strode at the head of the group as they left Dracula’s Castle to head past the magical perimeters in order to disapparate. Every single Death Eater was in attendance, even Rookwood and Greyback, who had not yet fully recovered from their injuries from the siege Beauxbatons, however the Dark Lord had insisted that all were to be in attendance. The fifty wizards that Minister Yildriz had also joined them, including Yildriz himself, his Lordship was determined that Potter, and anyone willing to defend him to be completely outnumbered.

When they apparated into the silent countryside, Astoria beheld a dismal little train station. It was scarcely more than a platform and a small concrete shelter. The place was completely deserted. The Dark Lord raised his wand and swept it in an arc, casting an anti disapparition jinx over the area for miles. Afterward, his Lordship gave a curt nod and the group of Death Eaters silently crept toward the train tracks, splitting into groups as they had been commanded. There were at least seventy of
them in Astoria’s group. Antonin had been put in charge once again, and they been commanded to
wait at the top of the tracks so as to be positioned at the front of the train when it was intercepted.
The remaining Death Eaters had gone with Minister Yildriz and his men, who had been placed
further up the tracks to prevent anyone from escaping. The Dark Lord himself would wait in the
wings until the fray broke apart. As they reached the platform, Astoria was the first to take a step
down toward the tracks, but Antonin forestalled her. “No.” He said harshly, throwing an arm out to
stop her from going any further. Then he pointed at long wooden metal poles which stood near the
tracks, with what looked like metal wire linking them together. “It is called electricity, a crude
method used by those dirty Muggles for transportation and lighting. It is easy to get rid of, but it can
give a nasty shock I’m told.” Indeed, when she strained her ears, Astoria could hear a faint, ominous
buzzing from the tracks in the early morning air. Antonin pointed his wand at the tracks, there was a
brief flash of blue light and the buzzing noise vanished at once, allowing them all to trudge across the
metal tracks carpeted in gravel, unscathed.

They all performed disillusionment charms to conceal themselves from watchful aurors and train
conductors, and waited. They had all been standing there for just under an hour when they heard the
distant rumble of a train from far away. Astoria could hear the train but could not see it, the
thundering of its wheels on the tracks growing louder and louder as it let out a sound like a foghorn,
drowning out the excited sounds of Bellatrix’s panting. As the train drew nearer, Astoria faintly
thought that it looked queer, it was slimline and metal, not at all like the steam trains she was used to
seeing. Then, as the sound of the train was screaming in her ears as it flew directly in front of her,
seventy voices cried, “Expulso!” The train was blasted over one hundred feet into the air, its
underside aflame as it twisted through the air to land upon the ground with an ear splitting crash,
metal debris flying everywhere. At once, their disillusionment charms broke and many of the Death
Eaters charged at the smoking train, roaring with triumph, as screams and crying issued from the
inside of the wreckage.

The Dark Lord’s information had been accurate, for several wizards had burst from the train, wands
raised. Muggles scattered everywhere as the fight broke out, and the Dark Lord suddenly appeared in
the midst of the chaos. Astoria recognised, fleetingly, two of the witches and wizards hurrying toward
his Lordship; her old professor Remus Lupin and his wife, Nymphadora Tonks. As Astoria ducked
to avoid a jet of orange light, she saw Antonin flying at Lupin. “You!” he screamed, “You! I am
going to kill you and your beast loving bitch wife!” and they began to duel. Astoria was distracted
from this as a disguised Ministry witch advanced upon her, shooting a jet of scarlet fire in her
direction, which set the hem of her robes alight. Panicking, Astoria gave a flick of her wand to
quench the flames and wildly fired out killing curses indiscriminately at the other witch, who only
looked to be a few years older than herself. She was reasonably skilful with good reflexes, but her
magic simply was not powerful enough. Astoria finished the other witch by blasting out a snake from
her wand, and it coiled sinuously around the other’s neck, throttling her instantly and plunging its
fangs into one of her eyeballs. As she staggered backward, Astoria saw the Dark Lord duelling four
at once, including Tonks. The other Death Eaters were picking off Muggles, either killing or
incapacitating them, so Astoria followed suit, giving them quick deaths rather the slow, horific ones
they would experience in Dracula’s Dungeons if captured. As she struck down a man in his middling
fifties, Astoria saw Antonin direct a final curse at Lupin, and he yelled with triumph as the werewolf
was blasted into pieces, his blood spattering Antonin’s face, his mangled remains slamming into the
side of the ruined train to slide sickeningly onto the ground. There were also non Ministry wizards on
the train who had simply been travelling and had attempted to help to subdue the Death Eaters, but
they were no match for any of them. These were just normal French wizards who did not practice the
Dark Arts and their spells were incapable of winning duels. Astoria saw Snape kill a witch and
wizard who looked to be a couple with absurd ease as their children wept and screamed, their bloody faces mutilated by nails and pieces of metal. Indeed, a warlock attempted to duel Adelaide Yaxley, but she was able to strike him down in an instant, sending him flying over the other side of the train where Astoria heard him land with a crunch upon the floor as his bones shattered.

Then suddenly, a harsh cry rent the air and Astoria spun on the spot toward the sound of the noise. “There! Over there my Lord! Potter! It is Potter!” Drisella Selwyn shrieked, pointing further up the train tracks. And there they were. Potter, Granger, Weasley and Longbottom were blasting themselves free from the mid section from the mangled metal ruins of the train, wands raised. They were all trying to turn on the spot to disapparate, but the Dark Lord’s anti disapparition jinx kept them trapped where they stood.

The Dark Lord, who was still duelling Tonks, the only surviving combatant from the initial duel, promptly blasted the witch into one of those electricity poles. Astoria heard Tonks’ neck give an audible snap over the din, killing her instantly. Her head rolled sickeningly onto her shoulder as she slumped upon the ground, following her husband to the grave. Astoria was then knocked aside by Silas racing past her. “POTTER!” He screeched, charging toward Potter and his friends, wand raised.

The Dark Lord then whirled around and started running in the same direction as Silas. “Stand aside! Stand aside Norton!” He shrieked, “I shall kill him!” Potter and his companions were duelling Drisella, Dashiell, Travers and Avery as the Dark Lord rushed forward in their direction, Bellatrix and more Death Eaters hot on his heels, stunning spells flying everywhere. The Dark Lord thrust Silas roughly away from the group as he raised his wand, his scarlet, cat like eyes wide and crazed, a terrible grin twisting his serpentine face. Avery was then knocked off his feet by the Granger girl whom he had been in combat with, yelling obscenities, and the Dark Lord in turn made a savage movement with his wand so that all around him fell, including Astoria herself, giving him full access to his prey. Potter directed a curse at the Dark Lord, but he repelled it with an easy flick of his wand, the spell deflecting onto the ruined train, causing a carriage to burst into flame, the windows shattering. Astoria was quick enough to conjure up a shield charm to protect herself from the lethal shards as glass sprayed everywhere. “Now, Potter!” the Dark Lord shrieked over a high pitched, insane cackle, delighted that he was finally about to get his heart’s desire. Potter’s companions all raised their wands to strike back but it was no good. Black ropes covered in metal spikes flew from the Dark Lord’s wand as he pointed it at the group, binding them together as one, excepting Weasley, who hurtled at the Death Eaters in a last ditch attempt to save his friends. However, Dashiell struck him dead with a single killing curse, Weasley’s body landing on the gravel with a thud as half of his teeth were smashed out from him landing face first on the metal tracks, blood pooling out from underneath him.

At the sight of his corpse, Granger began to scream and struggled against her bonds, the spikes ripping her flesh as she lay, bleeding and helpless upon the ground, bound to her friends. “Ron! Oh Ronald! No! No! No! it cannot be!” Several of the Death Eaters laughed cruelly, while Bellatrix gave a scream of triumph and blasted the Dark Mark into the sky, causing the train to groan and tumble completely off the tracks with a crash, such was the force of her spell.
“Filthy Mudblood!” Roared Yaxley at Granger’s anguished yells. “You are a verminous little thief and a liar! Your Blood Traitor lover deserved what he got!” Rodolphus Lestrange and his brother Rabastan laughed jeeringly as they watched Granger dissolve in grief.

The Dark Lord then strode up to his victims and stared down at them, his deathly white face alight with a devilish glee. “Harry Potter.” He hissed. “The boy who lived. Or rather now, the boy who died.” Antonin and the Zabini brothers roared with laughter at his Lordship’s words, their expressions full of savage anticipation as all the other Death Eaters looked on, looking just as eager. However, the Dark Lord silenced them all with a deadly look, now pacing around the struggling group. “This will not be over quickly, by the time I am finished with you, you shall be begging me to feed you to Nagini.” He crowed gloatingly, pleasure etched in every note of his high, cold voice. Potter remained defiant, still struggling furiously as his blood pooled upon the ground, but Granger continued to openly sob. Longbottom had turned as pale as milk, staring blankly into space, seemingly transfixed with terror. All Potter’s companions were covered in cuts from the cruel bonds.

“You vile…you evil…he was my best fucking friend!” Potter yelled as he spat at the Dark Lord’s feet and attempted to kick out at him. “You will not get away with this, Riddle! Someday, somehow, someone is going to bring you down and you will not even see it coming, you son of a whore!” Potter then turned his head toward the Death Eaters and roared, “And that goes for the rest of you! You are all going to pay for fucking up the world!” Adelaide sniggered disbelievingly, Elizabeth gave Potter a cold smile full of promise of what was going to happen to him and his friends, and Astoria could hear Alecto Carrow cackling madly in the background.

Astoria however gave a gasp and actually took a step back from the scene, unable to believe that anyone would dare speak to the Dark Lord in this way, expecting him to fly into a black rage and blast them all into smithereens right then and there, but no. His Lordship merely looked cruelly amused. “You think you are clever, you pathetic little boy.” He said softly, still pacing around the captives, wand raised. “Try to make me kill you because of your churlish insults? Ha! As I said, this will not be over quickly. There again, Lord Voldemort does not permit slights on his person so… Crucio!” Potter and his companions screamed and writhed in a tangled heap of arms and legs upon the floor as the curse hit them. All the Death Eaters were jeering and yelling as the Dark Lord threw back his head toward the sky and let out his high cold laugh, beside himself with jubilation.

Minister Yildriz and his guard then appeared, his face bloody and his red robes soot stained, the other wizards surrounding him also in a similar state of dishevelment. “The ones from the back are all dead my Lord” He panted. Yildriz looked down at Potter and his friends and smiled unpleasantly. “Good fortune to you on acquiring these filthy little criminals. The war is won at last, what shall we do with them now?”

The Dark Lord’s lips curved into a horrible smile as he looked back at Yildriz. “We shall take them to the castle. There they will feel the full strength of Lord Voldemort’s wrath. They are to be heavily guarded to ensure that they do not escape. Ensure that you round up any surviving filth for Count Dracula.”
“At once my Lord.” Replied Yildriz, a wicked grin twisting his face, as he and his men advanced upon Potter and his friends.

Chapter End Notes

I decided to age Gabrielle Delacour up a bit as I found it too disgusting for her to be 12/13 years old. Not that it isn't still horrible, but those young ages are going a bit too far for me.
Also, I feel like Bellatrix would have genuinely loved Delphi in a twisted sort of way. As we all know though, she will always love Lord V above all others.
XXI. - Mercy

Chapter Summary

This chapter was hard to write, I almost cut some of the more unpleasant bits, but in the spirit of creative writing, I feel that original material is the best. This is a little longer than I would have preferred but it was too difficult to condense things down while keeping it interesting. (I usually like to keep them to about 5000 words max but this is closer to 7000) Thanks again for the views/kudos's, I really appreciate it as I know this is something that hasn't really been covered in the HP fanfic community.
Warning: graphic material
Same disclaimer applies.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Dark Lord finally had Potter. After all these years, after all the escapes and bungled missions he was finally going to get what he craved above all else in this world, to kill Harry Potter. The jubilation and excitement that whirled around Astoria and the Death Eaters as they dragged Potter and his friends back to Dracula’s Castle was so intense it was tangible. As they crossed the bridge they made an almighty racket, many Death Eaters shooting jets of light into the sky, laughing and whooping with triumph, occasionally blasting bits of the jagged rocks everywhere. Silas was quivering with glee, Avery could not stop leering, and the Dark Lord himself seemed to be in an almost euphoric like state as they marched through the castle toward the dungeons. On the journey back, Potter, Granger and Longbottom had to be stunned in order to subdue them, for they had continued to struggle, and Granger almost succeeded in using wandless magic against Dashiell Selwyn, which did nothing but to earn her a few vicious bouts of the Cruciatux curse. When they reached the dungeons, Greyback, along with some of Yildriz’s men dragged the unconscious group to the centre by the racking table, now tying them up individually. There was a tremendous amount of noise echoing off the stone walls when the Dark Lord suddenly screeched over the tumult, “Rise and shine Potter! Rise and shine! Lord Voldemort is waiting!” and he pointed his wand to revive Potter and his friends, who began to stir feebly.

When Granger fully awoke and beheld the dungeon around her, she let out a hysterical scream and began to weep again. Her screams increased in pitch when Antonin laughed jeeringly and blew her a sarcastic kiss. “I have unfinished business with you Mudblood!” He called to general amusement. “So do some of my friends over here!” Dashiell Selwyn grabbed his crotch and Greyback leered, a horrid promise of what was to come later.

Bellatrix likewise, was taunting Neville Longbottom. “Dolohov’s not the only one!” She cackled. “I am going to take extra special care of you, Neville Longbottom, even more so than your charming parents!” Astoria had never seen Bellatrix look madder, her head was cocked to one side, she was covered in grazes from the recent battle and her eyes seemed to pop out of their sockets as she beheld her victim. Astoria expected Longbottom to break down, but his face flooded with angry colour and
he glared at Bellatrix defiantly. *He has more courage than I knew,* Astoria thought sadly, though most like, by the time the night was done he would be begging for the gift of mercy.

The insults directed at Longbottom and Granger were nothing to the abuse being hurled at Potter however. The Death Eaters screamed obscenities in his face and slapped him, jeering and laughing with triumph. Potter was hit countless times with the *Cruciatus* curse and Dashiell even went as far to conjure up roting fruits and vegetables to fly at him, yelling with delight as they exploded on impact, giving off a hideous smell. Blaise punched Potter in the jaw and Travers hawked up a gob of bloody green phlegm which he spat in his coal black hair, while Rowle sent various hexes at him so that he was covered in bruises and cuts. “That is enough!” Called the Dark Lord. “Enough, now.” And the noise dropped considerably, though there were still murmurs of excited chatter. The Dark Lord walked slowly over to Potter, wand raised. “*Diffindo!*” He screeched, and a deep slash opened upon Potter’s forehead, blood pouring from the wound. Nagini slithered around the captives, hissing softly at the scent of blood and the prospect of a fresh meal. “Now you have one more cut to go with the other, Potter.” The Dark Lord sneered. “Not that you shall live long enough to see it heal.” He finished, a twisted grin warping his inhuman features as more raucous laughter rang through the dungeons.

Potter was gasping and shaking, blood was running down into his eyes as he attempted to glare up into the Dark Lord’s delighted face. “Fuck you Riddle.” He slurred, his voice constricted with rage and agony, “I…Never…Will not…You…” He choked, barely getting his words out.

At this, the Dark Lord dealt him another bloody slash with his wand. “Accept it Potter, accept that I am your vanquisher and I may just make your death a quick one.” Several of the Death Eaters chuckled softly, but Potter began to struggle worse than ever, kicking and shouting. The Dark Lord hissed softly. “I see, so you have chosen the hard way.” Then with an abrupt change in his voice, he barked “Death Eaters! Do what you will with Potter’s little friends, let him watch while we slowly exterminate them from the face of the Earth!”

At once Antonin, his comrades and some of Yildriz’s men advanced upon the trembling form of Granger with roars of delight, the Dark Lord’s insane laughter ringing in the background. Jugson reached her first and began tearing off her garb, but Antonin shoved him away roughly, “Stand aside” he growled, “I have a score to settle with this little Mudblood.” He backhanded Granger four times so that her lip split, and blood poured out of her nose. As she sat there, dazed, he lifted her up by the hair and snarled in her ear “I am going to pay you back for that little trick you pulled on me at the Ministry all those years ago. Antonin Dolohov does not forget a thing you little whore, remember that.” He forced her down onto her hands and knees, yanked down her Muggle attire and shoved aside his robes to push himself up inside her. Judging by Granger’s scream of pain, he had taken her through her rear entrance. Astoria knew how painful that was.

Silas, who had also drawn out his member, was waggling it tauntingly in Granger’s face. “It is big isn’t it?” He sneered, attempting to shove it into her crying mouth. “Does the little Mudblood tart fancy a taste of Silas?” Many of the Death Eaters laughed as he rammed his length down her throat, panting with excitement. However, the laughter was quelled slightly as Silas gave a screech of pain,
pulled back, and punched Granger full in the face, grasping his member. “Teeth!” He screamed. “This filthy little Mudblood used her foul teeth on me!” Travers gave a snort of laughter, but Silas strode toward the racking table and seized a rusty knife, Antonin still plunging in and out of the girl all the while. With a wave of his wand, Silas caused the knife to glow red hot and began to advance upon Granger, a demonic glint in his mismatched eyes. He crouched down in front of her and began brandishing the knife in her face, evidently deciding where he should strike first. Then his face split into an awful smile. “Do you like my eye, Mudblood?” he asked in his cold, reedy voice, gesturing at his own disfigured face. Granger did not answer, tears spilled from her brown eyes as her body jerked from Antonin’s thrusting and she was biting her lip to keep herself from screaming in earnest. “No? Well, I think I shall give you one to match all the same!” He screeched. Quick as a flash, Silas grabbed her hair to steady her face, and dug the knife deep into the top of her left eyebrow. Granger let out an unearthly scream as Silas drew the blade across her eyelid and brought it further down to the top of her cheekbone, almost mirroring his own scar. Astoria could see Granger’s flesh smoking, and the smell brought the bile rushing up to the back of her throat, but she willed herself to look cold and composed. Silas cackled madly as he beheld his grisly work, and just for good measure he stuck the point of the knife into Granger’s eyeball, ripping it out of its socket. At this, Granger collapsed onto her elbows, half conscious and whimpering. “I don’t think so!” cried Silas shrilly, “Rennervate!”

As Granger was brought back to her senses with a sob, Antonin began to climax noisily inside her before finally pulling away, his member still dripping with seed. He got to his feet with a sigh of contentment and asked casually, “So, who wants to go next?”

Before anyone could answer, there was a shout. Potter had found his voice again. “No! No, please stop it!” There were tears streaming from his green eyes as he beheld his defiled, mutilated friend, his defiance vanishing at once. “Leave her alone, I’ll do whatever you want just please, no more!” Astoria glanced over at Longbottom and saw that he had fainted, though no one else seemed to have noticed.

At his words the Death Eaters laughed, and Josiah strolled over to where Potter was slumped on the stone floor, and with all the force he could muster, he stamped down hard on Potter’s ankle which gave a sickening crunch. “What could we possibly want from you? Do you take us for sodomites!” He roared over Potters howls of pain, grinding his foot down harder onto the broken bones. “The Dark Lord gave you the chance to save your precious slut, you filthy Half-Blood!” The Dark Lord himself casually flicked his wand at Potter, giving him another dose of the Cruciatius curse and his screams increased in pitch.

Meanwhile, Rabastan and his brother Rodolphus had taken control of Granger, the former in her mouth and the latter behind, just what Antonin and Silas had attempted to do so before. Granger did not offer up any resistance, Silas’s mutilation had clearly broken her. However, her meekness did not seem to amuse Rodolphus, who said angrily, “She is too quiet, I may as well fuck a corpse! Norton, bring me that knife!” Silas came hurrying over gleefully with the red hot knife, handing it to Rodolphus, who proceeded to turn the blade on its side, branding it hard onto Granger’s right buttock. This wrenched Granger back into reality, and she started to scream again as her flesh bubbled and seared under the flat of the blade. Rodolphus smirked and began to grind into Granger,
grunting and puffing in unison with his brother who worked himself in and out of her mouth.

Bellatrix, who had been watching the perverted display with an intense avid hunger, seemed to snap out of her reverie, and her crazed eyes fell upon the unconscious Neville Longbottom. “Ahh, such a shame that our little friend is missing out on all the fun!” She cried over the sounds of revelry and rape, striding towards Longbottom, wand raised. “I think it is time he joined us!... Crucio!”

Longbottom awoke with a scream. Bellatrix’s spell was so powerful that he was lifted off the ground and writhed in mid air. When she finally released the curse after a good five minutes, Longbottom fell to the ground with a crash, sobbing. Astoria saw that he had wet himself, something that was not missed by Hestia Carrow, who laughed cruelly. Bellatrix then let off several loud bangs with her wand, directing them at Longbottom as he shrieked in pain. “Some more?” She leered, “Or do you finally understand how foolish you were to challenge the Dark Lord, our one true ruler? You scummy little Blood Traitor.”

Longbottom’s breathing was ragged, and he was struggling to his knees, trying to speak. “Harry was right...one – one day, you are all going to pay.” He choked.

Bellatrix roared with laughter and hit Longbottom with the Cruciatus curse again, provoking more screams. “Pay? Pay, Longbottom?” I suggest you take a look at that dirty little Mudblood whore over there, she is the one who is paying for her crimes just now.” She jerked her head in the direction of Granger who was now being urinated on by Antonin, Theodore, Silas and several others as they chortled mockingly. “If you love Mudbloods so much then why don’t you…” Her voice trailed away as though she were contemplating something, then a singularly mirthless smile twisted her gaunt face. “Dracula!” She called, “Dracula, where are you!? I need you at once!”

Dracula appeared in the dungeon archway at once, one of his wives, Natalia, at his side as they both came gliding over to Bellatrix. “Ah, Madame Lestrange, this is looking most entertaining.” He announced, bowing low to the Dark Lord and Bellatrix in turn. “How may I be of service good lady?”

Bellatrix smiled unpleasantly, “I command you to procure some flesh from this soiled Mudblood, I refuse to touch her.” She said, gesturing at Granger. “And then, you are to feed it to this chubby little Blood Traitor! I daresay he shall be in need of sustenance. Cook it up crisp and make him eat it, every bite!” Her expression became more devilish when she finished, “And bite him too, if that is your pleasure.”

“No! No! Not Neville, NO!” Potter bawled as Natalia advanced on Longbottom, her fangs bared and her long fingernails outstretched. She knelt behind Longbottom and ran her fingers through his hair, sniffing his neck and sticking her grey tongue in his ear, all the while staring malevolently at Potter who yelled, “NO! He is no part of this! Take me instead, he has done nothing! Please!”
“Silence.” Sneered Bellatrix, as Dracula drew toward Granger, who had been dragged to her feet and shoved up against the grimy wall, and was now being raped by Lyle Nott from behind, who seemed to be half strangling her as he took his pleasure. Lyle released her reluctantly and Granger crumpled to the floor. Dracula knelt over the girl, bent his head over her form and ripped some flesh from her buttocks, the chunk of bloody skin and meat dangling from his mouth as he grinned maliciously. Granger did not even scream now, she merely gave a muffled moan of pain as the flesh parted from her body, her one remaining eye rolling back into her skull as she shifted onto her back, squirming weakly. Dracula stood, threw the flesh into the fire and just as quickly drew it out again, his pale dead skin unharmed from the flames. The smell reminded Astoria horribly of roast pork and she wondered if she would ever be able to stomach the dish again after this. “Yes! Yes!” Shrieked Bellatrix, jumping up and down on the spot like a demon as Dracula approached Neville. “Taste her dirty blood Longbottom!”

Dracula held out the sizzling human meat toward Longbottom who was struggling furiously, while Natalia held his head still with her long fingered hands. Longbottom vomited everywhere as the meat touched his lips and Astoria saw Elizabeth smirking as Dracula shoved it into his mouth. “Mudblood’s do not taste so good after all do they?” She asked tauntingly, her voice full of callous pleasure at the sight of Longbottom being force fed the flesh of one of his best friends, Bellatrix cackling madly all the while.

Then without warning, Natalia yanked back Longbottom’s head and plunged her fangs into his neck as Potter let out a yell of rage and anguish. Longbottom did not even have time to cry out. His eyes widened, and he drew in a terrible, whistling breath as Natalia’s fangs punctured his airway. Dracula laughed. “My wife, she is always being so eager.” He glanced in the direction of the Dark Lord and grinned. “All these wonderful gifts you have been bringing us have given her more of a taste for boys.” At his words, Natalia drew her fangs away from Longbottom’s neck and also smiled, her fangs were covered in dark blood as it began to dribble down her chin to drip onto her gown.

Surely this must be over soon, Astoria thought, they must have been down here for hours now. Potter’s body was a mutilated mess, Granger was whimpering as Greyback bit her all over, tearing off her left breast in the process, obscenely licking the bloody wound on her chest as she wept. Longbottom was now twitching and bleeding upon the floor, his skin becoming paler as the first stages of the Vampire transformation began to take effect. Then at last, the Dark Lord’s voice rang out cold and clear so that the Death Eaters ceased in their rape and torture. “Now!” He called, “Time to make an end!” His Lordship began to walk toward Potter and raised his wand slowly, his chest rising and falling rapidly, not quite keeping the tremble out of his deathly white hand. Potter looked blearily up at the Dark Lord, and to Astoria’s mingled shock and horror, he gave him a mocking smile through his severely cut and bleeding face. Undoubtedly, Potter was about to utter some contemptuous last words but- “Avada Kedavra!” The curse hit Potter directly in chest and he fell with a slight thud on the stone floor. There was silence for a moment, then came the jeering, the laughter, the gasps of disbelief and the stamping of feet. Potter was dead, dead at last; the Dark Lord’s dearest wish had finally been fulfilled. Astoria did not know what to feel other than pity and revulsion as she beheld Potter’s bloody remains upon the floor, even though she could not ever recall speaking to the boy. Astoria knew that he despised the Pure Blood aristocracy elite that she came from and all it stood for, and being a Slytherin she had naturally avoided him, but still, he did not deserve to die, especially not in this way. Astoria was brought back to her senses by the Dark Lord’s high cold voice cutting through the din again. “Dracula!” He called. “You may do as you please with
the Mudblood now that my Death Eaters have finished with her.” His Lordship waved a white hand
carelessly toward the battered Granger girl who was now attempting to crawl away, the blood
between her thighs already starting to dry. Dracula gave a nasty grin and advanced upon Granger
who began to cry feebly, mumbling words Astoria could not hear. “And you shall share the Blood
Traitor with Nagini, but Potter’s body is mine.” His Lordship continued, “There is a…purpose I
require it for, is that understood?” Dracula nodded and dragged Potter’s corpse to a long, rusty metal
drawer set into the wall before slamming it shut with a clang. Astoria turned away from the scene
with revulsion, wanting nothing more than to forget.

No sooner had Astoria and the Death Eaters taken their leave of the dungeons, there was a riotous
feast to celebrate Potter’s death. No one had bothered to change into dinner wear, they were all still
clad in their Death Eater robes and bore all the marks from the train ambush. Antonin still had the
blood of the werewolf, Lupin, spattered across his face, Avery seemed indifferent to a nasty gash
across his cheek, while the Selwyn twins were covered in hex marks and cuts. The drink was
flowing thick and fast and Astoria could barely hear the conversations around her through all the
raised voices and shrieks of laughter. She forced herself to smile and act as though she were happy
whenever she was addressed, all the while pondering the death of Potter and his friends. To be sure
the Granger girl had it the worst, the best that she could hope for was that Dracula would finish her
off quickly. It did not quite seem real, these people who once walked the same corridors and took the
same classes as her suffering such a fate. The Dark Lord then raised his goblet and screeched, “What
did I tell you Death Eaters!? Harry Potter is dead! He is DEAD! I have killed him at last! The Order
of the Phoenix is finished, and now there is nothing on Earth to stop us in our pursuit of the New
World!” There was an ear splitting roar of assent as all the Death Eaters raised their goblets in turn
and drank deeply.

The night sank into still more depravity when Astoria saw Bellatrix lean in toward Silas and whisper
something in his ear. Silas promptly gave a screech of delight and rushed off to return a short time
later with a stark naked Gabrielle, who was miraculously, still alive. Astoria was revolted to see that
Silas appeared to have donned Potter’s cracked and grimy glasses, cackling madly. He was also
accompanied by Jinky the House Elf who was carrying a silver covered platter. The sight filled
Astoria with disquiet. Indeed, Silas seized the platter from the House Elf and shouted at Gabrielle in
his shrill voice, “On your knees slave!” The girl resisted, but Silas drew his wand and forced her
downwards with a spell as tears leaked from her brilliant blue eyes. Then, he drew the lid off the
platter and Astoria had to take a deep sip of wine to mask her horror and disgust. There, on the silver
tray, was Potter’s decapitated head. His green eyes were blank and unseeing, blood congealed from
his neck, and his tongue was lolling out of his mouth and was beginning to turn blue. “Kiss it.”
Commanded Silas, trembling with savage triumph, “Come now, kiss your saviour, the chosen one.”
He sneered. Gabrielle began to scream as Silas capered around her like an imp, jerking the tray back
and forth in her face, shrieking with glee. The Dark Lord began to laugh, sending chills up Astoria’s
spine, his high, cold, humourless tone penetrating her very bones as many others began to join in…
how could anyone find this amusing?

Astoria was also very uncomfortable about the fact that Antonin would not stop fondling and kissing
her at the dinner table. “I cannot wait to get you in bed and fuck you my love.” He whispered,
planting kisses up her neck and nuzzling there, breathing hard, smelling of drink and dried blood.
However, they had not been dismissed by the Dark Lord, so they needs must stay put, thus Antonin
took his pleasure as best as he could while he waited. Undoubtedly all the rape and torture he had
participated in before had aroused him more than usual, Astoria thought, disgusted. Antonin’s salacious behaviour was not missed by Dracula, and she was filled with revulsion as she felt his eyes crawling over her as she was groped by her husband, sure that he was becoming aroused by the spectacle. Yaxley likewise was all over Elizabeth, with many male Death Eaters shooting them covert and envious looks, no doubt itching to get their hands on Minister Yildriz’s Muggle sex slaves.

The drinking had really started to get out of hand when Lyle Nott began to quarrel with McNair and the former launched himself across the table to get at McNair, goblets and platters smashing everywhere. “That will do!” Screeched the Dark Lord over the cacophony, and his tone was so threatening that all fell silent at once. Lyle stopped trying to grab McNair and slumped back down into his seat, looking fearful. “You have my permission to retire for the evening, and I expect you all to be assembled in the War Room six hours after break of day. Now that Potter is dead, I think it fitting that we move on to the second phase of my plan for France.” As everyone rose when the Dark Lord swept from the room there was much excited chatter among the Death Eaters, everyone eager at the prospect of phase two.

Astoria got a shock the next morn when she was led into the War Room by Antonin. The long table had been elongated to accommodate what looked to be around forty Vampires who were standing behind their chairs. They all bore a resemblance to Dracula; their skin was deathly white, and they were skeletally thin with dark shadows around their eyes. The Vampires were mainly male, but there were about a dozen females among them, and all ranged from young to old. When everyone was assembled, the Dark Lord addressed them all. “May I present some new comrades who have now joined our ranks. We have Count Dracula to thank for bringing them to the cause.” The Dark Lord nodded curtly at Dracula who was seated to his left as the Vampires in turn nodded solemnly in his direction. “They shall be aiding us in the second phase of my plan for France, which is to finally destroy that disgusting Mudblood Minister who has slighted me and the Dark Order countless times and opened the doors of France to his filthy thieving Mudblood allies, and I mean to make him answer for his actions. Not only that, but once he is disposed of, France will fall into my hands with no one to lead them.” There were murmurs of comprehension and excitement following his words. After several hours, the meeting concluded, and the Dark Lord finished in his high, cold voice “…One week hence at Fontainebleau. One week.”

As some of the Death Eaters drifted into a parlour, Astoria felt Antonin’s hands grasp her by the hips, and he jerked her onto his lap as he collapsed into an armchair, talking animatedly with Yaxley as they discussed the Mudblood Minister and the siege that was to come. Astoria barely heard them, she was pondering all that the Dark Lord had planned for the Mudblood Minister. If he was indeed currently hiding out in the Palace of Fontainebleau as the Dark Lord seemed to think, even with all his Ministry Protection, he did not stand a chance. Now, with the additional forces from Turkey, Dracula’s fellow Vampires, and Fenrir Greyback’s pack whom he had now recalled from all over Europe, they would now be close to four hundred strong, and his Lordship had given them free reign to do whatever they wished with their victims. Astoria shuddered inwardly at some of the things that had been discussed in the War Room, it had been more grisly and disturbing than anything she had ever heard in her life. His Lordship wanted to humiliate and debase the Minister for daring to speak out against him, and Astoria felt a twinge of pity for Minister Clement and, if they were with him, his family. She dreaded what fresh horrors she would have to witness if the siege were to be a success, the anguished screams of Potter and his friends still rang in her ears whenever she cast her mind back
to last night and she had barely slept due to nightmares. Well, she thought wearily, you had best get used to it, this is the way things are going to be now.

A week later at two hours to midnight, all the Death Eaters, Vampires and Werewolves were gathered in the throne room. There was total silence as they stared at the throne made from human skulls and bones, waiting for the Dark Lord to appear. Astoria glanced around covertly and saw that most looked excited, others apprehensive as the silence spiralled. She was also acutely aware of Silas fidgeting. He was standing to the other side of Antonin, twirling his wand in his hands and running his fingers through his hair, his chest rising and falling rapidly. Then there was a scraping noise, and as one, everyone’s eyes jerked upwards, all gazing intently at the stone wall to the right of the grisly throne. The wall was sliding open to reveal the Dark Lord standing there, still as a statue, the hood of his black robes drawn up over his head so that his pale white skin shone out of the dark fabric. He stepped out of the passageway and his scarlet, catlike eyes roved slowly over the room. When he spoke, his voice was quiet but clear, and Astoria could hear the anticipation beneath it. “You all know what to do. Anyone who fails me this night will pay the ultimate price. Now, let us go.” There were innumerable popping sounds as all the Death Eaters disapparated, some grasping the arms of their newfound Vampire comrades who obviously could not apparate of their own accord. A second later, they arrived on a deserted country lane lined by trees and hedges, the night was as black as pitch and Astoria saw two fancy placards on opposite sides of the road. Through the gloom, she could just about make out the words ‘Beinvenue a Fontainebleau’ on their surfaces. Then, Astoria felt that horribly familiar chill coming over her, she looked over her shoulder and sure enough, a huge hoard of Dementors were gliding toward them, they were so black that they seemed to stand out against the night sky. She shivered and felt cold sweat running down her face beneath her mask, surreptitiously rubbing the back of her neck and shifting uncomfortably on the spot. As the Dementors swirled and twisted above them, the Dark Lord addressed Dracula. “You shall accompany the Dementors to suppress any Ministry protection as we discussed. Any magical perimeters will not be effective on your kind, so you may enter freely. Bite as many as you have a care for, the more the better.” His Lordship's high cold voice echoed strangely in the night air. Dracula bowed low and as one, he and his minions rose up into the air and glided toward the town alongside the Dementors, their cloaks streaming out behind them. The Dark Lord then wheeled around and began to stride up the road toward the town, Astoria and the Death Eaters following suit.

Around ten minutes later they arrived in the town of Fontainebleau. Like the road, all was dark and silent. Fontainebleau was small, most of the houses seemed to be made from pale stone and were lined up next to one another, and apart from the main boulevard, the streets were narrow and branched off in complicated directions. The Dark Lord stopped by some queer lights that were intermittently changing from green, to amber, to red, his back to them all. He waved his wand in a figure of eight movement and acrid grey smoke burst from it which began to seep everywhere, travelling under the doors of houses and the Muggle shops. Astoria could faintly hear the doorways being sealed, ensuring that no one could break out and put up a fight. She recalled how the Dark Lord had gleefully told them that the spell was likely to kill children first, such was its toxicity and power. How many parents would wake up to find their lifeless children in bed, only to find themselves imprisoned in their own homes, unable to escape while attempting to find aid? Astoria shuddered and walked through the cobbled main street, imitating her fellow Death Eaters as they extinguished the street lights, plunging the town into further darkness. They walked until they came to a wide avenue lined by trees, which grew sparser in numbers until they were looking up at black iron gates, at least fifty feet tall, their grand gold carvings glinting faintly in the dim moonlight. As one, the Death Eaters raised their wands and all but whispered, “Patentibus” and the gates silently swung open. The gravel crunched beneath their many feet as they made their way toward one of the
largest and grandest palaces Astoria had ever seen. It seemed to sprawl on forever and towered above the gardens in the courtyard, its many turrets and chimneys piercing the night sky. The palace was Muggle built, Astoria knew, and she was shocked and surprised that they were capable of building such grand structures. Her brief awe at the majesty of the palace was immediately eclipsed when they came across the first casualty of the impending siege. A wizard had been impaled upon a garden statue, his throat had been completely ripped out and what looked like his heart was congealing on the gravel in a pool of blood. The rivers of blood running down the statue looked black as they oozed down the pale stone, his eyes stared unseeing toward the night sky, and his wand was lying uselessly a few feet away upon the ground. The Dark Lord ignored the body and continued his purposeful stride across the courtyard, though Astoria heard someone, Hestia perhaps, chuckle softly at the sight of the dead wizard. Astoria was feeling cold again and automatically jerked her head up toward the sky. Sure enough, the Dementors and Vampires were gliding over and around the palace, encircling it in darkness and death.

At last, they arrived at the palace which loomed over them imperiously, as though daring them to attack. There was a large set of stone steps which led up to the main doors of the palace in the shape of a horseshoe. Silently, the Death Eaters split and made their way up either side of the many steps, though no one dared to reach the top before his Lordship, who had made his way up the left side. When he reached the top of the steps, the Dark Lord threw back his hood as he stood in front of the double oaken doors, and stared at them for a dozen heartbeats or so. The tension in the air was so intense that it could have been cut with a knife, every eye was upon the back of Dark Lord’s chalk white, hairless head. Then slowly, very slowly, the Dark Lord raised his wand and pointed it straight at the doors, which were promptly blasted open. At once, Astoria went surging into the palace with the other Death Eaters, some ran up the left of the long entrance hall, others to the right. The smell of burned wood hung in the air as the smouldering, groaning doors hung off their hinges. Many Death Eaters were shouting, wands raised as various groups split and charged down the numerous corridors which branched off the hall. The Dark Lord was screaming out instructions to them all over the explosion of sound, though his main refrain was “The Minister! Find me that Mudblood Minister!”

Astoria headed for the East side of the palace, and as her rapid footsteps echoed on the marble, she fleetingly thought that this was one of the most sumptuous palaces she had ever set foot in. Even in the dim candlelight, she could tell that there was not one surface that was not richly decorated in velvet, gold or some other grand material. Portraits, tapestries and statues covered the walls and the ceilings were high and cavernous. Astoria carried on running and was followed by Drisella, Elizabeth, Adelaide and the Zabini brothers as they came skidding into another hallway with a grand marble staircase set to the right. “The stairs!” Cried Josiah, “His Lordship says we are to bring any residents we find up there! Do not slay any of the family unless it is completely necessary, but you may do away with any aurors.”

They dashed up at least one hundred stairs, and everyone was breathing hard when they reached a large landing that branched out in four different directions. Josiah and Blaise sped down one, Drisella and Elizabeth down another, while Astoria and Adelaide went down their corridors alone. “Homenum Revelio.” Astoria muttered as she strode down the passageway, and a door about twenty feet ahead of her flew open. As she began to make for the door however, a wizard jumped out at her, sending a killing curse that barely missed her shoulder by an inch. Astoria leapt aside just in time and the spell hit an urn set into an alcove in the wall which blew apart, china flying everywhere, and she felt one of the shards fly into the small of her back. She stifled a scream of pain and responded with
an impediment jinx, but the wizard deflected it, ripping through the silk wallpaper and setting it ablaze, the flames slowly licking up the wall. Astoria began to sweat from the heat of the fire as she began to duel the wizard, forcing him further and further up the corridor until they came to another landing. Then in the distance there was a loud crash and a scream, causing the wizard to look over his shoulder. Astoria did not hesitate, she moved her wand in an upward arc and the wizard was thrown across the landing and down the stairs, where he landed with an audible ‘smack.’ When Astoria peered over the golden bannister, she saw that there were fragments of the wizard’s skull everywhere and blood was slowly pooling from the back of his head, his limbs sticking out at odd angles. She leaned on the bannister, panting slightly as she heard more fights breaking out in other parts of the palace. Astoria tore off her mask, flung it aside and buried her face in her hands, breathing raggedly. She dragged herself upright and made her way back to the corridor, which she was mortified to see was half ablaze now. She hastily put out the flames and turned toward the room whose door was open to what was evidently a child’s bedchamber. It was delicately decorated in pale blue and there were many toys littered upon the bed, but there was no child to be seen.

However, the pull of the spell that she had cast before drew her toward a white antique wardrobe. Astoria took a deep breath, grasped both of the handles and pulled open the doors. There, crouched on the floor with his knees huddled up to his chest and shaking in terror, was a small boy, no more than four years, dressed in a nightshirt. He had brown curly hair and his blue eyes were full of tears. Astoria crouched down in order to be at his level and asked softly “What is your name?” But the boy shrank away, shaking, too frightened to even sob in earnest.

Astoria held out her hand and gave him a small smile. He looked at her, his eyes fearful and unsure. Merlin knew what this child had been through thus far. Then, after a moment, the boy squeaked in a small French accent, “Pierre.”

“Hello Pierre, my name is Astoria, will you not come out here with me? There are a few problems in the palace just now and I have been sent to come and get you. I know your Mother, Justine, wants to see you very much, she is worried.” She held out her hand even closer to the boy and slowly, tremulously, he put his small hand in her own. Undoubtedly her knowledge of his Mother’s name had resolved him to trust her. Of course he trusts you Astoria thought bitterly, children trust women. Pierre looked up at her after he had clambered out of the wardrobe, his innocent eyes desperate for reassurance. Astoria made a decision then, she would not throw this child to the wolves, she could not save him, but she could at least give him mercy. Mercy. She took a deep breath and asked, “Tell me Pierre, which is your favourite toy?”

“Argent.” Pierre said timidly, pointing toward a silvery stuffed toy in the likeness of a Hippogriff. The charm on the toy was making it blink and breathe slowly to make it seem more lifelike.

“Well why don’t you show me Argent while we wait for your Mother? And – and, will you take some honeyed milk?” Astoria asked, trying to keep the break out of her voice. He nodded shyly, and she sat on the side of the bed, gesturing for the boy to do the same. Pierre seemed to be more at ease and began to talk to her a little more. As he did so, Astoria conjured up a crystal bottle filled with warm, soothing milk and handed it to him. “Quick now, drink it before it gets cold.” She whispered, and the boy obeyed. Within a few seconds, Pierre’s eyelids began to droop, and his head nodded against her. Astoria put an arm around him and stroked his hair, humming softly and willing herself
not to cry. The Basilisk venom that she had laced the milk with would end the boy’s life in minutes, sparing him the pain and terror of watching his family being murdered, or else being brutalised by the Death Eaters and Dracula. When Pierre lay lifeless on the bed, one small hand still grasped around his Hippogriff toy, Astoria hastily wiped away a tear and set a hover charm upon his body. Child killer. Murderer. She thought, filled with self loathing.

Astoria made her way through the extravagant corridors of Fontainebleau, Pierre’s body drifting hauntingly before her as she tried to find a staircase. At last when she came onto a landing, she saw Josiah Zabini dragging a screaming witch and a small girl by the hair before flinging them roughly onto the rich carpet. Like Pierre, they were both in their nightclothes. “Aurors give you trouble?” Josiah asked her gruffly, aiming a kick at the witch who would not stop weeping and paying absolutely no mind to the dead child floating in front of him. Before Astoria could answer, Blaise appeared with another young boy who he had by the scruff of the neck. Josiah then looked round at his brother and said, “Right, we need to get this lot downstairs.”

As they approached the main salon, Astoria heard the faint sounds of the Dark Lord’s high cold voice, though she could not make out his words. Flickering orange light danced underneath the doorframe which indicated a roaring fire in the hearth. Astoria inwardly steeled herself as the doors swung open to reveal the room within. She had been expecting more cavernous ceilings, but no. Though the room was vast, the gold panelled beams only reached about fifteen feet upwards above them. The lower ceilings with the dimmed chandeliers only served to make the atmosphere even more ominous and threatening. Death Eaters and a few Vampires crowded the room, furniture that had been broken in the struggle had been carelessly thrust aside to make room for the Dark Lord who was standing over his captives, who were lined up in front of the fireplace on their knees. They all wore the same, terrified expression, but Astoria only recognised one of them. There, kneeling at the Dark Lord’s feet, was none other than Gustave Clement, the Mudblood Minister.

Chapter End Notes

I really hated doing this to Harry and his friends, but I thought that it was more realistic for Lord V and his Death Eaters to catch them seeing as they are so powerful now. If they escaped then it would have just been dull, it would just be a repeat of a la Beauxbatons/Kingsley Shacklebolt. I decided to name this chapter 'Mercy' as I thought it was a good contrast in respect of how unmerciful the Death Eaters are to HP in the first half of the chapter, compared to the mercy shown by Astoria to Pierre Clement in the latter half, which I feel is the truest nature of her character.

For anyone who's interested, the Palace of Fontainebleau is a real place in France and very beautiful: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palace_of_Fontainebleau
XXII. - The Mudblood Minister

Chapter Summary

This chapter really only has one focus, and it's Voldemort's revenge/destruction of his political enemies. I briefly touched upon what he did to the Muggle Prime Minister in chapter 7, but this goes into far more detail. Personally, I think this is one of the most brutal chapters in the story so far and it has been the hardest to write. All will be explained in the end of chapter notes. This is also a long one. (7k words)

Warning: Very graphic material.
Same disclaimer applies.

*Edit* - Next chapter is written but it needs tweaking here and there. I will most like post it tomorrow as I've been so busy over the Christmas period and I haven't been able to write at my usual pace.
Hope everyone enjoys the Holidays!
S x

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Minister Gustave Clément was a wizard in his early fifties with brown hair and blue eyes, just like Pierre’s. If he did not look so horror stricken and frightened, then he might have been good looking. The Minister had not grown to fat as was common for men his age, he was fit and slender like a man of thirty years or so. There was a woman to his right, weeping hysterically and clutching a baby boy, and to his left there were two elderly people, a man and a woman, quivering with fright. If these were his parents, Astoria thought, then they were Muggles, and would most like be subjected to the worst treatment out of all of them this night.

Astoria waited near the door, seeing as her own victim was dead. Josiah and Blaise however, strode in front of her, dragging their weeping captives further into the salon and throwing them at the Dark Lord’s feet. “On your knees for the Dark Lord!” Blaise barked at them, as they lay in a crumpled heap upon the floor, stirring feebly. “My Lord, I believe this is the Mudblood Minister’s sister and her brat.” Blaise announced over the cries of distress. “And the boy is his eldest son.” He finished, waving a slender hand at the boy he had dragged in.

The witch whimpered as she looked up into the Dark Lord’s face, and she turned her own tear streaked face to Minister Clément. “Brother! Oh brother! How? What .”

But his Lordship cut her off. “How dare you speak without Lord Voldemort’s leave, you vile little cockroach!” He screamed, pointing his wand at her left arm so that the bones within gave an audible ‘snap.’ The witch shrieked in pain and clutched at her arm, while her daughter buried her face into her chest, utterly terrified. The boy who had been hauled in by Blaise had drawn his knees up to his
chest and was hiding his face, rocking backwards and forwards upon the spot. He could not have been more than ten.

Astoria looked away from this nauseating sight and was able to take in the salon properly now. With the captives that the Zabini brothers had brought, there were now eight prisoners in front of his Lordship. Nagini was coiled around a golden statue, tasting the fear in the air with her long black tongue and hissing softly. The Death Eaters were spread across the vast room in groups, looking eager and exchanging excited whispers, while the Vampires stuck together, all still as statues, their hungry yellow eyes fixed on Clément and his family. The Dark Lord directed his wand at the three new arrivals and at once, they mirrored the positions of the Minister and, Astoria suspected, his wife and parents. They were bound by enchantments so that they were on their knees, their backs slightly bent as though bowing to the Dark Lord.

The Dark Lord turned away from his victims and smiled at the sight of the dead boy hovering in front of Astoria. “Something went amiss I take it, Madam Dolohov?” He asked callously. Before Astoria could answer, the witch who was next to Minister looked up. Blaise and Josiah had stridden away to stand by the wall, so the witch had a clear view of Astoria and the dead boy. At the sight of Pierre’s body, she let out a long, drawn out scream of anguish, and Astoria’s suspicions about the witch’s identity were confirmed. This must be Pierre’s Mother, Justine. She thought, despairingly, for only a Mother could make such a sound of pain and misery at the sight of her dead child. The baby she was holding began to squall and she frantically rocked it back and forth in her arms as tears splashed down her face, shaking with grief. “Silence” sneered the Dark Lord, directing a virulent jinx at the witch, knocking her backward and she hit her head, hard, on the edge of the marble fireplace, sobbing uncontrollably and enclosing the child in her arms to prevent it coming to any harm as the baby continued to scream.

Astoria averted her eyes and addressed the Dark Lord, praying that he was not employing Legilimency against her. “Yes, my Lord.” She lied, closing her mind to the thoughts that may betray her. “I was duelling an auror and the boy was caught up in the struggle. He tried to run.” Astoria did her best to keep her voice cold and unconcerned, and she released the hover charm on Pierre’s body so that he fell to the ground with a thud, provoking more screams from his Mother. Astoria’s story seemed to satisfy the Dark Lord, for he looked down at Minister Clément, who had also begun to weep weakly, and his lipless mouth twisted into a taught leer.

“I would save those tears, Mudblood.” His Lordship grinned, his voice full of vicious pleasure. “This is only the beginning my dear Minister, we have hours ahead of us, and by the time my Death Eaters and I are finished with you and your filthy family, you shall be weeping tears of blood! You deluded imbecile!” The children began to cry even harder, and Justine and the Minister’s sister struggled to try and comfort them, but his Lordships spell kept them confined to the floor, so they did the best they could and whispered to them in rapid French, trying to quieten them.

Then suddenly, the doors to the salon crashed open, and Antonin and Rowle burst in, dragging two young witches in behind them. One, a girl of sixteen years or so, looked as though she were Pierre’s sister, the other… Astoria had to do a double take – Fleur Delacour, elder sister to Gabrielle who
was currently being held captive at Dracula’s castle as Silas’s plaything. Fleur was dressed in the signature green, Ministry of France robes, and Astoria was fleetingly surprised that the vain, haughty witch had chosen such a career. Fleur and the younger girl were struggling, but Antonin and Rowle held them firm with no need of magic, they were both immensely strong after all. When the younger girl’s eyes fell upon Pierre’s body, she began to scream hysterically. “Non! Non!” she wailed in French, tears leaking from her blue eyes. “Ma petit Pierre!” She abruptly switched back to English as she screamed to the room at large “You have killed him! WHY!? He was just a little boy!”

“Ah, what do we have here?” The Dark Lord called in his high cold voice, ignoring the girl’s outburst and addressing Antonin and Rowle.

Antonin grinned. “These are the last of them, my Lord.” He shook the Minister’s daughter roughly as she began to grapple even more furiously from his cruel grasp. “This one is the daughter, I believe.” Antonin glanced down at the lifeless Pierre upon the floor and smirked up at Astoria. “Nice work finishing off that dirty little sprog wife.”

“YOU! You killed him!?” Screamed the girl, “How - how could you, what sort of witch kills a child!? Tu es un MONSTRE!” And she made to lunge at Astoria, but Antonin yanked her backwards and twisted her wrist around until she screamed in pain.

“How dare you presume to speak to her, you grotty little whore!” He roared, shaking her even harder as she cried. “Wife! Give her a taste of my displeasure!”

Astoria started, her heart was filled with dread. It is either her, or you. You have no choice. She took a deep breath, summoned up all the magic she had within her and shouted, “Crucio!” The girl went rigid and screamed. Then she fell to the ground, her whole body shuddering, twitching and jerking so violently that she was covered in carpet burns in no time, her family yelling incoherently with fright and misery. After a minute or so, Astoria released the spell and she heard Antonin’s voice come from behind her. It was hoarse with arousal.

“Yes! Oh yes! That was magnificent my love, do it again!” Astoria glanced at him. The firelight was dancing in his cold blue eyes which were alight with excitement, he was moistening his lips with his tongue and fondling his crotch. She gave Antonin what she hoped was a suggestive smile and raised her wand once again.

“NO!” Begged the Minister and his wife.

But Astoria blocked them out, ground her teeth and hit the girl with the curse over and over again until she was stopped from doing so when Antonin grabbed her, causing her aim to go awry. He
drew her body to his and kissed her aggressively, making noises of pleasure in his throat as the surrounding male Death Eaters whistled lasciviously. “That was most stirring, my love.” He whispered breathlessly in her ear when they broke apart. "I am so hard that it hurts." Antonin then wheeled around seized the girl, dragging her to her feet. She was sniffling, tears were coursing down her cheeks, and she could barely stand up under her own power so that Antonin had to coil a muscular arm under her breasts to keep her from falling, a sadistic grin plastered upon his face.

Justine wailed even harder as she beheld her weeping, tortured daughter in Antonin’s clutches. “Lourdes! Oh Lourdes, my baby girl! Leave her be, you bâtard! Get your hands off her!” Antonin did not answer, but gave the witch a wink and an evil smile full of promise, and continued to address his Master, breathless and panting.

“As I was saying my Lord, when we attempted to lay hands on this one, she interfered.” He went on contemptuously, jerking his head in the direction of Fleur, who had stopped trying to free herself from Rowle and was now shaking with terror. “Yes,” He sneered, “She put up quite up a fight, but Rowle was loath to kill her. He thought that we might have a little fun with this exotic half breed before throwing her into Dracula’s dungeons with that sluttish sister of hers, if you will it of course.”

“Certainly, if that is your wish. Do what you will with her.” The Dark Lord replied in his high cold voice; he had surveyed the entire scene with a horrible sort of gratified mirth upon his snake like face.

Rowle chuckled and leered at Fleur. “I do like a feisty witch. There’s nothing more satisfying than hauling a slut into to bed to tame the wildness within her when she forgets her place.”

There was a ripple of laughter and Fleur went as pale as a ghost, her face full of blind panic. Silas strode up to Fleur and gave her a nasty smile that warped his disfigured face. “I enjoy your little sister almost every day! Did you not ever wonder what became of her?” He screeched at Fleur, his voice shaking with malicious pleasure. “She has a lovely tight cunt, but she’s a crier, especially when I decide to pass her around, you should hear the way she screams when I -” but Silas’s grotesque speech was cut off, for Fleur let out a shriek of fury and spat in his face, attempting to scratch him with her free hand, screaming French profanities. Silas took a step back and laughed, wiping the spittle off his cheek and flicking it away.

“Are you really going to take that Norton?” Called Jugson lazily, speaking for the first time. He was leaning against the wall with his arms folded, watching the scene with amused derision.

“Certainly not!” Cried Silas in his petulant voice, and he stepped towards Fleur once again and hit her hard across the face, the smack of knuckles on flesh reverberating around the room. Fleur stifled a scream and shrank back from Silas’s fury, but Rowle shoved her back toward him. Though Silas was shorter than Fleur, he was still a young wizard in his prime with a lean hard, body and far
stronger than she. He seized her other arm and threw her to the floor, cackling maliciously as she fell face first onto the rug. “Sectumsempra!” He screeched, violently slashing his wand through the air. At once, the back of Fleur’s robes were ripped open to reveal deep gashes from her shoulders down to her backside as blood spurted all over the patterned rug. Lourdes screamed in horror at the sight, Fleur howled in agony and began to thrash about on the floor as Silas whooped with delight. “You think you have felt pain thus far? That was just a taster!” Still grinning, Silas waved his wand, causing the candles in one of the chandeliers to soar out of their stems. They flew across the room, hovering above Fleur’s heavily bleeding form. “Candles are so romantic are they not?” Silas jeered to general laughter. “Let us see how well you like them, my lady.” And with another small flick of his wand, Silas caused the candles to tip, causing the molten hot wax within to fill the wounds on Fleur’s back. Astoria did not think it possible that anyone could make such a noise as Fleur did then, it almost eradicated the screams and wails of all the other poor tormented souls in the room. She convulsed violently upon the floor, shaking all over with spittle leaking out of her mouth, it looked as though she were having some sort of fit. Then she gave a great gasp, and vomited everywhere. Silas stepped back in disgust, wrinkling his nose at the acidic smell now permeating the air. “Clean yourself up.” He said, his reedy voice as cold as ice. He waved his wand and the vomit vanished, though Fleur was still twitching uncontrollably, her blue eyes rolling in their sockets. Silas kicked her onto her back and knelt, straddling her, and for a moment Astoria thought he was going to rape her, but no. He grabbed two fistfuls of her silvery hair and slammed Fleur’s head repeatedly into the floor, screaming obscene insults at her. “Pick a number! Silas screeched at her after a good five minutes of the abuse. “Go on, pick a number!” Fleur merely let out a gargled moan of pain in answer. “Have it your way!” Silas looked up to address the surrounding Death Eaters. “Boys! I need two of you to pick a number!”

“Two!” Called Jugson, chortling.

“Five!” Roared Avery from the other side of the room.

“Very well then!” Silas cried as he cleared his throat and began to sing, directing his wand between Jugson and Avery. “Eenie meenie miney mo, chop a Mudblood by her toes, if she bleeds then let her go, eenie meenie miney mo!” His wand landed on Jugson, and he smiled unpleasantly down at Fleur. “Right, that is five!” Silas then pointed his wand at Fleur’s right hand and jabbed at her index finger with his wand. “One!” At once, Fleur’s fingernail was ripped from her, and she let out a scream of pain. “Save those screams bitch, we still have four more to go!... Two!” Silas went on in this fashion until all the tips of Fleur’s right fingers were in bloody ruins. He started to slap and scratch her face but Rowle forestalled him.

“Enough Norton! Leave her face, I want her pretty!” He called, though there was faint amusement in his voice. Silas merely shrugged and got to his feet, kicking Fleur in the shoulder as she began to weep uncontrollably, which increased in pitch as Rowle grabbed her by the ankles and proceeded to drag her to the back of the salon which was steeped in gloom. “I like a bit of privacy” He grinned at Silas, who cackled as Fleur struggled feebly.

“Fleur! Non! Non, ma Cherie!” Lourdes screamed, beside herself with anguish as Fleur was hauled
“The people of France will not stand for this, Voldemort!” Minister Clément bellowed up at the Dark Lord over Fleur’s sobs from the back of the room as Rowle took his pleasure. He looked utterly horrified. Several of the Death Eaters let out low hisses, and others roared in outrage. “Do you hear me? No matter what you do, no matter who you maim and kill, Harry Potter, the chosen one, will vanquish you and your vile Death Eaters, I know it! He has more friends than you realise, Voldemort! Just you wait!”

At his last words there was an explosion of scornful laughter, many of the Death Eaters exchanged gleeful looks and leered at the Minister, their faces full of sadistic triumph. “Harry Potter is dead, you witless fool!” The Dark Lord proclaimed over the outpouring of mirth. “I killed him one week ago, he died a craven and begged me for mercy!” The Minister looked as though he had been struck in the face and began to shake his head, not wanting to believe his Lordship’s words. But the Dark Lord ignored him and went on ruthlessly, “And how dare you utter my name, Mudblood! This requires punishment. I command that your slovenly brat -“ He jerked his head in the direction of Lourdes, “Shall be the mount of any male who wishes to claim her within this room.” There were cheers and whistles at his Lordships words, and Astoria felt nauseous. She cast a glance at the Minister and saw the little colour left in his face drain away. He looked shocked, stunned, desolate… unable to utter a word as his daughter began to scream, his resistance seemingly broken.

The Dark Lord nodded at Antonin. With a shout of delight, Antonin tore Lourdes’s thin nightgown from her body, leaving her naked for all the room to see. There was much whooping and salacious comments from the surrounding Death Eaters, while her family by contrast, wept and begged. Lourdes was struggling madly again, but Antonin dealt her a vicious blow on her right temple, and she stumbled, clutching the spot where he had hit her and almost fell. “Time to make this one a woman!” He shouted, digging iron fingers into her delicate arm to keep her from toppling over.

Minister Clément seemed to come out of his blind horror and was now fighting tooth and nail to free himself from the Dark Lord’s spell. “No! No!” He sobbed. “Mercy my Lord, Mercy! She is my daughter! Do what you will with me, but please, spare my Lourdes!” But the Dark Lord only laughed and hit him with the Cruciatius curse. Clément screamed, his back arched and his limbs twisted in grotesque shapes. His teeth were chattering so badly that he bit off a piece of his tongue, so that blood bubbled from his mouth.

Clément was drenched in sweat and taking in huge gulps of air when the Dark Lord released the spell. “Now, watch.” His Lordship hissed, and just for good measure, he pointed his wand at the Clément family, even the children, forcing their heads around so they were looking right at Lourdes, who was still naked and sobbing as Antonin circled her like a hungry wolf. When he groped at her breast, the girl let out a terrified shriek and wet herself, her whole body shaking with terror. Antonin gave a soft chuckle, and without warning, he gave her a stinging slap on the backside to renewed screams of pain and the jeering of the other Death Eaters as they urged him on. He continued to circle her, pinching and poking at her body, making lewd comments and discussing her openly with his comrades.
Antonin then smirked directly at the Minister as he pointed his wand at Lourdes, who was forced onto her hands and knees, now hysterical. Naturally he took the girl from behind, as was his wont with captives; not as a man takes a woman, but how a dog takes a bitch, Astoria thought, revolted. He gave an exaggerated groan as he pushed himself inside her, all the while gazing into the Minister’s face, his face alive with savage pleasure as Lourdes gave a squeal of pain. Justine shrieked and begged for him to stop, but Antonin merely grasped the girl under the chin, forcing her face and body upwards as he raped her, so that she was looking straight into the eyes of her mortified family. It seemed to Astoria that Antonin was trying not to laugh between his grunts as he brutally shoved himself in and out of Lourdes. “Maman!” Lourdes cried, “Maman, it hurts! Make him stop! Papa! Auntie Chloe! HELP ME!”

“Be quiet!” Antonin snarled in her ear as he began to increase the pace of his thrusting. “I am rather enjoying your little daughter Minister” He sneered breathlessly, as Clément dissolved in misery. Out of every heinous thing Astoria had seen thus far, this had to be one of the worst. She could not imagine what it would be like to have her own child defiled like this in front of her, helpless to do anything to stop it or make the pain go away. This is another kind of torture, she thought, worse than any curse. Antonin suddenly gave a strangled moan, he released the girl and she landed on the floor with a smack. He roughly turned her onto her back and knelt over her, where he promptly spilled his seed all over her face, his breathing ragged and a chortle escaping his lips. The elderly man, who had been crying silently with the old woman, burst out angrily in French at Antonin, his face contorted with rage and pain. Though Antonin could not understand his words, he seemed to get the general gist. Wordlessly, he pointed his wand at the old man, whose shouts turned into screams as his left hand was severed from his arm, blood fountaining from the ruined stump of mangled flesh and bone as the Clément family shrieked in terror. Amycus had now forced himself upon Lourdes, who was now shrieking uncontrollably at the top of her lungs. She struggled fruitlessly to escape the crushing weight of his foul, pudgy flesh as Amycus let out obscene, pig like wheezes, roughly slamming himself into her womanly entrance.

Antonin began to laugh cruelly, glorying in the family’s despair and Lourdes’ renewed torment. He carried on laughing until there were the sounds of running footsteps on the polished wood from the adjoining chamber. Bellatrix Lestrange came racing through the doorway at the head of a pack of Werewolves and the rest of the Vampires. She was flanked by Greyback and Dracula, who were covered in blood. She made straight for the Dark Lord and flung herself at his feet, panting excitedly and taking a handful of his robes, kissing them with fervour. “My Lord!” She gasped, gazing up at him slavishly. “My Lord, it is done! We have slain all the remaining aurors within the palace and its grounds, just as you commanded my Lord!”

The Dark Lord looked down at her, a triumphant expression upon his serpentine face. “Very good, Bella. Lord Voldemort is satisfied. You may rise.”

Bellatrix leapt to her feet, her dark eyes filled with tears of joy. “My Lord knows I am at his unequivocal service!” She gushed, breathlessly. The rapturous expression on her face died as soon as she laid eyes upon the Clément family, who had watched the whole exchange with bewildered and horrified expressions upon their tear stained faces. The old man was now half conscious from his
severed hand, but he was unable to collapse in earnest due to the Dark Lord’s spell. “So” Bellatrix leered, advancing upon the quaking family, looking utterly mad with her wand raised as red sparks shot from the tip. “What do we have here?” Her insane gaze roved over the terrified captives and it fell, not on the Minister, but upon the elderly couple next to him. “These are the Muggles are they not?” Bellatrix did not wait for an answer, and was now towering over the stooped old man and the cowering old woman. “You are nothing but filth!” She suddenly screamed. “This is only the beginning! By the time we have finished with your rotten kind, there shall be bodies piled up to the sky!” Bellatrix’s wand slashed through the air, and she began to torture the two old Muggles for what seemed like an age. She finished this horrendous display by seizing an ornate bayonet that had been mounted on the wall, and plunging it into the old Muggle woman’s stomach, cackling madly. The elderly woman gave a strangled yell and blood began to leak from her mouth as Bellatrix twisted the blade cruelly. When she drew it out, the woman’s entrails gushed out onto the floor. The smell was almost unendurable as she fell forward with a sickening squelch, dead.

“Maman!” The Minster wailed in anguish as he beheld the dead woman “Oh, Maman!” Though he was a grown man, Astoria thought that he sounded no different than his terrified children.

“Be quiet, MUDBLOOD!” Shrieked Bellatrix, who had flown into a crazed, almost rabid sort of state, her gaunt face filled with fanatical malice, her head rolling sideways onto her neck. She dealt the Minister a slash across his chest with the sharp end of the bayonet and began to beat him all over with the musket, howling incoherent insults. The Dark Lord came up behind her and hissed at Nagini, who uncoiled herself from the statue she had been perched upon, and began to wrap herself around the old man. She crushed the life out of him as he wheezed and choked, gasping for breath, and Astoria heard the unmistakable sounds of his ribcage puncturing his lungs.

The night only became more brutal as it dragged on, and Astoria had been dreading what would happen when her fellow Death Eaters turned their cruelty upon the children. Indeed, Yaxley paved the way for the unspeakable acts. The baby boy in Justine’s arms began to wail again at all the noise as the family howled at the sight of their dead elders at Bellatrix’s feet. “I grow tired of that screaming whelp!” Yaxley roared from across the room, “Time to dispose of that scummy little Mudblood urchin!” He then strode up to the screaming Justine and her infant, ripped the baby from her arms and threw him into the fireplace. The sound that the boy made as his little body made contact with the flames was unlike any Astoria had ever heard, the child’s scream seemed to tear through her like a razor sharp blade… the noises did not even sound human. She thought of her own son then, and wanted to break down and weep, heartbroken at this senseless suffering of an innocent child. Hestia however, laughed derisively as Justine began to shriek incoherently along with her burning child, maddened by this monstrosity. “Mudblood filth!” Hestia called jeeringly, as the baby’s screams subsided, the smell of burning flesh befouling the salon as his body congealed in the fire.

Minister Clément began to roar in rage and anguish, but Justine had suddenly stopped screaming. Something had died in her eyes. Astoria could see it, even though she was a good ten feet away. Justine’s shoulders slumped, and she began to shake violently and mutter to herself, her eyes rolling in all directions, before finally fainting. Astoria felt certain that she had lost her mind.

The Death Eaters were jeering and shouting insults at the Minster as he cried in despair, the Dark Lord was circling him and his unconscious wife, screeching at them at the top of his voice. Astoria
could not make out most of his words, but she caught a few. “You see! You see, you vile Mudblood! I am all powerful, you honestly thought that you could challenge me!? ME!?” He screamed over the tumult. “Lord Voldemort, the greatest sorcerer in the world, be cowed by the likes of YOU!?... CRUCIO!” Astoria barely heard the Minister’s yells as the Dark Lord mercilessly hit him with the curse over and over again, laughing as he writhed upon the floor, screaming and crying. When his Lordship grew tired of the sport, he turned to the room and announced, “Death Eaters! I give you full reign to do as you wish with these creatures!” And the Dark Lord lifted his spell on all the family, excepting the Minister, forcing him to watch on. They all fell into a crumpled heap and huddled together, shaking with terror. Lourdes was being raped for the twentieth time or so, now being taken by Blaise Zabini, as the other wizards rallied.

At his Lordship’s words, the Death Eaters advanced upon the remaining Clément’s, savage anticipation etched upon every face. Minister Yildriz strode up to the captives and sneered at Clément. “Ah, how are you faring, fellow Minister?” Yildriz rolled up the sleeves of his robes to reveal the newly burned Dark Mark upon his left inner forearm, grinning as Lourdes was sullied repeatedly. The Dark Lord had agreed to make him and his men Death Eaters after their assistance in the capture and murder of Potter as a reward, Astoria knew. “I do not think I have glimpsed you since the last gathering of the International Confederation of Wizards… How the mighty fall!” He smirked derisively. Yildriz's expression was full of barbaric bloodlust as he gestured for his men to take Lourdes once Blaise had taken his pleasure. Some of his men had armed themselves with brutal iron pokers that had been stacked by the fire, and began to beat Lourdes remorselessly with an almost bestial fervour. Angry red and purple marks blemished Lourdes’ pale skin as they struck her again and again while she cried out in agony. Astoria felt her flesh prickling as she heard Silas piping gleefully in the background, and she was seized with a strong desire to curse him into a thousand slimy pieces.

After they had battered her entire body to a pulp, Dashiell Selwyn knelt over Lourdes, seized one of the spiked pokers from one of Yildriz’s men, and proceeded to violate the girl with it. She let out a horrendous shriek as the cruel metal penetrated her. Dashiell had raped Lourdes so viciously with the poker that when he wrenched it out of her, intestines were glistening upon the sharp tip, and he proceeded to pull the rest of her innards out from her womanly folds between her legs. He grabbed a fistful of the ropey, glistening, snake like organs and hurled them straight at Chloe Clément, the Minister’s sister, who let out a cry of horror and hastened to wipe the guts and gore that were covering her face and hair, crazed with terror and grief.

Chloe’s screams had drawn Dracula’s attention to her. With a nasty smile, he pointed a bony finger toward her and rasped, “That one.” Chloe began to wail, and clutched desperately at her daughter as two male Vampires strode toward her, their white hands outstretched.

“Don't you touch my Lina!” She shrieked, as the Vampires pried her arms from her hysterical little daughter, shoving the girl roughly aside. They dragged Chloe toward Dracula who was grinning, his long fangs bared. When Chloe was thrown at Dracula’s feet, he sunk to his knees and raised one of his claw like hands. He stiffened his fingers oddly, then in one fell swoop, he tore into Chloe’s stomach, leaving an open gaping wound as she let out a hair raising scream of excruciating agony, attempting to wrestle the Vampires in vain as Dracula’s hand explored her insides, evidently deciding
what parts of her he would feast upon first.

Astoria was filled with horrified surprise that Chloe had not been overcome by these devastating wounds as she continued to yell and struggle. Lyle Nott, apparently, was not amused. “Enough of this rubbish!” He barked, as Chloe thrashed about on the floor. Lyle directed his wand at a solid marble globe which came shooting across the room. The sphere came smashing down onto Chloe’s head, her skull shattering as blood and brains flew everywhere. Some of the Vampires scrabbled for the scraps as Dracula gave a raspy cackle. There was a tremendous amount of noise in the salon as the Vampires proceeded to tear Chloe Clement limb from limb, blood flooding the carpet as Dracula buried his face in the gash down the middle of her stomach, tearing out her liver as he emerged.

Hestia and Drisella then marched over to where the Minister’s eldest son was still huddled by the fireplace, trembling with fright. Astoria thought she had heard Justine call him ‘Raphael;’ her heart ached for the boy as the two sadistic witches loomed above him. Hestia waved her wand in an arc, and at least three score black hornets the size of rats burst from her wand tip, buzzing horribly as they began to stab the boy all over his body with their cruel, curved stings as he shrieked in pain, holding his hands over his head to try and protect himself. Drisella laughed and indiscriminately hurled hexes and jinxes at Raphael, whose yells of pain only increased in pitch.

Travers then approached his Lordship and bowed. “My Lord, if I might?” He asked, a sadistic smile playing around his thin mouth. Evan Rosier, whom Astoria had only just noticed, was hovering behind him, was wearing a similar expression on his cruel face. The Dark Lord gave a curt nod and Travers turned to Clément, looking down at him like he was a piece of dirt. “Fuck your wife.” He commanded in a hard voice. Astoria could not quite believe what she just heard but – “Go on, you heard me Mudblood! Fuck her right here in front of all of us, or I will give that little beast -” He pointed at the sobbing Lina, who was watching her Mother being devoured by the Vampires - “To our friend Greyback here. If you do not do as I say, he will rip her to shreds before your very eyes. Do as I command, and her ending might just be swift and merciful.” Fenrir Greyback stepped forward and leered at Clément, licking his lips and picking at his teeth with his long, dirty fingernails.

Astoria thought that Clément was going to be sick, his skin was grey, and spittle was drooling from his mouth, moistening the dried blood on his chin from where he had bitten off part of his tongue. “What… what is wrong with you people? I cannot -”

“Last chance Mudblood!” Barked Travers. When Clément fell forward onto his hands and began to dry heave, Travers lost patience. “Greyback! Take the brat, if that is your pleasure.”

Greyback lunged forward eagerly, but then the Minister found his voice, though it was cracked and defeated. “No! No please! I will – I will do it!” He began to sob as the Dark Lord lifted the spell that bound him to the floor so that he was able to shake his wife back to consciousness, who awoke with a scream. “I am so sorry, mon amour.” He wept, tremulously drawing out his member, trying to stiffen himself. Justine shrieked hysterically and scrambled backwards away from her husband,
unable to believe what he was attempting to do.

Hestia and Drisella had ceased tormenting the boy, Raphael, who was whimpering on the floor, but at the sounds of his Mother’s renewed screams, he twisted around on the floor, tears pouring from his blue eyes, his face and body covered in bleeding puncture marks. The poor boy was seemingly transfixed with horror and confusion as he watched the Minister, his own Father, being forced to rape his Mother while she wept and screamed, attempting to beat him off with her fists and scratching at his face. Travers, meanwhile, was laughing. “Yes... yes! That’s it Minister! Fuck your precious Mudblood slut!” The Minister and Justine wept together as he ground into her unwillingly, mortified that what was supposed to be an act of love had been turned into a degrading spectacle for the twisted amusement of their sworn enemies. “Very good” Travers smiled, and he looked to Greyback, who had watched the perverted display with lustful eyes, slaver dripping from his jaws. “You may take the girl” he said, coldly.

“No, no, no! PLEASE!” Clément begged, clasping his hands out in front of him and looking up, imploringly, into Travers’s cold, uncaring face. “You swore to be merciful!”

“I am going to be merciful, fool.” Replied Travers, smoothly. “Greyback, tear out the little Mudblood sprog’s throat out first so that it kills her instantly. You see? Edward Travers is as good as his word, I told you I would be merciful, and so I have been. I could have just as easily commanded Greyback to pass that creature around his pack, a far more painful death if you ask me.” He smiled unpleasantly down into Clément’s grief stricken face. Greyback then bounded towards the terrified little girl, his jaws closing around her neck as blood spurted everywhere, spraying the sobbing Justine and Raphael as they cowered. The best thing that could be said was that the girl’s life ended swiftly, just as Travers had so crassly outlined; she was dead before she hit the floor as Greyback began to savage her, panting and grunting excitedly. One of this pack latched himself onto the child’s leg, and they began tugging at her small body like two dogs fighting over a veal chop. Suddenly, without warning, Justine launched herself to her feet and flew at Travers, seemingly crazed with rage. Before she could reach him however, Rosier grabbed her by the throat and began to throttle her violently, as he sniggered tauntingly all the while and snarled insults at her. Rosier did not strangle Justine to death, instead he preferred to throw her from him, after which he wiped his hands on the front of his robes as though he had dirtied himself. Astoria saw that the whites of Justine’s eyes had turned red, she was frothing at the mouth, and taking great rattling breaths as she lay upon the floor, defeated.

The torture and humiliation went on for hours and hours, and still had not abated when the sky began to lighten outside. Astoria knew that the Dark Lord wanted Clément to be thoroughly punished for everything he had ever said against the Dark Order, so he needs must have his fill. He seemed to be determined to inflict every kind of sick and debased torture upon the Minister and his family. When the sun had risen high up into the sky, Astoria glanced at a gilded clock framed by cherubs on a sideboard. It was now noon, and nearly all within the salon lay dead. Fleur was naked and cowering in a dark corner, her flesh battered and bruised. Someone had cruelly fastened an iron collar around her neck which was attached to a heavy ball and chain, preventing her from crawling away. Dracula and his Vampires hissed as the sunlight streamed through the gold paned windows, backing further away into the gloom. Astoria knew that Vampires were unable to walk in the daylight for more than a few minutes without being horribly scorched, eventually bursting into flames and dying if they did
not reach the darkness in due course. Wordlessly, Snape began to conjure up small potion bottles and distributed them around the Vampires. “This will give you protection from the sun for about a moon’s turn.” Snape declared after he had handed over the last bottle. “Report straight to me should you feel any ill effects.”

Then, Astoria heard a dry whimper, and she and the other Death Eaters who had been watching Snape address the Vampires, turned. It was the Minister who had uttered. He had not made a sound for hours as his family were struck down around him. Many of the Death Eaters laughed softly and surveyed him with vicious triumph. The Dark Lord walked across the blood stained rugs toward Gustave Clément, sliding the mangled remains of Chloe Clément out of his path with a sweep of his wand. The Minister was half naked, covered in injuries and his head had been shaved by Elizabeth and Adelaide. He merely stared blankly at the floor, his eyes flat and dead. Perhaps he has run out of tears, Astoria thought, the Dark Lord has broken him. There was total silence in the room, every eye was upon the Dark Lord. “Look at me Minister.” He hissed softly. When Clément did not respond, the Dark Lord pointed his wand at him so that his head jerked upward, so that he was staring directly into those pitiless red eyes. His Lordship then conjured up a large crystal vial, swimming with what looked like dark red smoke. “Know what this is?” He asked Clément, but he did not seem to expect an answer, so he went on remorselessly, “This is a plague, Minister. A plague of my own invention that will wipe out those precious Muggles that you hold so dear. I shall release this to experiment on this charming town of yours… if anyone is still alive, that is. If all goes well, it shall slay all Muggles within twenty five leagues of here.” The Dark Lord smiled cruelly as he saw fresh tears pouring down Clément’s face, and he mumbled some words Astoria could not hear, but the Dark Lord gave a screech of laughter and said, “Say that again Minister, so all of us can hear!”

“KILL ME!” The Minister choked through his sobs, trembling violently.

The Dark Lord continued to laugh. “Kill you? I think not. I have other plans for you my dear Minister.” And with a flick of his wand, Clément was then imprisoned in a black iron cage which provoked raucous laughter from the Death Eaters. With a look of dastardly amusement on his face, the Dark Lord strode toward the fireplace. He uncorked the vial, and released the dark red smoke, which escaped with a loud rush as it went flying up the chimney to the sky above. Looking deeply satisfied, the Dark Lord turned back to the room and addressed them all. “Cut off their heads.” He said, coldly. “We shall impale them upon the spikes of the gates, so that when they are discovered by my enemies they will know what befalls anyone who dares to oppose Lord Voldemort’s rule!” At his words there was wild outburst of jeering and applause. “This, is my declaration of war upon France!” He screamed over the tumult. As Silas strode toward the dead body of Lourdes and severed her head with a slash of his wand, the Minister fainted, his forehead banging on the metal bars of the cage. Astoria determinedly fixed her eyes upon the still portrait above the fire when the time came for little Pierre to be beheaded, willing herself not to collapse upon the floor and be sick. When the grisly work was done with, the Werewolves gathered up the heads of Justine, Lourdes, Pierre, Lina, Raphael and the Minister’s parents, holding them by the hair as blood oozed from the ragged flesh of their necks, their blank eyes unseeing. Naturally, they could not take the head of Clément’s sister, Chloe, seeing as it had been smashed to bloody ruins. “Now, assemble in the courtyard, there is one last task I need of you.” Announced the Dark Lord. “Fenrir, you and your pack have my leave to be excused, I command you to see to the heads.” Greyback gave a monstrous smile and bowed, his pack following suit. The Death Eaters all proceeded to troop through the silent palace as the sunlight streamed in bright through the windows, illuminating the crystal chandeliers which cast rainbow
lights over the magnificent surroundings, beautiful and unknowing to the horror that had taken place within these walls.

Astoria got a shock when she stepped outside. To be sure, the sun was shining, but the sky had an ominous, swirling red haze to it from the plague that the Dark Lord had unleashed. She shuddered, and began to make her way down the left side of the horseshoe entrance stairs alongside the others, where they waited in the courtyard. The Dark Lord was standing in the centre so that he looked down upon them all, though his red eyes were currently fixed upon the distant horizon. Astoria glanced at Draco, who was a few feet away from her, his grey eyes staring at the palace, his jaw clenched, his face white and shocked. Most like, he had been as horrified as she at what had befallen Minister Clément and his family. Astoria hastily cast her gaze away from Draco, not wanting Antonin to notice that she had even looked in his direction. Instead she drew her attention to the ruined front doors of the palace, and observed that Dracula and his entourage of Vampires were among the last to emerge. They were hesitant at first, but Astoria saw Dracula step out first, holding out his hands in front of him and turning them over, as though unable to believe that he was walking in daylight for the first time in centuries without being burned. He clenched his fists and raised his skull like face to look up into the sky, his expression exultant. He jerked his head at his minions, indicating that it was safe to step outside, and they all filed down the stone steps. An incredibly tall male Vampire brought up the rear, dragging Fleur by the chain attached to the metal collar around her neck, and Astoria saw that her wrists and feet had also been bound in iron manacles. When they were all assembled, the Dark Lord surveyed them all. “Silence!” He shrieked over the low murmur of voices, and everyone stopped talking at once. “Now, Death Eaters! I command you burn this foul Muggle hovel to the ground!” With shouts of delight, the Death Eaters scattered all over the courtyard, each witch or wizard making for a different portion of the enormous palace as Feindfyre began to erupt everywhere. As Astoria made for the Eastern column, she saw Silas performing a grotesque sort of jig on the spot, flourishing his wand so that a fiery tiger burst from the tip, and the beast began to rampage through the gardens, destroying all the greenery in its path, giving an unearthly roar. Astoria directed her own Feindfyre at a large window. It took the form of a monstrous wolf that bounded forward, snarling, as it smashed through the glass and lit up the entire corridor within as it charged. She glanced over her shoulder and glimpsed the Dark Lord, still standing at the top of the stone steps, his deathly white skin glowing from the blinding brightness of the Feindfyre, his serpentine face alight with demonic glee. “Burn it! Burn it all! Burn it all, until there is nothing left but ash!” He screeched, his high cold, inhuman voice clear and audible over the roaring and billowing of the flames. The Dark Lord blasted the Dark Mark into the sky and began to laugh like the deranged maniac that he was. He laughed and laughed at the destruction exploding around him, raising his hands high in the air as Dementors, Vampires and fiery beasts swirled and leapt against the blood red sky.

Chapter End Notes

Okay so I this is probably the only chapter so far that I have not really enjoyed writing. I nearly cut it and planned to do a brief description of what happens to the French Minister and his family in Fontainebleau... BUT, I thought that would come across as lazy/rushed storytelling. This is because from about chapter 10 we get fed the idea of the French Minister and his name continues to pop up every now and then, with Lord V’s desire to punish him, Astoria pondering what will become of him, and the Minister is really the main reason the Death Eaters struck at France in the first place. Therefore, I
thought it made more sense to describe the Minister's fate rather than skipping out on it, as all the info building up to this would have just seemed like pointless filler. Also, I hesitate to use child death/murder/torture in my writing but I didn't really have a way around this one, and I'm sorry if it has upset anyone. However, I have always tried to keep Lord V's personality more or less canon compliant, and as everyone knows, he is utterly ruthless, so there is no way he would have spared the Minister's children. I do not intend to write a chapter like this again unless the plot warrants it.

Bayonet: http://americanhistory.si.edu/onthewater/assets/object/full/2008-7117.jpg
XXIII. - The Plague

Chapter Summary

This chapter is a bit tamer than the latest ones I've been writing which has been a nice change writing wise, it gets a bit wearing writing about blood and guts all the time! Same disclaimer applies.

*Edit* - I am going away in a couple of days for the New Year so the next chapter will probably be posted in a couple of weeks, though it may be sooner as the introduction has already been written, which I plan on extending in the intervening time before I travel. But it all depends on whether I'm happy with it or not, so keep checking back if you are following this. Thankyou so much again for the comments/kudos's, it is really appreciated!

*Edit* - I have had a lot going on at the moment so the next chapter is later than expected, but I would say its about 70% done, might post it later today if I'm happy with it.

Happy Holidays!
S x

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Astoria was numb when she arrived back at Dracula's ghastly abode. She barely noticed all the maniacal laughter exploding around her when the cage containing the now deposed Minister Clément thudded to the floor and various Death Eaters fired hexes at him through the iron bars while he screamed in anguish. The Minister was hopelessly clutching at the bars and yelling, though the Dark Lord's high, cold voice drowned him out as he announced, “Fenrir, take our dear Minister down to the dungeons for the nonce. You may torture him as much as you have a care for, but do not bite him, I want him alive, is that understood?” Greyback gave an amused grunt and nodded, his face full of savage triumph as he gazed at the caged Minister and the Dark Lord went on, “Should this Mudblood show signs of expiring, feed him hard bread and cheese so that he does not die, force it down his throat if you must!” There was laughter as Greyback and his Werewolves heaved the cage away, the Minister's shrieks echoing around the grim hall as he was dragged to his doom. The grisly procession was then followed by Dracula and his minions, who were dragging a bleeding and sobbing Fleur amongst them, still bound in chains. They all bared their fangs at her and leered as she dissolved in paradigms of misery, and Astoria could see angry red marks upon her neck and wrists where the cruel iron manacles had scraped off her skin.

“I shall be seeing you later, Veela slut!” Called Rowle, giving Fleur a sarcastic little wave as she was forced down the corridor that led down to the dungeons. Astoria could still hear her screams echoing off the walls even after she was well out of sight.

After this grim spectacle, the Death Eaters were murmuring excitedly amongst themselves as they all made for the dining hall, where they were promptly served a relatively simple supper of rare duck
with plum sauce, Dauphinoise potatoes and crisp greens slathered in butter. But Astoria barely had
the stomach to eat, only doing so as not to incite Antonin’s wrath. The meal was relatively traditional
compared to the usual ghastly fare, but Astoria may as well have been eating carpet as she forced the
food down, willing herself not to vomit while thinking about the bloody encounter at Fontainebleau.
She could have almost thanked Antonin when the food was done with and he commanded her to go
up to their chambers where she was to ‘get ready’ for him, after which he turned back to Rookwood
whom he had been speaking with in hushed tones throughout the entire dinner. She had murmured
her assent and swept gracefully from the room. However, as soon as she was out of eyeshot and
turned the corner to make her way up the stone staircase, she broke into a run, her boots echoing on
the floor in the silence. Father had always deplored the idea of a lady running, she thought, wildly.
Astoria raced through the blood red corridors until she came to their apartments. Frantically twisting
the doorknob, she burst into the bedchamber and slammed the door behind her, blood thundering
through her ears. She strode to the middle of the room, kicked off her boots and all but tore her Death
Eater robes from her body which stank of smoke and corpses, half tempted to throw them upon the
fire. Astoria sank onto the side of the bed, breathing hard, now clad only in her lingerie. She looked
up out of the window to behold the bleak view outside. The monstrous Amazonian Vipertooth
soared in great arcs around the dead lake, dwarfing all the other dragons which were following suit.
Her fright and horror could not be contained any longer, she buried her face in her hands and wept.

“Monster,” a nasty voice whispered in the back of her mind, “Murderer.” It did not even help when Astoria closed her eyes and laid down upon the
feather bed, this only served to give her flashbacks of every harrowing thing that she had witnessed,
and participated in, over the last day and a half. She did not know for how long she laid there,
...Antonin! Astoria was wrenched out of her tortured thoughts at once and her eyes flew
open. Antonin could not see her like this, weeping and smelling of salty sweat, he would be furious.
Tears enraged him, unless they were on his terms of course, and he would expect to find her waiting
for him in a state of undress, batting her lashes adoringly. Astoria leapt from the bed and flung herself
down in front of the carved, black dressing table. She hastily dabbed powder onto her face to hide
the blotchy red blemishes upon her skin, and dripped Antonin’s favourite scent all over her body;
Rosewood and essence of Orchid. It was imperative that she looked and smelled beautiful for him.
“Jinky!” Astoria called, and the undead House Elf appeared at once. “I require a bath, draw one at
once if you please, rose water is preferred.”

“At once Madam Dolohov.” Squeaked Jinky with a deep curtsy. Astoria followed the elf into the
bathing suite, and with a snap of Jinky’s fingers, the circular bathtub sunk into the floor was filled
with pink, bubbling, sweet smelling water. As Jinky scuttled around fetching oils and cleansers,
Astoria slipped out of her lingerie, leaving it in a pool of silk and ribbons on the black marble floor
before slinking gracefully into the warm water. She laid her head backward as Jinky began to work
berry scented infusions into her hair, occasionally scooping up the bathwater to wet her tresses, and
Astoria was almost relaxed, though occasionally she would feel the elf’s ice cold touch upon her skin
which made her shudder. The heated oils in the water were making her feel sleepy when she
suddenly heard heavy footfalls making their way into the suite. She jerked her head up and was not
surprised to see Antonin swaying in the doorway, a bottle of Ledyanoy Korol' vodka clutched in his
hand. This one was a favourite of his, she knew; Ice King, a particularly potent concoction from his
native Russia. The sight made Astoria nervous, Antonin was even more unpredictable when he was
drunk.
“Leave us, elf” Antonin slurred, and Jinky disappeared with a loud ‘Crack!’ He slammed the bottle down by the sink, began to undress clumsily, and was soon stripped bare. Despite Antonin’s heavy drink intake, Astoria saw that his member was hard and erect, jutting out from his muscular body. She supposed that this was better than him being ‘incapable,’ that always made him so angry, and he would often blame her for his inability to perform, which would normally result in a very rough encounter when he was restored to full vigour. “Such a lovely surprise.” Antonin declared, as he lowered himself into the bathtub somewhat awkwardly while still holding the vodka bottle. “My luscious little wife, naked and waiting for me, covered in sweet oils, like a delicious piece of cake. You are truly a lovely sight to behold my darling.” He ogled at every bit of Astoria’s naked skin that was not submerged in the bathwater. The oils had made the golden hue of her skin shimmer in the dim candlelight and water was beading down between her breasts. Antonin touched her under her chin, brushing his thumb along her bottom lip, his tongue moistening his mouth. He then took another great swig from the bottle, and conjured up a crystal goblet. “Will you partake, my lady?” He asked with a wolfish smile and attempted to get her into focus, still reeling slightly, though there was no mistaking the lustful desire in those cold blue eyes. Moreover, Astoria was not fooled. The ‘offer’ of the drink was no offer at all, it was a command, so she dare not refuse.

“I should be delighted, you are most kind, husband.” Astoria murmured back, as he handed her the goblet full of the clear liquid, watching her intently. The first sip of the vodka was like molten lava down the back of her throat, such was its potency. Astoria felt her eyes water as she gulped down the drink and resisted the urge to cough it back up, she knew that would not amuse Antonin. However, he had not noticed her momentary discomfort as he had now produced a black cigarette, lighting it with a snap of his fingers, and Astoria noticed with curiosity in spite of herself, that the smoke was scarlet rather than the vivid blue she was accustomed to seeing. Antonin saw her looking and smirked, throwing an arm around her dainty shoulders and fondling her right breast idly as he puffed away.

“This is somewhat different to tobacco.” He announced. “Young Masakh Shafiq sent it over, he is currently stationed in the Middle East, and this was part of the most recent plunder from some palace or other. It is said that it causes, ah – relations to be far more satisfying. Here, try.” Antonin held out the smoking cigarette or whatever it was between his fingers, and Astoria dutifully leaned forward and took a tentative intake of breath. Her head was already swimming from the effects of the immensely strong vodka, and the inhalation of the smoke seemed to compound this feeling. She felt light headed and out of control, and she saw that Antonin was smirking still more broadly at the sight of her obvious intoxication. “My sweetheart needs to pace herself.” He purred softly, drawing her in even closer, the strong smell of vodka fumes permeating the little space between them. “I loved watching you give that Mudblood Minister’s little slut her just dues yestereve, will you do that for me again when the chance presents itself?” Astoria nodded mutely, and Antonin ran his fingers through her sodden hair which still glimmered gold despite the wetness. He gave a grunt of pleasure and grasped her behind her neck, pulling her toward him as he began to kiss her roughly, his breathing deep and rapid. Antonin had not shaved since they had left for Fontainebleau, and his stubble prickled her skin uncomfortably, making his kisses crueller than usual. Astoria had almost forgotten about the goblet she was still clutching until Antonin jerked it out of her hand and flung it across the bathing suite, where it shattered somewhere upon the wall. He broke the kiss and grasped her by the hips, positioning her over his lap as the bathwater splashed around both of them and slopped over the sides. Antonin grinned as she gave a little gasp when the head of his member brushed her entrance. He had not been far wrong, whatever they had smoked had served to heighten her sense and touch
tenfold, even though in the back of her mind she was screaming against these unwanted sensations. It was though her body had been taken over by these vile substances, and she wanted to weep even as she let out a moan when Antonin slid himself up inside her grunting, grasping her waist as he did so. When Astoria began to ride him in earnest, Antonin raked his fingers down her back, moaning in pleasure. “Such a sweet little cunt.” He breathed in her ear, pinning her against his heaving chest. Astoria’s head was spinning, she hated feeling this way and struggled to keep her composure as Antonin released her and began to grope at her breasts, far too roughly as usual, all the while grinding into her noisily. Antonin then grasped her by the jaw, forcing her to look into his eyes as she panted breathlessly. “So beautiful” Antonin murmured, his other hand groping at her backside. Astoria then drew in a sharp intake of breath, that familiar warm, tingling feeling between her legs intensifying more powerfully than ever before. When she began to moan, Antonin seized her and began to kiss her hard again, grasping her tightly and groaning. When they broke apart, Antonin’s eyes were upon her breasts as he bounced her up and down upon his length. Astoria placed her hands upon his chest, and that seemed to do it. At last, at last, Antonin’s rippling muscles became taut, he ground his teeth together and moaned as he finished inside her. After his breathing slowed, he slid her off of him and set her down in the water with a splash. He heaved himself heavily out of the bathtub and picked up the vodka bottle, finishing the rest of it in one. “Come.” He commanded, holding out his hand to haul Astoria to her feet. However, she was dizzy from the drink, and was unable to walk more than a few steps without nearly toppling over. Antonin then grew impatient and clumsily picked her up to carry her back into the bedchamber. Predictably, once they were in bed, Antonin made it clear that he had not finished with her. Astoria saw that he was stiffening again, and he began to plant sloppy wet kisses all over her body, murmuring drunkenly and touching her all over. “It has been some time since you gave me my first boy... I think it is time that you give me another.” And he pulled Astoria toward him by her hips, and positioned himself between her legs.

At least an hour passed after Antonin had passed out drunk after repeatedly bedding her, and Astoria still could not sleep. She was wide awake, and her head had stopped spinning, but her thoughts were now filled with tormented parents and mutilated children. Nothing could divert her. She did manage to drift off to sleep once or twice, but the respite was brief, for she was to be wrenched out of her slumber by monstrous dreams, her naked skin drenched in cold sweat as she lay there, trembling. Astoria needed the one thing she loved most in this world, her son... Dare she risk it? She sat up and looked down at Antonin, who gave a great grunting snore and turned over, breathing deeply, his scarred, muscular back rising and falling. Usually when he had this much to drink he did not wake until the morning, surely, she could slip away for a little while? Astoria sat there, her heart hammering in her chest, agonising over what to do, elated at the prospect of seeing her son, yet terrified of what Antonin would do if he awoke to find her gone. Most like he would whip the flesh from her back, which he had threatened to do several times while in a drunken rage. Astoria thought of her Leo, his smile, his touch, his happy little giggles when he looked at her... Slowly, very slowly, she slid out of the bed, freezing for a moment as it creaked under her weight, just to make sure that the noise had not woken her husband. Astoria tiptoed across the bedchamber to where her bed robe was flung over the window seat. The garment was heavy, crafted in double woven cashmere and thickly trimmed with luscious silver fox fur. It did not serve to wear the light silken bed robes that she was accustomed to, the bedchamber was chill now that the fire was almost extinguished in the hearth, and most like the corridors would be ice cold. As she swept across the room Astoria ignored the matching silver fox bed slippers that lay under the dressing table, she would need to be as silent as possible and the noise of slippers on stone would only serve to hinder her. She turned the doorknob as quietly as she could and slipped out into the corridor.

Predictably, the corridors were glacial, and Astoria winced slightly as her soft bare feet skimmed the
cold stone, and she saw her breath misting in front of her. Everything was as black as pitch, with only a single fire sconce at the end of the corridor to illuminate her way, so she made her way toward it. After passing the light, it was dark again, and Astoria felt up the right side of the stone wall until she grasped the edge of a bannister. She tentatively lifted her foot to find the first step and began to climb, there were at least thirty of them. When she came to the top, there were flickering shadows shifting from sconces that had been lit down a further corridor, and Astoria heard two male voices murmuring to one another in Turkish. She flattened herself against the cold wall, glanced surreptitiously around the corner and saw that two of Yildriz’s men were sat outside the door to the Nursery, playing cards, which were hovering in mid air. Astoria took a deep breath and stepped out into the corridor, striding toward them with as much confidence as she could muster. At the sound of her approach, both jumped to their feet and raised their wands, but lowered them just as quickly when they saw who it was.

“Madam Dolohov” Said the wizard to her left, bowing. He was tall, swarthy, unshaven and had a golden hoop pierced through the top of his right ear. Astoria recognised him as one of the men who had helped beat and rape Lourdes Clément to death at Fontainebleau. “Much apologies my lady but none can enter at this time.” His accent was so heavy that she had to strain her ears in order to make sense of his words.

“I am here to see my son; will you keep a Mother from her child sir?” Astoria asked coldly, putting every ounce of authority she could muster into her voice. The wizard looked unsure and glanced at his comrade, a man with a thick black moustache, who mirrored his expression. Astoria took advantage of their silence and said silkily, “Or perhaps, you would like to accompany me downstairs to wake my husband, Antonin Dolohov, and explain to him why you saw fit to defy me. The hour is very late, but I am sure he will understand, don’t you think?”

The wizards shot terrified looks at one another, and as Astoria turned to go – “No Madam, please, wait!” The first wizard said desperately, his voice riddled with panic. “You may enter, but you must be being quick.”

Astoria felt a twinge of guilt as the wizards watched her on tenterhooks. She did not derive pleasure from intimidating others, but when it came to her son, there was nothing she would not do. In any case, these were not good men, well did she remember how they had jeered and laughed when Lourdes begged for mercy before she died as they savaged her with those awful iron pokers. “I thank you.” She said curtly, nodding to each of the wizards in turn as they parted, and she swept over the threshold.

Like the rest of the castle, the Nursery was dark and gloomy, the white frilly cribs and baby clothes strewn everywhere contrasted oddly with the harsh reds and blacks of the room. Astoria had only been in here twice or thrice before, and that was under the watchful eye of her husband, so she did not really have time to take in her surroundings beforehand. Nurse Clayden was stooped over a crib, laying Guinevere Yaxley down to sleep, but when she heard the door creak and beheld Astoria standing there, she gasped. “M- Madam Dolohov… What are you-”
But Astoria interrupted her, she did not have time to explain. “I have come to see Leo. Please, just let me hold him for a few minutes or so, no one need know that I was ever here… please?” Her voice was no longer cool and commanding, it was shaking… pleading. Clayden did not answer but was still staring, petrified by fear. Astoria felt a stab of annoyance and strode over to the larger crib next to Guinevere’s, and sure enough, there he was. Leo was wide awake, dressed in pale blue wool, and he smiled up at her, his arms outstretched. She picked him up without hesitation and he began to make those sweet innocent baby sounds as he touched her face with his pudgy hands, delighted to see her again. Astoria could scarcely believe that it had been over half a year since she had brought Leo into the world. She proceeded to kiss him all over his face and stoke his fine golden hair, feeling at peace for the first time in days. After a few moments of cradling him against her chest, Astoria whispered in his ear, “Mother loves you, Leo, remember that my darling. Mother will always love you.”

As she made to lay him down back into his crib, Leo touched her face. “Ma” He gurgled, still smiling his sweet smile. Astoria started, unable to believe what she had just heard. Could it be? No, it was just a sound. But then – “Mama, Mama!” Tears rushed to her eyes, and she thought that her heart might melt with emotion. Her precious little baby that she had carried inside her for close to a year had called her ‘Mama’ for the first time. Astoria did not want to let go of her son, she wanted to hold him in her arms forever more and keep him safe. However, in her heart of hearts, she knew this was not to be. She was not a normal Mother; the Father of her child was a ruthless monster who used their baby as a means to control and instil terror in her with unspoken threats. She was a Death Eater, and a wife to Antonin Dolohov; a vicious, jealous brute whom she lived in fear of. All Astoria could do was to try and raise her little boy to the best of her ability… whenever she was allowed to see him that is. Finally, Astoria realised that she had been in the room for well over half an hour by now, far longer than the stipulated time that Yildriz’s men had intimated to her. Perhaps they were too afraid to burst into the room and start commanding her as to what she should and should not do. Finally, with an enormous effort, Astoria gave Leo a final kiss on the forehead and laid him back down in the crib, gently stoking his face and not bothering to wipe away the tears now streaming down her own cheeks.

Nurse Clayden had finally found her voice. “Madam Dolohov.” She whispered, shaking like a leaf. “This is taking an awful risk. If your husband learns that you were here without his leave he will… he-”

“There are no risks that one will not take for one’s children.” Astoria cut in, sharply. “You will tell no one I was here, no one. Not Rathburne, not Beckwith, and especially-” She clenched her fists. “Especially, not Master Dolohov. Do I make myself plain?”

“As you – as you say Madam.” Clayden replied, awkwardly. But Astoria did not trust her reply. As Clayden turned to tuck in a peacefully dozing Delphini in a large four poster bed, Astoria subtly slipped her wand from her pocket and asked casually, “Where is Rathburne, for that matter?”

“Sleeping Madam, we change duty every eight hours or so, we-” As Clayden turned around to face her, quick as a flash, Astoria drew her wand and thought, ‘Obliviarte.’ The spell hit Clayden on the
forehead and her eyes suddenly turned dreamy. Astoria had not wiped her memory completely, only making her forget that she was ever there. She knew she had only minutes and Astoria gave Leo one last fleeting look, and made for the door which swung open at her approach. When the two guards looked around, she pointed her wand at each of them in turn, modifying their memories. As the wizards stood, dumbstruck, she flew down the passageway as quietly as she could, around the corner, down the stairs and up the other corridor until she slowly pushed open the door to her chambers. Mercifully, Antonin was still deep in his drunken slumber as Astoria tiptoed across the room, shrugging out of the heavy bed robe, taking care to leave it back on the window seat, before nimbly sliding back into bed next to her husband. She lay there, thinking. Despite all the darkness and doom she had witnessed thus far, she was feeling distinctly joyous that her baby boy had called her ‘Mama’ for the first time ever. Astoria turned over, smiling slightly into her pillow, and drifted off to sleep.

It had been just under a moon’s turn since Astoria’s secret encounter with Leo, and she had seen him once a week thereafter, this time with Antonin’s leave, though he would always accompany her, watchful as an eagle as ever. The Death Eaters had not left the castle since the attack on the Clément family and the Dark Lord releasing the plague upon France. As his Lordship had so cruelly put it, they were to: “Lay low while the chaos unfolds, and strike when they least expect it. Keep them in a constant state of fear.” To be sure, Astoria hated this foul castle, but she would rather hide behind its walls as opposed to going out into a world of blood, rape and torture; her bad dreams had still not abated, and she would feel constantly on edge to the point where she wanted to break down and cry. The Dark Lord would come and go intermittently, most like travelling between the countries he had already conquered to oversee what the relevant armies had accomplished thus far.

One such morn when the Dark Lord was absent from the castle, Bellatrix came striding into the dining hall after breakfast. The platters had not yet been cleared, the remnants of cold meats, eggs and fruit strewn across the china plates and the goblets of sweet wine only half filled. She was clutching what looked like a rolled up paper in her right hand, her expression ecstatic. Bellatrix unrolled the paper and slammed it down at the head of the table, panting excitedly. “It has happened!” She said gleefully. “These French fools are in a delicious state of panic, we have fulfilled one of the Dark Lord’s primary aims by instilling fear into their very hearts!”

Bellatrix held up the paper to the table at large, a demonic smile upon her gaunt face. The front page contained photographs of Bellatrix herself, Rodolphus, Antonin and many others, including… Astoria’s stomach gave a jolt, her. The title of the paper told her that it was Le Prophète Français, which Astoria took to mean – The French Prophet. Underneath the title of the paper there was a header, done in block red capitals above the photos, reading: DEMANDERE. She knew exactly what this word meant this time; WANTED. Wanted!? I have been made into a criminal, Astoria thought, despairingly, but then – no, after everything I have done, I AM a criminal, I did this to myself. Her fellow Death Eaters were not amused by the French print however. Indeed, Silas screeched, “I cannot make sense of that French garbage! What does it say, pray tell?” Bellatrix’s mouth gave an unpleasant twist and she tapped the paper so that it translated into English. The Death Eaters all leaned forward to study the front page, triumphant smiles upon every face as they read the headline:

**WANTED – These individuals are wanted for questioning in their involvement of the brutal murders of the Clément family, who were discovered in the Palace of Fontainebleau a dozen days**
Silas gave a delighted cackle when he beheld a picture of himself at the bottom of the front page, his photographic likeness sneering up at the camera. All the Death Eaters leant forward eagerly to see who else had made the front page, when Jugson called, “I have a better solution!” He pointed his wand at the paper still clutched in Bellatrix’s thin fingers so that a stack of them piled themselves up in front of her.

“Most prudent of you, Jugson.” Bellatrix declared in her harsh voice, her face flushed with sadistic pleasure. There were many murmurs of excitement as the papers were passed around, the other Death Eaters exchanging amused looks between one another, revelling in the fact that they had caused such chaos and terror among the people of France.

For a time, there were no sounds other than the soft flickering of parchment being turned over as all examined the paper, until Silas broke the silence. “Look Antonin, Look!” He shrieked, beside himself with barbarous pleasure. “They have used your Azkaban photograph, the fools!” He gestured at one of the top pictures upon the front page. Antonin’s prison photograph depicted him in a windowless, stone walled cell, tossing his identity placard aside, all the while silently jeering and gesticulating mockingly up from the paper. Silas leaned forward and asked excitedly, “What – what, is it like in there?” At Silas’s words, Astoria saw an odd, closed expression pass over Antonin’s face, and something seemed to flicker in his cold blue eyes… was that, unease?

Antonin’s fleeting moment of disquiet was eclipsed almost at once, however, his satisfied sneer firmly back in place. “Nothing a strong man cannot handle, Silas. Only the weak give in to such nonsense, you should hear the way some of those other spineless fools scream and cry at night like women and children.” He snorted derisively. “Myself, Bellatrix and the others had eight Dementors guarding each of our cells, all the way up on the top floor in Block X, such was the Ministry’s fear of us.” Antonin boasted, as Rookwood and Travers chuckled with prideful gratification. Antonin straightened the French Prophet to study the other photographs, and turned toward Astoria, leering, as he tapped at her own picture. “I do not think I have ever seen a prettier ‘Wanted’ photograph in my life, my dear. I daresay they shall want to hunt you down first!” He shouted to raucous laughter from the surrounding Death Eaters, who quaffed more wine, despite the early hour.

Astoria did not answer, but gave Antonin a swift smile and glanced down at the paper again to read the ledger under her own picture:

Astoria Dolohov, née Greengrass – Suspected Death Eater. Suspect in the destruction and incendiarism of St. Mary’s Muggle hospital in London, Great Britain. Suspected to have
participated in the murders of the Clément family. May be travelling with her husband, Antonin Dolohov (Left). Last possible sighting on the coast of Northern Holland.

Astoria studied her photograph, and was mortified to see how haughty and arrogant she looked. The Ministry of France had somehow managed to procure her Hogwarts school picture, where she was clad in silver and green Slytherin House robes. Astoria was tossing her hair and examining her nails, looking disdainfully up into the camera with the faintest hint of a sneer playing around her mouth. Is that truly me? She thought, stunned. Astoria could not be surprised that they knew about her marriage, it had been widely published in The Prophet back home after all. Antonin then thrust the paper at her, which she took to mean that she now had permission to read it. Astoria flipped through pages and pages containing photographs of confirmed and suspected Death Eaters now operating under the Dark Lord’s regime in Europe. She noticed that the French Prophet had also used Hogwarts photographs to identify other Death Eaters who were closer to her own age. Elizabeth’s photographic likeness depicted her with her arms folded and looking cold as ever, while Blaise was lounging on a chair, an arrogant and superior expression upon those handsome features that he held so dear. Astoria vaguely thought how she used to be fond of Blaise, but the war had brought out the very worst in him, and he now seemed determined to outdo his diabolical brother, Josiah. Her dull musing of the paper eventually brought her to an article about the plague that the Dark Lord had let loose upon Fontainebleau, and in spite of herself, she began to read:


A malignant and cataclysmic plague has gripped the Parisian region of France. Healers from the central wizarding hospital in Paris, St. Joan of Arc, have traced the plague back to the town of Fontainebleau after the recent discovery of the ruined palace and mutilated remains of the Clément family, widely believed to have been murdered by the Dark Wizard who styles himself, ‘Lord Voldemort’ and his Death Eaters. Minister Clément’s body was not found among the wreckage, and it is suspected that he has been taken hostage by the Death Eaters, though no formal demands have yet been made. For more on this story, see page 22.

Little is known about this plague, but it is also suspected to have been unleashed by Lord Voldemort, and Healers are currently studying its effects upon those who have been infected. It appears that Muggles succumb to the plague far quicker than wizards. All cases of Muggles who have been infected thus far have resulted in death, even with Healer intervention. Far fewer wizards have been infected, though it would seem the very young, the very old, and expectant mothers are most susceptible, with the disease being far slower in progression. Around twenty thousand Muggles are have estimated to have died thus far in the short time that the plague has been released upon French soil, with those numbers expected to rise. More worryingly still, the plague seems to affect not only humans, but also livestock and crops, making them dangerous and inedible, which has devastated local food supplies. Many have begun to starve as a result, which has appeared to exacerbate the ferocity of the infection on humans, and riots have broken out over the lack of food, leading to more people being contaminated due to close contact. Healers have exclusively revealed to The French Prophet what the warning signs of the infection are through studies gleaned from Muggle and wizard patients alike and by observing the behaviour of livestock. The general onset of the disease usually presents itself with headaches, high fever, chills, vomiting, and a hacking cough within a few hours of being exposed, with many
wrongly believing that these symptoms are that of common Muggle or wizard influenza. The next stage is characterised with confusion, bleeding from the orifices, obscured vision, bleeding underneath the skin and difficulty breathing. When the final stages of the disease take hold, the skin and flesh mortify, usually turning black and sloughing from the bones. Severe delirium is common, and the infected patient may become violent, aggressive or exhibit signs of extreme terror as a result of hallucinations (seeing and hearing things that are not there) brought on by this rapid onset of mental incoherence. Death occurs within hours after these symptoms present themselves, and the progression of this disease from start to finish usually takes a day for Muggles, but can last for up to three days in wizards. Animals have also exhibited similar behaviours, and larger species such as bullocks must be avoided at all costs, as the mental decline associated with the disease causes them to charge about wildly, therefore giving rise for the creatures to inflict potentially fatal injuries on those caught up in their path. Healers have described this plague as being ‘The worst ever breakout in European history.’ There is a race against time to find a cure or at least contain the plague, or Healers fear that its devastating effects will cause a national crisis. One Healer, who requested that his name not be printed, confided to me:

“I have never seen anything of its like, and I dread to think where we will be in another moon’s turn if we are unable to take preventative measures. It is highly possible that this plague is airborne, meaning that it can be transferred from person to person from close contact, particularly if said infected person coughs or sneezes within close proximity of others. Muggle and wizard hospitals within the region are overflowing with sick patients and are unable to cope, with some Healers and most Muggle ‘Doctors’ being struck down with the disease. Many Ministry officials are dead or missing, and with our dear Minister Clément deposed, the situation is now desperate. There is no order, it is total chaos and we are very much on our own here, we have people dying in the streets while waiting in packed queue’s outside of hospitals. German Ministry Officials have assured us that they will come to our aid, but that may take some time. Now that the Dark Order control Poland, the Germans have had to send much of their forces to the border where there is terrible fighting. In the meantime, what do we do while we wait? I am fearful for the future of our nation, Ms Bernard.’

Harrowing words indeed, but we must be thankful for wizards such as this anonymous Healer who put their lives at risk to help others, and continue to thwart the Dark Order’s stranglehold on much of Europe. The Healer has also informed me that temporary ‘healing stations’ will be set up in affected regions where anyone, both Muggle and magical, can attend for treatment. He has also set out some general guidelines for temporary management of the plague:

- If you or a family member exhibits ANY of the aforementioned symptoms above, DO NOT HESITATE, seek treatment IMMEDIATELY.
- Anyone who is suspected to be infected MUST NOT share things such as food, water or eating utensils with others.
- If you have ANY doubts whether any animal or wheat products are contaminated, remove them from your home AT ONCE.
- A calming draft may be helpful in lessening the symptoms of delirium if present.
- If you come across ANY corpses that appear to have signs of the plague, DO NOT touch, stay as FAR AWAY as possible.
- Bubble head charms may be useful in preventing the spread of the disease from person to person.
If you have been in contact with an infected person, it is STRONGLY recommended that you regularly use scouring potions to wash your hands, face and body. Any clothes worn while caring for an infected person should be burned, IMMEDIATELY. Where possible, use existing disease and infection repellents that have been approved by the Ministry of France. (Dragon pox repellent may be of use).

Wizards and Witches of France, I am aware that the above guidelines are rather rudimentary, but Healers are working tirelessly to manage this terrible scourge that is tearing through our country. Here, at the French Prophet, we intend to keep our fellow countrymen as well informed as possible about what is happening out there, so keep reading! Do not forget, there is always hope, our hearts go out to all of those who have been affected by the Dark Order’s attacks on France, do not despair, Long Live France!

* N.B. ‘Doctors’ – Muggle counterparts of Healers.

Astoria felt a mixture of revulsion and pity as she finished reading the article, though she could not really be surprised. The Dark Lord was the most powerful wizard in the world now, and this vile plague was an easier way to subdue France rather than sustaining heavy losses as he had done so in Poland, where countless troops had perished from the vicious backlash against the Death Eaters by the Ministry and wizard residents alike. Antonin was watching her closely, and he must have noticed the expression on her face when he enquired sharply, “What is it?”

Astoria groped for a lie. “This – this, reporter, she used his Lordship’s name in her article.” She said timidly, pointing to the paper.

Antonin raised his eyebrows coldly. “Indeed. Well, she is just another one who will pay for her crimes, unless of course the bitch is struck down by his Lordship’s plague.” He replied, a sadistic smile twisting his face. Antonin glanced up at the small moving picture of Ms Bernard and said, “I shall remember that face. Never fear my love, by the end she will be begging for death, no matter what.” Antonin was distracted from the paper when Vlad, his murderous Sea Eagle, came soaring into the hall, and everybody looked up as Vlad let out a shriek. The creature’s black wings were spread wide as it glided closer, its lethal talons outstretched, and a letter was clasped in its cruel, curved beak. Vlad landed on the polished stone table with a clatter, his sharp talons clacking across the hall, and everybody looked up as Vlad let out a shriek. The creature’s black wings were spread wide as it glided closer, its lethal talons outstretched, and a letter was clasped in its cruel, curved beak. Vlad landed on the polished stone table with a clatter, his sharp talons clacking across the surface as he made his ungainly way toward Antonin to give him the letter, dropping it in front of him. Before Antonin could start reading it however, Vlad let out another ominous screech and began beating his wings wildly, fanning them all with cool air. Antonin let out a sigh and conjured up a strip of raw, bloody meat and tossed it further up the table where Vlad fell upon it eagerly, ripping it
to shreds. Undoubtedly the vicious raptor would start gouging out their eyeballs, or else tearing at their faces if he was not fed. Antonin broke the seal of the letter which was emblazoned with the Dark Mark and opened it, his cold blue eyes moving from left to right, the cruel smile upon his twisted face becoming more pronounced as he read further and further down the parchment. “It seems that the French Prophet is behind the times.” Antonin announced, when he had scanned over the letter once again. “The Dark Lord informs me that the Muggle death toll is closer to fifty thousand rather than twenty.” There was a burst of cruel laughter from the surrounding Death Eaters, they banged down their goblets upon the table and stamped their feet, glorying in the news of destruction and death. When the noise had subsided, Antonin went on triumphantly, “And what is more, the Dark Lord plans to unleash the giants upon the Eastern French border, so there will be nowhere for them to run other than Spain where they are unlikely to be received, disease ridden as they are. We have got them good and trapped. By the next year, France should be ours!” Antonin seized his goblet of wine and raised it in the air. “To the Dark Lord!” He bellowed.

As one, the Death Eaters imitated him and shouted back, “To the Dark Lord!” And they all drank deep.

Chapter End Notes

Shafiq family - Pure Bloods who are part of the 'Sacred Twenty Eight' (Canon). I am undecided as to whether they will feature more prominently in the story yet... As mentioned before, all material is completely new now so I am open to any suggestions/feedback anyone may have. Thanks!
Chapter Summary

This chapter covers Voldemort's struggle for France and sets the scene for some of the tactics that he will use later on in the story.

Same disclaimer applies
Warning: graphic material

Many thanks again to all those who comment/kudos
S x

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone, sorry that the chapter is later than expected. I was sick and some parts of the chapter had to be rewritten so it's taken longer than I thought.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Dark Lord’s stranglehold on France was tightening with each moon’s turn that went by like a snake’s murderous coils. It now became a grisly sort of ritual for the Death Eaters to examine each new copy of the French Prophet and discuss their crimes with relish, glorying in the death toll that was rising every day, the forced disappearances and repeated attacks on small towns and villages. The country was in such a state of chaos that the newspaper only got the chance to print every few weeks or so. It was said that a few loyal reporters had continued to write for the paper and were hiding out in a secret location, possibly aided by the Germans, some of whom had managed to slip into the country despite the Dark Lord’s defences. Though his Lordship was growing more powerful in this country than ever before, problems still surfaced. The people of France were on high alert which made their infiltration of the country harder, though not impossible. The Germans were also putting up quite a fight on the French-German border. They can fight, Astoria thought sadly, but I am doubtful as to whether they will win. The Dark Lord claimed that he had several blows he intended to deal France to assure him of a victory, though she did not know what these were. As was his wont, his Lordship never revealed his plans to them until a week or so beforehand, during which time they were confined to the castle. The one small ray of light in this dark, desperate situation was that Astoria was free from Antonin – if only temporarily. The Dark Lord had commanded him to make for the border and supress the rebellion. Antonin was to take thirty other Death Eaters and recall the giants from the mountains and crush the German forces who were causing most of the havoc at the French border for good and all.

Such as it was in her husband’s absence, what would seem like small pleasures to many were practically treasures to Astoria. Things such as sleeping alone in her bed each night without being woken at all hours by Antonin pulling her legs apart to lie with her, being free to choose what she
wore each day, or else not having him constantly telling her what to do and frightening her daily with his erratic temper. But best of all, she got to see her precious Leo every day without Antonin breathing down her neck. Her baby boy had grown so much, he was getting heavier every time she picked him up, he could sit up on his own in his crib now and would regularly call her ‘Mama.’ It would not be long until he reached his first year, and Astoria felt that the time would have dragged by if she did not have her Leo for comfort. She would visit him in the early morn before everyone else rose, as Antonin had left Rowle behind and had clearly instructed him to watch her closely while he was away. Antonin had put on a good show of gratitude when the Dark Lord had bestowed the ‘honour’ upon him to serve at the border, but later that evening he had gotten even drunker than usual and was incredibly rough with Astoria when he bedded her, so rough that the bruises on her ribs took almost a dozen days to heal. Astoria suspected that one or two may be fractured, but Healer Beckwith had gone with Antonin and his party of Death Eaters, and she did not want to distract Rathburne from caring for Leo. “You will behave yourself while I am away, wife. If I get so much of a whisper of anything being amiss it will go very ill for you, and you will never see my son again.” He had snarled in her ear after spilling his seed inside her for the sixth time or so on the morn he left. Astoria almost burst into tears at his last words, almost, only allowing a single one to trickle down her cheek. At this, Antonin had smiled and brushed it away with his thumb, delighted at the effect he had produced. Thus, as was her wont, Astoria was very careful about how she behaved and what she said, even in Antonin’s absence. Rowle followed her almost everywhere, even to the damned privy, just to make sure that was where she was really going. Antonin had shrewdly taken Draco with him to the border, not wanting him to be around her when he was gone, so Astoria had no one, though she would occasionally talk with Narcissa after dinnertime. She was very scared for Draco, not only because of the dangers of the war, but she felt that Antonin may use this campaign as an excuse to murder him and claim that he had died in battle. Antonin had a vicious hatred for Draco because he knew how he felt about Astoria, and things that Antonin Dolohov hated had to go, though he did not dare do anything out in the open for fear of punishment from the Dark Lord. To be sure, the Malfoys were at the bottom of the food chain and would most like stay there, but his Lordship was hesitant to spill too much Pure Blood unless any said witch or wizard had grievously failed him. There again, the Dark Lord’s behaviour had become increasingly turbulent – even more so than before, something Astoria did not think possible. He would explode over the smallest trifles and his rages were terrible to behold. She remembered when the Dark Lord had killed a House Elf one eve when the creature informed him that a letter he had been due to receive appeared to be late. On another occasion he had tortured a low ranking, Half Blood Death Eater into near insanity after he informed him that he had lost up to two score men at the border in a surprise attack by the Germans. Astoria felt that his Lordship had gone completely mad with power seeing as much of Europe was now under his control… his heightened crazed state made him even more frightening to be around.

The remaining Death Eaters at Dracula’s Castle had been commanded to stay in the shadows for the nonce, and they were mainly sent out in groups of about a score or so to sack small villages and towns, or to capture and kill prominent members of French wizarding society, often dumping the bodies in public places under cover of night so that they would be found the next day. The Dark Lord had also commanded them to poison local water supplies, ensuring the deaths of any who managed to escape who had not yet been infected with the plague or murdered in the raids. Even with the Dark Lord’s vast numbers and weapons, the cities were still too large to take on, many wizard citizens taking it upon themselves to use protective charms and spells to defend their own homes and Muggle homes alike. The first time Astoria had been sent out was two lunar cycles after Antonin had left, and it had been a dreadful experience. The campaign had been led by Josiah Zabini
who had begged for the ‘honour’, so Astoria knew it would be brutal, and so it was. They had been commanded to eliminate the town of Castelnou which was situated deep within the Pyrenees mountains, not too far from the ruins of Beauxbatons, its protection was poor with it being so remote, and France simply did not have enough aurors or Ministry officials to spare. The town had been made up of about four hundred residents, ranging from the very old to mere babes. Josiah had commanded them to kill all the men and hang their bodies in trees while the women and children watched on, wailing and screaming with terror. There had only been one wizarding family in the town, the Father of the family had attempted to fight them, and for that, Theodore burned his wife and children alive, forcing the man to watch while he screamed with malicious laughter. Babies and the incredibly young were simply tossed off cliffs, their small bodies spattering on the jagged rocks fifty feet below, but children and elderly were tied to posts and flogged to death. Younger women however, were tortured with the Cruciatius curse until they could barely stand, and they were to be sent to the border for the use of the male Death Eaters. “…Spare the younger ones. Deny a man women and wine, and you will have chaos and mutiny in the ranks.” Josiah had declared when he outlined their commands before they had left. Astoria shuddered at the memory and fleetingly thought that the whole grisly process needn’t have been so drawn out if they had just used Aveda Kedavra on them all rather than subjecting the townsfolk to all that wanton brutality. By the time they had left with their captives the sky had been darkening, and they had gotten there early that morn.

As September dawned, Rowle received a letter from Antonin, Astoria knew the letter was from him as the ill tempered Vlad had delivered it during luncheon, and there was also his unmistakeable scrawl upon the surface of the parchment. Rowle read the letter himself first, then to the table at large. Antonin wrote that the fighting on the French-German border had now broken out into a full scale war, and the Dark Lord had commanded them all to join the fight in the border town of Wissembourg, which they had commandeered as their base, to put an end to the German backlash for good and all. Astoria privately thought that the Dark Lord had underestimated the situation, he honestly did not think they would fight back, or that others would not come to their aid? She did not allow this thought to enter her mind very often of course, even to think these thoughts could be dangerous. There were also rumours of a charismatic, top ranking auror from the German Ministry of Magic who led the initial forces into France. Henrik Paetzold was his name, and the Dark Lord wanted him found and killed. “Cut off the head and the body will die!” he had screeched at Antonin before he and his party had left for the border, “When that fool Paetzold falls the rest will follow, now GO!”

“Right I shall have silence now!” Barked Rowle over the chatter, snapping Astoria out of her troubled thoughts, and all subsided at once. “Jinky!” The House Elf appeared at his knee and gave her customary curtsy.

“How is Jinky being of service, good sir?” The House Elf squeaked.
Rowle tapped the letter with his wand and an identical one appeared at once next to it. “Take these letters to the Eastern and Western barracks” he said, brusquely. “Give one to Flint, and the other to Bulstrode. Tell them they are report to me early this eve.” Astoria knew that Marcus Flint and Jeremy Bulstrode commanded the three hundred or so Half Bloods who made up the rest of the Dark Lord’s army. They were not housed in the main castle, however, that was only for inner circle Death Eaters who were ‘truly pure’ and were therefore kept in the utmost comfort. Flint and Bulstrode had been given their positions as they possessed a fair amount of Pure Blood and had proven themselves useful in battle thus far, Astoria knew. There were rumours that the Dark Lord had promised them gold and brides if they pleased him, pure brides at that too. Undoubtedly both wizards had jumped at the chance, for despite their high ranking positions, they remained very much second class, and a Pure Blood wife would allow them to mix in aristocratic society, as well as lining their pockets with the gold, she thought wryly. Rowle then abruptly got to his feet and stared around at them all. “As for the rest of you, prepare to leave for the border four days hence. Take as little as possible, or nothing at all, I for one shall only be taking my wand and the robes on my back. Ladies, bring a dress or two.” With a curt nod, he spun on his heel and strode from the dining hall.

Astoria and her fellow Death Eaters had departed very early on the morn that they were to travel to the border. When they apparated into the remote, rural area as commanded, Astoria was almost sick with the horrendous stench that hit her nose. Thousands of dead cattle and sheep littered the fields surrounding them, while fields of wheat and barley were blackened and mouldering, surely making them poisonous and inedible. There was also a lake in the area, it appeared to be stagnated, and all the fresh water life such as fish and frogs had floated to the surface, their carcasses putrefying in the early morning sun. The sky was dark with acrid smoke despite the early hour, and there was a sense of foreboding in the air. They had been ordered to apparate about a mile from the Death Eater base on the border, the Dark Lord would not permit the protective charms around the current combatants to be lifted for a minute, even for other Death Eaters, so they needs must walk the distance. When they were scarcely ten minutes into their journey, they came across one of the first casualties of the brutal siege. A Muggle man was infected with the malignant plague, and it looked as though he did not have long to live. The man was completely delirious and conversing wildly with thin air, his teeth chattering and spittle drooling from his mouth. There were black patches all over his skin and half of the flesh from his right arm was gone, leaving only bone. Many of the Death Eaters laughed at the sight of him and he began to scream in terror and ran away, completely out of his mind. More bodies appeared in the shallow countryside ditches which were awful to see, but the very worst Astoria saw was a dead woman. She could not tell if she was Muggle or Magical, but her condition could not have been more plain. Like the crazed Muggle man they had come across before, large parts of her flesh were as black as ink, the paler portions covered in blood bruises, and one of her hands was missing. She was lying in the ditch with her legs partially spread, and from between them snaked a pale, rope like object. No, no that was no rope, oh Merlin forgive her, no! It was a cord, a cord that belonged to the woman’s dead baby lying a foot or so from her, still attached to its tiny body. Astoria saw despairingly that the woman had been pretty far along; her belly still looked pregnant and the baby looked to be fully formed, as bruised and blackened as she was. I doubt that the child ever drew breath though, poor thing. Astoria wanted to weep, this was one of the saddest, most heart breaking things she had ever seen. Her fellow Death Eaters took no notice whatsoever, not even sparing a glance for the devastating sight. As they drew closer to their destination, she saw many decaying heads impaled on trees, piles of disease ridden, rotting corpses that had been set alight, and more smatterings of crazed Muggles infected with the plague, wandering about aimlessly, muttering to themselves. Astoria knew they were at their destination when they were all abruptly flung
backwards as they trudged through a hilly area surrounded by trees. Rowle, who had been leading the group and who alone had managed to stand his ground, held up his left arm and passed through the magical perimeter freely, the others following suit.

When Astoria herself passed through, she beheld a truly horrific sight. It looked as though the town had been completely destroyed, nothing remained except a large country manor about half a league away, though she did see pieces of burned debris scattered here and there upon the ground. Yet still more bodies were piled twenty feet above them, there was a canal to the East which had flooded because it was choked with dead, befouling the water. There were numerous barbed wire pens where hundreds of men, women and children wept and languished, covered in dirt, and in many cases - wounds. They were dressed in rags and looked so emaciated that she was surprised that they were still alive, many following the new arrivals with dead, dull eyes. The grass had been burned to ash and there was nothing but wet mud beneath their feet. Apart from the prisoners, there was no living thing in sight. The smell was unbelievable; a mixture of rotting flesh, smoke and human waste hung thick in the air, and Astoria felt her insides heave and covered her mouth, such was the pungency of the stench. In the distance, she saw hundreds and hundreds of tents, presumably where much of the army were housed. She turned her eyes Westward and saw several giants lumbering about, some of them clutching clubs in their massive hands, but she could not even hear them as they were so far away. Rowle then turned to address her, unperturbed by their grim surroundings.

“My lady, I have been instructed by your noble husband to take you to him at once, come with me if you please.” He held out his arm and she took it dutifully as they both made for the manor house, their boots making sucking sounds in the sodden mud, dirtying the hems of their robes.

When they arrived at the courtyard of the manor, Astoria saw the remains of a dead man swinging from a tree, he looked as though he had been set alight and his entrails were spilling out of a long gash in his stomach. There was a slight wind and his body swayed and twisted, blowing the scent of his corpse toward them and adding to the foul air. The manor was grand enough, but there were burn marks up its pale yellow walls and some of the windows had been smashed. Stumps of trees were everywhere where they had been cut down, and as Astoria looked up, she saw the Dark Mark swirling malevolently in the sky above the ravaged remains of the town. Like the exterior of the manor, the interior retained vestiges of beauty, but no longer. As she took in her surroundings, she saw that the rooms had once been sumptuously decorated, but there were now blood spatters up the silken walls, many of the paintings had been slashed open, several doors were hanging off their hinges, and much of the furniture had been smashed to pieces. Rowle marched her down several corridors and down a set of stairs leading under the house, several other Death Eaters in their wake. They arrived at a splintered wooden door where laughter – and screams – could be heard.

At once a handsome young wizard who was guarding the door blocked their path. “Afternoon Cousin, I see you are here at last.”

Astoria took in the young wizard’s features and knew who he was at once, though it had been close
to three years since she had last glimpsed him. Lancelot Mulciber, son and heir of the now dead Robert Mulciber who had been killed at Beauxbatons by Kingsley Shacklebolt. Lancelot looked nothing like his Father, Robert had been dark haired and heavy featured, but his wife had been a Rowle, and Lancelot had inherited the thick blonde hair, piercing blue eyes and immense height commonly found within the House. Astoria knew that he had been campaigning all over Europe after Britain had fallen, and was said to possess, ‘a sense of adventure.’ **An odd way to describe destroying entire countries and committing mass murder.** Indeed, Astoria was not fooled by Lancelot’s charming smile and good looks, those vivid blue eyes of his did not quite disguise the greed and slyness lurking behind them. **This one is more dangerous than many give him credit for, I’ll wager.**

“Indeed, I come with precious goods” Rowle smirked, glancing at Astoria. “I imagine Antonin is in there?” He asked, jerking his head at the door.

Lancelot returned his cousin’s smirk and nodded, his blue eyes gleaming. “Yes, he is in session, but you may enter all the same.” He replied, ogling Astoria hungrily as he stood aside for them. The door creaked open automatically as they made to step over the threshold.

The noise that came from the room was louder than Astoria had been expecting, and it made her jump. There was jeering and wails of anguish, and the air was thick with cigarette smoke and the smell of drink. Through the haze, Astoria saw that the room was stark and bare, the only piece of furniture was a battered wooden desk that looked as though it were about to collapse, and there were no windows. There was a dead body slumped against the far wall; all the skin had been peeled from the flesh, though the eyeballs were still intact, staring sightlessly at the carnage as blood pooled beneath it. It was a terrible, eerie sight. **This was no true room, this is a torture chamber.** Some Death Eaters were leaning against the walls, others sat on crates or boxes, but all wore the same entertained expression as they watched the sport. Antonin was in the middle of the room, pacing around a battered wizard who was chained from the ceiling and hanging upside down, naked but for his undergarments which he had seemed to have soiled, giving off a revolting smell. Antonin was dressed in dark breeches, his customary heavy boots – perfect for stamping – and a thin undervest. His muscular arms were covered in hex marks and he had various grazes all over his face, but otherwise seemed as fit and strong as ever.

“…I am going to ask you again.” Antonin said in his most dangerously soft tone to the hanging wizard as he puffed on a cigarette, **“Where is Henrik Paetzold? How many men does he command? Where does he plan to strike next?”**
“I know not, I swear I know not!” the wizard replied in a heavy German accent which was cracked with pain as he thrashed about in his chains. “I never see Paetzold! Never! Please!”

“LIAR!” Antonin bellowed at the wizard, making him flinch violently. “One of your men told me under torture that he glimpsed him two weeks past! TELL THE TRUTH!” The wizard was now gibbering in German, and it sounded like he was praying. Yes, praying for death, most like. Antonin huffed in annoyance and extinguished the lit cigarette onto the wizard’s face as he screamed in pain, then he pointed his wand at him. “Crucio” He said in a bored voice. The wizard screamed even louder and when Astoria looked at his face properly, she saw with a stab of revulsion that both of his eyes had been gouged out of their sockets. 

Merlin only knows how long this poor soul has been down here, she thought, pityingly, worst of all, he is probably telling the truth. “If you do not answer me, I am going to cut your bollocks off and feed them to you!” Antonin suddenly screamed to general laughter from the room. “That picture I found in your pocket, the one that shows your wife and children, how easy do you think it would be for us to track them down, when we found the Mudblood Minister in mere weeks, hmm?” The wizard began to sob as Antonin went on, ruthlessly, “When I get my hands on that pretty wife of yours, I am going to fuck her.” The hilarity mounted as the wizard began to kick and scream harder than ever, the chains around his bloody ankles jangling.

“And then, after that, my boys are going to fuck her, and when we have made your son and daughter watch, I shall feed those brats alive to a pack of starving wolves!” Antonin continued to taunt and hex the wizard, but he either could not or would not talk. Frustrated and enraged, Antonin, slammed his boot into the wizard’s chest, and he vomited everywhere, the chunks of waste sliding down his face and into his bloody eye sockets to drip upon the floor as he gasped and choked.

“Eat it!” Screeched a cold, reedy voice Astoria had no trouble in recognising. The disfigured face of Silas Norton came looming out of a dark corner, alight with excitement. He strode over to the wizard and looked down at him maliciously, “Eat that filth!” Silas shrilled, pointing at the pool of vomit upon the floor. Antonin laughed as Silas raised his wand toward the wizard’s chained feet, where he was promptly released and came crashing to the floor with a howl of pain. Silas forced the wizard onto his knees and ground his boot into the back of his neck so that his entire face was sprawled in the pool of sick as he gave a muffled gag, desperate for air, Silas’s mad cackle reverberating around the room all the while. “You are not eating it properly, come now you must be starved!” Silas grinned and after a few minutes of this twisted spectacle, he hissed “Imperio.” Sobbing, the wizard began to scoop up fistfuls of his own sick, shovelling it into his mouth and retching as all the Death Eaters laughed derisively.

The wizard collapsed onto his front again, his ragged breathing causing the vomit underneath him to bubble sickeningly. “Is he dead?” Antonin asked casually, surveying the scene with amusement.
Silas kicked the wizard over and waved his wand. “No.” He replied coldly, “The filthy worm still lives.”

“You!” Antonin shouted to Josiah and a group of seated Death Eaters, “Take this cretin back to the holding pens and feed him so that he does not die, I have not finished with him just yet. Give a loaf of bread to the other prisoners, they can fight it out with one another.”

“At once, Dolohov,” Josiah replied, and he and five others dragged the wizard out of the room, barely clinging to life and breathing raggedly, his eyeless face lolling from side to side.

There was an explosion of chatter and laughter after Josiah slammed the door behind him, with many of the Death Eaters exchanging gleeful looks. Astoria saw Theodore talking animatedly to Jugson, Yaxley was so drunk he was swaying heavily even though he was sitting down, and Avery was roaring with mirth as Rodolphus whispered something in his ear, grinning. “I have something for you, Antonin!” Called Rowle through the din, gesturing at Astoria, all the while keeping a firm grip upon her arm.

Antonin looked up in their direction for the first time, and his face split into a lecherous grin. “Ah, my darling wife. Come to me my love.” Antonin called, stretching out his hand. Astoria prized herself free of Rowle’s grip and dutifully made her way toward her husband. Without preamble, Antonin grabbed her and kissed her full on the lips, plunging his tongue down her throat and grasping at her backside. The heat rose to Astoria’s face as several of the other wizards in the room let out wolf whistles and catcalls. Antonin kissed her neck hard, making noises of pleasure in his throat. “Get out.” He grunted between his kisses, “Get out, all of you.” Many of the surrounding wizards chortled, some making crude jokes as they filed out of the torture chamber. When they had gone, Antonin began to rip the robes from her body so forcefully that he left red marks on her, and did not stop until she was left clad only in her lingerie. It was a favourite set of his, scarlet silk with matching lace stockings, which contrasted beautifully with her skin. “Red.” Antonin panted breathlessly, seemingly unable to articulate proper sentences as he groped everywhere he could reach. He lifted her off her feet and placed her on the rickety desk, spreading her legs as the desk creaked ominously. Astoria had hoped that he would take her lying down, but no, after he wrenched away her knickers with deliberate force, he coiled a muscular arm behind her back so that they were face to face as he buried himself up inside her. “Fuck, I have missed that cunt of yours.” Antonin moaned as he began to thrust, very hard, grunting like a beast. Astoria willed herself to put on her best performance, she gasped and squealed, placed her hands on his shoulders and dug in her nails the way he always liked; all she wanted to do however was run. She wanted to run and run and never look back; it was even more unpleasant being taken like this by her husband in a bleak torture chamber that smelled like blood and death and occupied by a mutilated corpse. Disgusting was not
even the word to describe what they were doing. Upon closer inspection of Antonin’s face, she saw that three fresh scratch marks adorned his right temple, and there was no mistaking how he had come by them. *A relic from the latest girl who he has raped and killed, most like,* Astoria thought as he pumped away at her. To spare herself this nauseating sight, she closed her eyes and moaned, all the while biting her lip – that always stirred Antonin and would hopefully quicken his release.

Just as she had predicted, the ordeal was over moment later. It could not have been more than ten minutes or so, any longer andAstoria thought that she may have broken down completely. When he was done, Antonin waved his wand so that she was clad in a matching scarlet silken bed robe, though it exposed half of her breasts which he leered at. *You would think he had never seen them before,* Astoria thought, with mingled exasperation and annoyance. He lifted her into his arms and strode up the stairs and through the ruined house until they came to a bedchamber. When Antonin set her down within, Astoria was horrified to see the state of the bed situated opposite a large, grand window, framed in gold. Strewn across the sheets there were clumps of long dark hair, some with pieces of scalp still attached. Dry curls of flesh, human fingernails and even *teeth* also littered the bed, the blood stains were everywhere so that there was scarcely any white sheet to be seen. Antonin’s cut throat shaving razor was on the pillow, covered in dried blood. There were ripped and torn clothes all over the floor, and there was a smear of a bloody handprint on the door leading to the bathing suite. When Astoria had first noticed the scratch marks on Antonin she knew that whichever girl had given them to him would have paid *dearly* for fighting back like that, and here was the grisly proof. She knew from her own experiences with Antonin and the countless times she had seen him rape other women in front of her that resisting his attacks would only make him more violent. He would beat his ‘prey’ as he liked to call them, worse than ever as opposed to ‘just’ being rough if they merely lay there and cried.

Antonin must have noticed Astoria’s disquiet, for he glanced at her and chuckled softly as he beheld the room, a look of the utmost satisfaction upon his twisted face. “My apologies my lady, it is such a dreadful mess in here, we have none of those beastly little House Elves and only one maid to serve us in this dump. Though you must not fear, I can put this right.” He waved his wand and the clothes on the floor vanished, and the bedsheets looked crisp and clean with no indication of the horror than had taken place within them. “I have missed you so very much my sweet. I am most pleased to have you back in my bed again where you belong.”

“A wife’s place is beside her husband.” Astoria replied mechanically. “It makes my heart glad that my Lord husband is pleased.”

“That is right.” Antonin replied, taking a step toward her and tracing her collar bones lightly with his fingers, moistening his thin lips. “I had almost forgotten how lovely you are my darling. Now, where
were we?” And he pulled her to him, grinding the bugle of his arousal into her. Astoria sighed inwardly, and slid off her bed robe.

Dinner was a crowded affair that evening with everyone now in one place. The manor was large, but only just large enough for them all. Antonin told her that this was the home of Maurice Baudin, the Mayor of Wissembourg, who was a Half Blood wizard that had masqueraded as a Muggle for almost fifteen years, presumably because he enjoyed the position of Mayor so much. Astoria knew that this would have earned him a prolonged and painful death, and her suspicions were confirmed when Antonin said, “…That is him out front, I strung him up by that tree so that he can be food for crows!”

“I pity the crows having to feast on that filth!” Screeched Silas, “Masquerading as a Muggle, honestly! What kind of wizard does such a thing, I ask you?”

“Like you said Norton, filth” Growled Rookwood in his low rumble, and he spat on the floor contemptuously before taking a large gulp of wine.

The meal went on in this fashion for some time, Antonin’s party of Death Eaters trading gruesome stories with the new arrivals about what they had done thus far at the border. Astoria understood that their food had been prepared by an Imperioused cook, who had been spared for this very purpose when the Death Eaters had pillaged the manor. There had been several maids in the house but three had succumbed to the plague and died, some had been killed in the siege and another had been killed by Lancelot Mulciber when he had raped her; Antonin claimed that Lancelot had gotten ‘overexcited’ and had broken her neck. Thus, there was only one maid left now, but Astoria had not yet glimpsed her, and did not wish to, such was her guilt.

The after dinner chatter was quelled instantly when Bellatrix came striding into the room, and Astoria fleetingly wondered where she had been, seeing as she had been absent from the meal. *She is where she always is, at the Dark Lord’s side.* Bellatrix marched up to where she and Antonin were sat, and said without preamble in her harsh voice, “Dolohov, the Dark Lord commands your presence. You are to join him in the West wing at once.”
“Very good, Bellatrix.” Antonin replied, draining his goblet and getting heavily to his feet.

As Astoria watched their retreating backs, she felt a twinge of savage pleasure, wondering if Antonin would return from his audience with the Dark Lord. After all, those who walked into a room with his Lordship, did not always walk out. The noise in the hall was restored as soon as the door slammed behind them, and Astoria’s attention fell upon Elizabeth, who was slurring louder than anyone else at the table. “I daresay, this place truly is a pigsty, I have never been in anything of its like in all my years. How fucking long must I endure this?” She swilled her wine clumsily so that it splashed all over the table and onto her gown.

Rowle and several others laughed, but Yaxley was not amused. His brutal face hardened as his gaze fell upon his drunken wife and his cruel eyes were narrowed in anger. “Hold your foul tongue wife!” He snapped at her, wrenching the goblet out of her hand and slamming it down onto the table.

Elizabeth suddenly grew angry. “My wine! Give me back my wine I want…” But her voice tailed away into a drunken slur.

Yaxley grabbed her by the arm and pulled her to her feet. “When will you fucking learn to do as I command you?” He snarled at her, now tightening his grip, his fingers digging deep into the silk of her gown and the flesh beneath. Everyone at the dinner table was looking at them now.

“But Yaxley had had enough. He let go of her arm and dealt her a vicious blow on the side of her left cheek. Elizabeth stumbled and almost fell, but she did not weep or cry out, she merely clutched at the side of her face and glared at her husband through her heavily bloodshot, grey eyes. Yaxley was shouting incoherently and began to shake her very hard by the shoulders, and Astoria glanced around the table to see how the others were receiving this. Most of the Death Eaters looked amused, but Astoria was surprised to see shock flit across Adelaide’s normally smooth and arrogant face as she stared at her half brother chastising his wife. “…Now to bed with, you! Go at once or I swear,
you will pay for this!” Yaxley yelled as he grappled with Elizabeth.

Astoria then felt a tap on her shoulder and started. She looked up to see Rowle standing over her. “Time for bed for you as well, I think.” He murmured with an unpleasant smile. “I shall escort you up there, my lady.”

When Yaxley saw that Astoria was getting up to leave, he shouted over at Rowle, “Take this one too, Thorefinn, before I fucking kill her!”

At her husband’s words, Elizabeth wrenched free and spun on her heel, striding around the dinner table, her head held high, looking neither right nor left. Astoria could not help being a little impressed, she did not think that she would have been able to retain such composure if she had gone through such a thing in front of everyone. She, Rowle and Elizabeth left the room in silence as they trooped through the hall and up the stairs to their chambers. It transpired that their chambers were connected to one another by a door, followed by a small antechamber between them. Rowle ushered them into Yaxley’s bedchamber nearest the staircase. “We are all going to have some fun with that maid tonight, so you cannot have her. You are to stay in your chambers and be ready for your husbands for when they return.” And with that, Rowle slammed the door and Astoria heard the lock click.

As soon as he had gone, Elizabeth fell to her knees and wept, her face in her hands. Astoria was at a loss for what to do. Ordinarily she would comfort another woman if she was distressed, but this was Elizabeth Nott Yaxley, cool, curt and aloof Elizabeth who had ruled her group of friends like a Queen at Hogwarts. Astoria sank into a nearby chair and watched her. When her tears had subsided a little, Elizabeth looked up. “Do not look at me!” She snapped, but Astoria did not break her gaze, Elizabeth did not frighten her in the slightest.

“Has- has Corban ever done this before?” Astoria asked, tentatively.

Elizabeth glared at her for a moment, but then the last remnants of her composure fell, and her shoulders seemed to slump a little. “All the time.” She whispered, sounding like a scared little girl.
The effects of the drink seemed to have worn off a little and she was speaking more coherently. There was a short pause. “Does Antonin beat you?”

“Yes, though he tends to leave my face as he does not want bruises marring my visage, or so he claims.” She replied, her words laced with bitterness.

“It is so unfair. I never thought marriage would be this way.” Elizabeth said miserably, drawing her knees up to her chest. “How do you bear this day after day?”

“Of course, it is unfair.” Astoria replied with a sad smile, “We are women. But during my darkest hours I think of my Leo, I think about the next time I will hold him and the way he smiles at me. I counsel you to do the same with regard to your daughter, think about how defenceless she would be without you.”

Elizabeth nodded, wiping away her tears and getting unsteadily to her feet. “Corban was so angry when Guinevere was born. He said I had failed in my duty to give him a son. I do care for her very much, I just find it harder to love her as fiercely as you love your Leo. After the birth I felt ever so melancholy every hour of every day and I found Motherhood so… difficult.”

“They say being a Mother is the hardest thing in the world, so I would imagine it is harder for some than it is for others. Try and spend more time with Guinevere, as I say, you are all she has in this world, Elizabeth.”

More tears leaked from those grey eyes as Elizabeth glanced at a clock on the mantle, but she did not weep in earnest. “Perhaps we should garb ourselves for bed, they will not be happy if they come in to find us talking like this.” Astoria did not need to ask who they were, and Elizabeth’s notion was a correct one, she shuddered as to what Antonin and Yaxley would do if they found them like this and unprepared for bed. “May you undo my clasp, Astoria?”
“Certainly.” Astoria made her way to Elizabeth who had turned around, and began to fumble around with the jade and gold clasp at the top of the gown. She was not used to dressing and undressing herself, let alone anyone else; even getting ready for dinner had been a most cumbersome task.

“My thanks, Corban keeps my wand unless we are going out campaigning, so I cannot use magic to undress, and I doubt I could master those spells in any case. I would give anything for a House Elf just now.”

Astoria let out a chuckle and Elizabeth gave her a small smile in return, the first real smile she had ever seen upon those proud features which served to increase her beauty tenfold. “I really must take my leave now, good eve to you, Elizabeth.”

“And a good eve to you.” She replied, as Astoria turned and made for the adjoining door.

Chapter End Notes

I almost cut the Astoria/Elizabeth exchange but I decided to keep it as we get to find more out about Elizabeth and I don’t know when I’ll have another chance to put it in again. I want to point out that Elizabeth is not a changed person, she’s still arrogant/cruel and hates Muggles and Muggleborns etc... I just thought it was interesting to show another dynamic of her character as opposed to the ‘ice queen’ side of her we have seen so far.
Chapter Summary

This is probably the longest chapter so far (Just under 8k words) Anyone can feel free to let me know if they think it's too long and I will avoid this in the future. I think the chapter title pretty much speaks for itself :)  
Same disclaimer applies.  
Warning: graphic material

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The residents of Mayor Baudin’s manor were awoken the early the next morn by an almighty CRASH! That seemed to shake the very stones around them. Astoria woke with a start and saw Antonin rising from the bed in wrath, his eyes scanning the room “What in the name of-” He spat, seizing his robes from the floor, but he was cut off by another tremendous CRASH. This time, the goblet on Antonin’s bedside table toppled onto the floor and smashed, blood red wine spattering the cream carpet as he let out a snarl of rage, clenching his fists so hard that the muscles in his arms flexed. Astoria vaulted out of bed to dress, not wanting to incite his anger even further. She hastily began to don her undergarments first as the crashes and bangs reverberated around the manor every few minutes as though they were coming from the very sky. Something was clearly very, very wrong here. Minutes later she and Antonin were striding through the manor alongside the other Death Eaters who had been wrenched out of sleep by the racket, all of them were robed and armed with their wands.

“What is the meaning of this?” Shouted Avery angrily over the noise as they spilled into the courtyard, conversing rapidly with one another; all with their voices raised in order to make one another heard over the periodic crashes and bangs.

“It is those blasted Germans, I’ll wager.” McNair yelled back contemptuously as they peered around the bleak landscape, wands raised. As the ground trembled, the screams and wails of terror from the prisoners in their pens were audible even from here.

Suddenly, a dark haired, thick set young wizard apparated in their midst and took a knee in the mud before them, wiping the sweat from his forehead. Antonin pushed forward to the front of the group and stood over the wizard, looking most displeased. “Bulstrode!” He barked. “Explain what the fuck is going on here!”
Jeremy Bulstrode raised his chin and looked up into Antonin’s face. “At once Sir!” He replied. “It is the Germans, Dolohov. They are attempting to break through the charms we cast around the town after we sacked it.”

Astoria saw Antonin’s jaw clench in fury and his cold blue eyes swept the horizon, but there was nothing to be seen. “How many wands?”

“At least two hundred, Dolohov. It may take them a few hours, but it is highly likely that they could break through if left unchecked. I have half that number wands awaiting your command, the rest are further South with the Dark Lord and Flint. With everyone present, we will have just enough to take them on, but they will still be more than us… What are your orders?”

“KILL THEM!” Antonin bellowed as an almighty groan rent the air. The tree which held the Mayor’s remains splintered and toppled over to smash upon the ground, twigs and leaves flying everywhere. “KILL THEM ALL! I do not care about prisoners, I want to see a field of corpses by the time the day is done! Now GO!” Jeremy gave a nod and a bow before disapparating in a swirl of black robes. Antonin then turned to the watching Death Eaters, incandescent with rage. “You heard me, you are to slay each and every one of them! Now, let us go and teach them what happens to those who dare defy us!” There were roars of assent over the tumult and faint pops as all turned on the spot to join Jeremy Bulstrode and his men.

The din that had pummelled the Death Eater defences around Wissembourg seemed almost dull compared to the eruption of sound that assaulted Astoria’s ears when they apparated outside of the base. Witches and wizards were already locked in combat with one another and there was a great deal of shouting, screaming and the blasts of noise and colour emanating from hundreds of wands as curses flew everywhere. There were around half a score of wizards directing their wands at the invisible shield to the Death Eater base which had caused all the racket within. They were being protected by just as many of their fellows as they fought off Death Eaters who were attempting to stop them breaking through. Astoria saw that Elizabeth was duelling a much older wizard and she was already losing. The wizard was screaming insults at her as he fired out hexes indiscriminately, one flying right past her face. Astoria pointed her wand at the wizard, she did not even need to speak anymore; a burst of green light flew from her wand tip and the wizard fell with a squelch in the thick mud, dead.
Elizabeth caught her eye and nodded her thanks fleetingly, until Astoria heard someone shriek, “Impedimenta!” and before she knew it, she was flying through the air before she landed with a dull thud, her wand flying out of her hand.

Gasping for air, she scrabbled about in the mud and pulled her wand out just in time as a heavy boot slammed into the ground. Astoria looked up and saw a wizard of thirty years with a heavily scarred face raise his wand and open his mouth to deal her another curse. She pushed herself backward on the ground from him, her robes covered in mud as she retaliated with an expelling hex to break his neck and remove his bones, but he deflected it and it parried onto one of his fellows, killing him instantaneously as his spine was ripped from his body.

“Filthy Death Eater bitch!” He screamed over the tumult, bearing down upon her, “When we have defeated you, I shall give you to all of my men who will pass you around like the whore you are!” His cocky sneer and lecherous jibe made her think of Antonin, and rage erupted in her then like a volcano as she launched herself into the wizard’s legs. Her sudden attack had surprised him, causing him to topple over and fall.

At once Astoria was upon him, straddling his chest. “Sectumsempra!” She screamed, brandishing her wand violently as deep slashes marred the wizard’s already ravaged face, the blood fountaining from the wounds with such force that it gushed all over her face and into her eyes. Taking advantage of her split second distraction as she blinked him back into focus, the wizard smacked her in the face and she reeled sideways, now it was she who was in the mud as her head sank downwards through the filth. She stared up into the bloody ruin of the wizard’s ripped and torn face as the battle raged around them while he snarled malevolently in German. He was now groping for his wand a few feet away, attempting to keep Astoria pinned to the ground as she struggled viciously, unable to point her own wand at him while he bent her wrist back. Then she remembered the one thing that may be the saving of her. Astoria’s free hand scrabbled about in the pocket of her robes, searching and searching. Yes, there. As the wizard snatched up his wand and pointed it directly in her face with a wicked grin, Astoria plunged the short, silver knife into the side of his neck. “I am no one’s to pass around.” She hissed in his ear. The wizard’s eyes seemed to bulge, and he tried to utter, however, nothing but dark blood poured from his mouth, the bloody gash in his neck pulsed sickeningly as she drew out the blade, drenching them both. Though he was certain to die now, Astoria did not hesitate. She plunged the blade in again. And again. And again. Before she knew it, she was atop the wizard once more, both her hands were drenched in blood as she stabbed him repeatedly, long after the stink of his dying met her nose. The wizard had almost been decapitated and his intestines were spilling from his stomach, such was the ferocity of her attack. Astoria realised that someone was sobbing, and as the knife slipped from her fingers, as she sat there, dazed, she realised that the sobs were coming from her own mouth.
Astoria wiped away her tears with her bloodstained hands and got to her feet unsteadily, staring at the carnage surrounding her. It looked as though more German forces had joined the fight, and the Death Eaters were completely outnumbered now as there were at least a hundred of these defenders. Terror tore at her heart, what if we lose? Will I be put to death, or simply on trial? After apparating to the scene, some of the Germans concealed themselves in a deep sort of trench she had not noticed before and were firing out curses before ducking back down behind the walls of earth. Jugson conjured up a spiked, black, circular looking oddity which began to spin rapidly. He pointed his wand at the thing, causing it to fly through the air to land straight in the trench. There was a deafening explosion and the mounds of earth by the trench rose up into the air like tidal waves. Those closest to the trench were screaming from horrible burns and blown off limbs, others were completely on fire, rolling madly upon the ground to try and stem the flames. Deep green smoke plumed high up in the air as bloody arms, legs, torsos and heads rained down upon them all, such was the force of Jugson’s exploding device. He grinned and plunged back into the fight to kill those who had been further away and were still stunned from his attack after being knocked off their feet. As Astoria struck down a tall, wiry witch with greying hair who she had been duelling, she looked around wildly, expecting another attacker to come bursting out of the wall of combatants, but none came. When she turned to check behind her, she saw a wizard who had lost his wand attempting to flee from Rookwood, who had cast some sort of curse upon him so that his flesh bubbled and peeled as he screamed for mercy. A short distance away, Travers had conjured up a lethal looking axe which started to chop his enemies to pieces of its own accord; the defensive jinxes that were fired at it seemed to have no effect whatsoever and they ricocheted everywhere off the cruel steel, causing utter chaos. Antonin was laughing as he duelled three at once, none of them were able to touch him and within minutes they were all blasted into the air, their bodies smashing like eggs upon impact with the ground as he continued to roar with mirth.

The air was suddenly rent with piercing screeches, like an eagle’s, and instinctively, Astoria jerked her head up to the sky. No, those were no eagles, they were far bigger and far more dangerous. A score and a half of Hippogriffs came soaring down toward them, beating their huge wings and snapping their cruel beaks, their deadly, razor sharp talons outstretched. Worse still, the Hippogriffs had riders who started to rain down curses upon them all, taking advantage of their elevated position. Astoria was so shocked by these sudden appearances that she ducked – too late – as a mounted wizard on Hippogriff as black as jet flew right at her. The beast’s talons ripped through her robes with absurd ease and tore the delicate flesh beneath on the back of her shoulder. Astoria let out a scream of pain that no one could hear over the din and fell to the ground once again, frantically feeling her shoulder to see how much damage had been done. When she drew her hand back in front of her it was an even deeper scarlet with fresh blood and she was in exquisite pain from the wound. She staggered to her feet and took aim at the wizard who had flown around in an arc and was now wheeling back toward her, shouting curses as his mount shrieked in unison with him, ready for a second attack.

“Expulso!” she yelled. The spell hit the wizard directly in the head, which exploded, his brains flying everywhere. The only remnants of his skull left were the lower portion of his jaw; his tongue still attached and many of his teeth still intact.
The Hippogriff was thrown off balance as the wizard’s headless corpse slid to one side, still mounted in the saddle. The beast spiralled towards the ground and hit it with an almighty thud, mud splattering all over the place as it rolled one, two, three, four times as its wings broke and the dead rider beneath it was crushed by its sheer weight. The Hippogriff’s back legs were broken, its neck was tangled up in the reins and it was thrashing about in abject pain on the ground, covered in dirt and blood. Many of its beautiful long feathers were scattered all around, with some flying in the air. Astoria moved forward cautiously, scanning the sky briefly just to be sure that it was safe to do so, and it seemed that it was. Many of the riders were now occupied with whole groups of Death Eaters who were battling furiously to bring the remaining Hippogriffs down. She caught a glimpse of Avery through the crush of people, and he had a nasty slash across his forehead. She moved even closer to the distressed creature to put the poor thing out of its misery for good and all. Being careful to avoid its dangerously flailing limbs, Astoria pointed her wand at the Hippogriff. It was over in a second. There was a flash of green light as the creature gave a final screech before lying still and silent on the mud sodden ground.

The battle had been raging for hours with the additional German forces that had joined the fight to assist their countrymen. The dead were everywhere, both Death Eaters and German defenders alike, most bearing horrible injuries. Astoria saw one dead witch who looked as though she had died in the act of trying to push her entrails back into her stomach and many of the German forces had been beheaded by Travers’ axe. The Hippogriffs and their riders had been slain too, the paltry few that had survived were now long fled. Astoria did not know how much longer she could endure this without collapsing, she had never duelled for this long and on this scale before. Her reactions were becoming slower and once or twice she almost paid with her life. She could see some of the others such as Theodore and Adelaide who looked as though they were growing tired as well. Hardened Death Eaters such as Antonin, Travers, Snape and their ilk showed no signs of relenting, and looked as if they could fight until the sun went down and beyond. Then there were shouts, and the duelling ceased somewhat, with many witches and wizards pointing Southward at what appeared to be a large, black cloud in the sky. Even the Death Eaters paused in spite of themselves to stare as the cloud drew nearer and nearer at a rapid pace. A curse suddenly flew out of nowhere, from friend or foe Astoria knew not, but it served for the battle recommence at once in a kind of explosion. Snape blasted aside every opponent that ran at him, Rowle foolishly fired out curses everywhere, as was his wont, and Astoria found herself duelling next to Blaise as two wizards sent jets of green light at them both. They both responded in kind, and as the killing curses collided with one another, there was a great shower of molten green sparks that scorched the ground below, obscuring their vision, but neither wavered in their attack. Astoria heard something heavy fall to the ground and knew that at least one of the wizards had been hit, she raised her wand to finish the other, but the sky had darkened and a chill that went to her very bones began to steel over her. There was only one thing that could produce such a feeling.

Slowly, she raised her head to the sky and gave a gasp of shock, for she had never before seen such a sight. The ‘black cloud’ was no cloud at all, but a hoard of hundreds and hundreds of Dementors
with many Vampires teeming in their midst. At the head of this grim party was the Dark Lord himself, flying like smoke on the wind with neither broom nor Thestral to support him, his livid red eyes discernible even from here. There were cries of triumph from the Death Eaters as they beheld their Master, and Josiah blasted the Dark Mark into the sky.

Astoria saw his Lordship’s cruel mouth move, and his high cold voice which was magically magnified, tore through the air as he screamed, “Attack! Kill them! Spare no one!”

Dracula then swooped out of nowhere with his fangs bared, his sharp nails outstretched toward a young witch. The witch foolishly sent out killing curses which went straight through the Vampire, and in the blink of an eye he was atop her, ripping out her throat. Several witches and wizards had grouped together to repel the Dementors by casting Patronuses, which seemed to be working in the main, but Astoria could see some of the animals starting to flicker, and the Death Eaters pressed their advantage by striking them in the back with killing curses. The Dark Lord was not fighting at all, he was circling in the sky, surveying the scene of death and destruction, and Astoria could see that he was smiling. Her vision of his Lordship was obscured when she ducked down to avoid a jet of orange light that had been intended for Silas, who was duelling a few feet away. Then the ground began to tremble violently, and Astoria spun around to see a pack of giants charging towards them, as they let out guttural, blood chilling roars and swung their enormous, spiked clubs. At once the giants started to attack the German forces with savage ferocity as the Death Eaters scattered. Groups and groups of other Death Eaters were now apparating to the scene to hurl themselves into the battle, most prominent among them were Bellatrix, Greyback, Marcus Flint and Minister Yildriz, all leading their own fighters. Astoria had barely a few moments notice as heavy footfalls rattled her very bones, she wheeled around just in time to see a giant running in her direction, roaring words she could not understand. She flung herself aside into a pile of stinking corpses as a massive foot slammed upon the ground where she had been standing. The giant, at least twenty feet tall, bent over and seized the wizard who Silas had been duelling. Astoria heard the wizard’s bones crunch as the giant held him in a massive fist, raising him higher and higher into the air as he screamed for his Mother. The giant then tore the wizard in half with absurd ease, as though he were merely tearing a piece of parchment in two. Droplets of blood showered all in the vicinity, Astoria repelled the blood with her wand, but Silas gave a scream of triumph and raised his head to the sky, allowing the blood to rain down upon him, cackling like a demon. Hestia and Bellatrix were side by side duelling half a dozen wizards, Bellatrix was shrieking with mad laughter, while Hestia was cold and intent as their wands slashed through the air like swords. There seemed to be barely any German combatants left now, and there was a definite dip in the noise in comparison to before. There were no longer screams, shouts and the bangs from duelling, there were the triumphant shouts of the Death Eaters and the moans of the dying. Many Death Eaters were now slumped on the floor, exhausted. Some leaned upon their fellows, while others examined one another’s injuries, a sure sign that the battle was won. Astoria merely stood there, gazing at the scene.

Minister Yildriz and his men had subdued a score of witches and wizards, with the witches only making up six of the group. One such witch flung herself upon the ground at Yildriz’s feet, sobbing.
“Mercy! Mercy please! Our wands our yours, we surrender!” Her fellows were yelling at her in German, clearly dissenting and wishing to stay defiant until the end.

Yildriz threw back his head and laughed cruelly “Mercy?” He sneered. “The Dark Lord warned you what would happen if you tried to fight us, do you not remember the letter he sent to your pathetic German Minister? The countries he has conquered thus far? His Lordship told you, he warned you what would happen, yet you did not join the cause. You deluded fools forsook any mercy when you took up arms against us!” He bent slightly and spat in the witch’s face before taking a step backward, his expression disdainful as if she were something filthy on the bottom of his boot.

The witch had not attempted to wipe the spittle from her face, she merely knelt in the mud, trembling and terrified as the Dark Lord came gliding down from the sky, looking as fluid and graceful as a slithering snake. He landed lightly upon the ground, his black robes swirling, staring at the captives with those pitiless red eyes. “I have little to add to what Yildriz has imparted to you.” He announced in that cruel, clear voice. “You are all going to find out what happens to those who continue to fight Lord Voldemort and his Death Eaters!” The Dark Lord slashed the air with his wand and the survivors were bound to wooden stakes that were driven into the ground. The Dark Lord nodded to Yildriz, who conjured up buckets and buckets of a dark looking, oily liquid. His men marched forward and began to tip the contents of each bucket over each captive’s head so that they coughed and spluttered. One wizard was struggling fiercely and was spewing indistinguishable insults, so the Dark Lord commanded the giants to tear him to pieces. He was the lucky one Astoria thought grimly, when she saw what was at the base of each stake, and knew what was coming. Indeed, the Dark Lord went on to say, “This substance will make your… experience last far longer, hours perhaps, I am yet to experiment with it thus far… until now.” The Dark Lord’s serpentine face then twisted in a terrible grin, “Incendio!” He screeched. One by one the captives were set alight, and as the flames licked up the kindling that had appeared below them and made contact with their flesh, they began to scream. Long, drawn out, bloodcurdling screams that seemed to go on and on forever. This was the most humiliating death for any witch or wizard alive, to be burned at the stake. They screamed and screamed as the smell of their sizzled flesh hung in the air as they were burned alive, acrid smoke twisting and coiling in the dim afternoon light. Mingled with the screams was the Dark Lord’s maniacal laughter, and he could not seem to stop laughing as his robes billowed around him from the rush of the flames and he watched his victims howl in pain. The giants roared incoherently and brandished their clubs, the Dementors and Vampires swirled about malevolently while the Death Eaters shot jets of light into the air to mark their victory.

By the time sundown came, there were no longer screams. It seemed as though the Dark Lord’s ‘substance’ had produced the desired effect. The captives had gone quiet after some hours, and all that remained of their bodies were blackened bones and ash. After the last smouldering flames had gone out, the Dark Lord had commanded them to destroy any wands they found on or around the bodies of the rest of the Germans, and decreed that their corpses were to be fed to the giants. Astoria felt the bile rise in her throat as she saw a giant who was now sitting down by a pile of bodies grab one body and bite its head clean off with crooked, brown teeth as large as tombstones. Other giants
shoved the bodies straight into their mouths, chewing noisily as bones cracked and crunched in their mouths and blood dribbled down their chins. It was a truly disgusting sight, the foul beasts tore off limbs as though they were petals from a flower, such was their strength. She turned her face away in revulsion from the sight of Greyback and some of his Werewolves violating the corpses of the dead witches, grunting and panting with excitement as they ground themselves into the dead, lifeless flesh. Astoria saw Elizabeth staring at them, transfixed with disgust, but the other Death Eaters paid Greyback or his pack any mind as they continued to search through the field of the dead, checking for wands and gathering up the bodies of Death Eaters who had perished in the battle. The death toll to the Dark Lord’s forces was fifty; mainly Half Bloods who served under Flint and Bulstrode, though there were a few Werewolves, but only one Pure Blood. Vincent Crabbe had been killed; Rosier and Lyle Nott had found his body some distance away, indicating he may have been hurled through the air and died on impact. Half of Crabbe’s right arm was gone, and Astoria saw that he had a nasty slash across his fleshy stomach when they presented his body to his Father, Jasper.

Jasper Crabbe raged and cursed, swearing bloody revenge as his son’s eyes stared sightlessly up into the darkening sky. “He died serving the Dark Lord, there can be no higher honour.” Bellatrix cut in harshly through his tirade. There were murmurs of assent and many glanced at the Dark Lord himself who was pacing back and forth some way away, Nagini draped around his shoulders, indifferent to the grief of one of his longest serving followers.

Astoria was relieved when the Dark Lord commanded them to return to the manor; she desperately wanted to bathe seeing as she was covered from head to foot in mud… and blood. Undoubtedly Antonin would want her looking and smelling sweet, so this was something she should be granted in due course. There again, none of them were permitted to do anything until the Dark Lord had formally dismissed them. When they apparated back to the manor however, all the wounded were commanded to go to Healer Beckwith who had been set up in one of the larger drawing rooms with some beds and Healing potions. Due to Antonin’s position in the inner circle of Death Eaters, as his wife, Astoria was entitled to visit Beckwith first. Unfortunately, by the laws of matrimonium coactus under which they had been wed, Astoria was also Antonin’s personal property. Thus, any potential Healing decisions that may have to be made would be for him to decide as he had complete ownership over her body. Therefore, he was required to accompany her while Beckwith examined her injuries. As she stepped into the large, once grand drawing room, Beckwith gave a start, his eyes darting nervously from her to Antonin while his hands twisted over one another to conceal his shaking. Astoria thought he looked dreadful. He was considerably thinner; his dirty blonde hair was dull and unwashed and there were dark circles underneath his eyes. “M-Madam Dolohov, how may I be of assistance?” Beckwith asked, springing to his feet at once and bowing.

“It is my shoulder, Beckwith. I was slashed by a Hippogriff in the battle.” Astoria answered, turning slightly and gesturing at her torn, blood sodden robes.
Beckwith swallowed hard, looking terrified as he addressed Antonin who was standing behind her. “The lady will need to undress for me to evaluate this properly.”

Astoria glanced back nervously at Antonin who merely gave a curt nod in response, and she tentatively pulled her robes over her head to puddle on the floor. At this, he let out a hiss of fury and came striding over, standing so close behind her that she could feel his rapid breathing upon her neck. “What a fucking mess.” He snarled, and Astoria could almost feel his cold blue eyes studying the slash on her shoulder. “This had best not leave a scar Beckwith, or I swear, I shall make your dying last a moon’s turn!”

Beckwith went as pale as milk and came hurrying over to look for himself. “No Master Dolohov, there should be no scarring if I act quickly. Some Calendula first and then some Dittany, after which I shall seal the wound and—”

“Get on with it then.” Antonin sneered.

“Of course – of course, at once Master Dolohov.” Beckwith babbled. “If you would lie face down upon the sheets Madam, I can attend to your shoulder.”

Astoria obeyed. She heard Beckwith bustling about in his potions counter while Antonin watched her through narrowed eyes. Beckwith’s touch was light and gentle as he warned her that the Calendula may sting, but that did not prepare her for the line of fire that scorched the open wound as he dripped the potion onto the raw flesh. It was all she could do not to scream as she knew that would irritate Antonin, so she bit her tongue and gripped the sheets as hard as she could with her bloodied hands while Beckwith worked away. She had been through worse pain than this after all; no wound or curse could compare to the agony of giving birth. When Beckwith had finished his remonstrations, Astoria felt slightly better now that the wound had been sealed, though it still prickled uncomfortably.

Antonin ordered Beckwith out of the room and performed his familiar charm to clad her in a bed
robe and conceal her modesty, which she found ridiculous seeing as Antonin had allowed six of the inner circle to watch as he stripped her naked and bedded her back at Dracula’s Castle. Antonin was nothing if unpredictable in his actions, however. It was, in part, what made him so scary. “You look vile.” Antonin growled in her ear as he marched her through the various corridors to their chambers.

“I am sorry to have displeased my Lord husband.” Astoria replied meekly, hating herself. “I will make myself more pleasing to your eye until you are satisfied with my appearance.”

“You shall” he said, viciously, tightening his grip on her arm.

When they arrived back in their chambers Astoria heard the awful sounds of Elizabeth crying as Yaxley took his pleasure in the adjoining bedchamber. Antonin gave an annoyed grunt and pointed his wand at the door and performed a silencing charm, the noise subsiding at once. Astoria saw her reflection in a gilded mirror mounted on the adjacent wall and flinched. Like her hands, her entire face and most of her hair was covered in dried blood, not a single scrap of her golden skin to be seen, her lilac eyes looking even more vivid than usual as they blinked out of the mess. The blood had also run down the front of her chest and shoulders because there had been so much of it, the frozen red rivers stopping short of the top of her breasts. There was mud everywhere and like the blood, it had dried, matting into her hair and cracking on the left side of her face where it had spattered all those hours ago. Beneath all the red, Astoria could see that she was covered in hex marks, and each one was now throbbing horribly.

“Not a pretty sight.” Antonin said icily as he stepped forward to rip the bed robe off her body, so that she was only clad in her undergarments. He threw it aside and began to circle her, eyeing her critically. “Not pretty at all.” She felt a twinge of anger at his words; Antonin scarcely looked better than she did. His face was covered in soot stains, dust littered his hair and there was a deep cut that came from his ear down to his neck. “Time to get you beautiful again, I think. Where is that accursed maid? Clara! Clara! Get in here!” Antonin shouted, and Astoria got her first glimpse of the only surviving maid from the manor as a witch apparated right in front of them. She was young and slender with dark eyes and brown hair, though she looked drawn and two black eyes marred her face. Astoria was disgusted to see that someone had carved the words ‘SLUT’ on the back of her right hand. Undoubtedly the poor girl was littered with injuries beneath her robes if she had been left to the mercy of the male Death Eaters.

“Master Dolohov.” She said in a dead voice as she curtsied respectfully, not daring to make eye
contact. “How- how might I be of service?”

Antonin smirked. “I want my wife to look perfect this eve, do you understand me, girl? Perfect.” He smiled unpleasantly as he brushed the girl’s cheek and she flinched. “Who knows, if you please me I might just pay you another little visit tonight.”

“At- at once, M-master Dolohov, I shall attend to this with haste.” She replied, her voice trembling with terror. Antonin gave her a lecherous wink before spinning on his heel and striding from the room, the door slamming behind him.

Clara the maid had conjured up a tray that bore all a lady’s essentials for bathing; sweet oils, fruit infused cleansers and several brushes and combs. Her hands were shaking so badly though that she dropped the tray, its contents flying everywhere. The girl burst into terrified sobs as she scrabbled about on the carpet trying to gather everything up. “Pardons my lady, pardons!” She wept, shaking worse than ever.

Astoria dropped to her knees to try and comfort the girl, but she cringed away as though she feared she would be struck. “It is quite alright.” She replied quietly. “I am very sorry that he hurt you.” This apparently, was quite the wrong thing to say, it seemed. At Astoria’s words Clara flung herself upon the floor and wept harder than ever, beating the carpet with her fists.

Mixed in with her pity, Astoria started to panic. Antonin had only put a silencing charm on the entrance to Yaxley’s bedchamber, not their own, and she was terrified that someone, maybe even Antonin himself, would hear and demand to know what was going on. There would be dire retribution for them both if they were discovered like this; Clara for not doing as she was commanded and Astoria herself for not ‘chastising’ her. “Please, ah… Clara, you must make haste to the task at hand, my husband will be enraged if I am not ready for him, which bodes incredibly ill – for the both of us.” She whispered urgently, now terrified.

Clara raised her bruised and tearstained face to look at Astoria. Slowly, tremulously she nodded. “Of course, my lady, I – I forgot myself, many pardons to you. I will draw a bath at once.” She said
thickly, tears still leaking from those dark eyes which were a little less fearful now. As they were making for the bathing suite on the other side of the room, Astoria grasped the girl’s shoulder lightly, hoping that she could give some comfort to the poor creature amidst all this darkness.

The warfare had raged on for close to three lunar cycles since Astoria had arrived at the base of Wissembourg. Most days there would be some sort of attack from the Germans, so there was hardly any time to rest; the Dark Lord was unrelenting and insisted that they subdue the rebels as quickly as possible. There had been many occasions when the Death Eaters were not permitted to return to the manor back at the base, but instead had to camp out in tents in case of another attack so that they would be ready to fight immediately. Astoria had seen many more ‘torture sessions’ like the one she had walked in on when she had first arrived. Those who survived the attacks were dragged back to the manor and subjected to horrific torture to extract information on the mysterious German commander Henrik Paetzold, who had still not been caught. Astoria remembered with vivid intensity how Silas had slathered a wizard in honey after hours of torment and locked him in an iron case that contained a dozen giant rats that ate the man alive. She could still hear him screaming now. Or else another time when the Lestrange brothers deliberately set a witch free, telling her that if she managed to escape then they would not pursue her. The witch had been so desperate that she had ran, she had been in the chamber for over a day; glass had been gouged into her back and her left arm had been smashed to ruins so badly that bone was sticking out of her elbow. Naturally the brothers had lied, and this was nothing more than a cruel jape. When they eventually caught the witch, she was raped by all the male Death Eaters and Rodolphus had commanded that she be lowered, inch by inch by the hour, into a vat of acidic potion that melted her flesh and bones alike into a sludgy mess. She had taken almost a day to die. No matter how much the German forces were tortured, however, none of them had any useful information regarding Paetzold, not even with the application of Legilimency. If you confide your plans to no one, no one can betray you, Astoria thought grimly as she watched countless witches and wizards swear that they knew nothing as they begged for mercy. The only one who even came close to anything by way of a capture was Rowle. He and a dozen others had found themselves surrounded during a fight that had broken out in the border region of Alsace. Even with other Death Eaters, Astoria included, they had been outnumbered. Rowle had commanded his men to take down Paetzold, who Astoria recognised from the photo they had all been shown. Tall, dark and fierce, the young man’s forces had forced Rowle’s own backwards, and in the end, they had all had to disappear and flee. When they had returned to the manor that eve, the Dark Lord had been most displeased with their failure. He had tortured Rowle for hours after he gave him the news of the defeat. Astoria had fled the scene with the others as the Dark Lord fired out lethal curses everywhere as he screamed and screamed with fury.

The relentless German attacks had made the Dark Lord even more unstable and erratic, and he would often fly into these black rages. Out of the four hundred or so wands the army had been when they arrived, they had lost around one hundred and fifty, which did not please his Lordship. Such was his fury and frustration, he had commanded Dracula to bring forth two of the dragons that resided in the mountains surrounding his castle. Astoria privately thought that this was utter madness. Even with the use of Dark magic, dragons could never be fully controlled, nor tamed. Nevertheless, the Dark Lord had unleashed them upon the border all the same. The two dragons were not as large as the Vipertooth, but were fearsome beasts all the same. One was brightest green, the other was deepest red, and they had insatiable appetites. The dragons were fed up to four times a day; even the
hundreds and hundreds of witches and wizards that were exterminated by Dragonflame could not seem to sate them, so they were fed dead cattle that had perished from the plague. Despite Astoria’s misgivings, the use of the dragons upon his Lordship’s enemies seemed to have worked in the main. The Germans had brought in Dragon Slayers, but they had been unsuccessful, and as a result, their attacks became fewer and fewer. The Death Eaters main duties now were to patrol up and down the border on the lookout for enemies in groups of five or so. Though this was lighter work it was by no means any more pleasant. Scarcely a day went by when Astoria did not come across bloody remains that had not been claimed by the giants or the dragons. The Dark Lord had commanded them all to impale the mutilated bodies of German rebels upon spikes near the border so as to instil fear within their fellows, and as far as Astoria could see, it had produced the desired effect. Thousands and thousands of corpses there were, flies and maggots invading their stinking dead flesh as it sloughed from their bones, while rabid crows tore out eyeballs and plague infested wolves tore them to shreds. Almost all of the German forces had now fled, terrifed at the potential fates that awaited them should they be captured. Astoria was sick of it all, sick of all the blood and death that constantly surrounded her, sick of the screams of raped women and tortured men and sick of the self loathing that coursed through her every day. Worst of all though, she missed Leo so badly that she would often cry silently into her pillow after Antonin had fallen asleep, something that she had not done since the early days of their marriage. She had missed Leo’s name day too, he was now a year old and she wondered if he would even remember her when she held him once again. When would this be over?

It had been a moon’s turn since the last German attack on the border which had been poorly organised and was crushed in less than an hour. The Dark Lord was in high spirits and one morn he commanded the entire army to join him just outside of the base along the main border. When they apparated to the commanded location, the Dark Lord was standing on a raised black stone plinth so that he looked down upon them all. All were jostling for position and there was a great deal of noise as the Dark Lord stared out into the distance, rolling his wand between his long, white fingers as Dementors swirled in the sky above him.

Without warning he pointed his wand at his throat and screeched “Silence!” his voice magically magnified once again, and everyone froze as though struck dumb. “I declare this campaign at the border a success. The magical protection put in place by those witless Germans is gone, and nothing will stop Lord Voldemort and his Death Eaters now! Watch!” He screamed, and he pointed his wand Westward. At once, a wall of blue flame shot both Eastward and Westward up the border, the flames dancing fifty feet in the air, scalding hot, rushing wind emanating from them and stretching out into the distance as far as the eye could see. The Dark Lord’s maniacal laughter seemed to come from the very sky as he stood above them, overjoyed with his victory as he continued to laugh and laugh. There was an upswing of gloating laughter and shouts from the surrounding Death Eaters, with some applauding and punching the air in triumph. When the Dark Lord regained control he spoke again, “See what happens to those fools who attempt to pass through now!” He snapped his fingers and five black crows soared toward the wall of fire. One by one the crows exploded as they tried to fly through, feathers and entrails flying everywhere. The Dark Lord screamed with malicious laughter at the sight and turned back to his army, “You are all dismissed, save for my inner circle who are to remain.” Astoria heard faint pops crackling through the air as the rest of the army disapparated. The Dark Lord’s plinth was slowly sinking lower and lower to the ground and when it disappeared into the mud, he swept over to Astoria and the remaining Death Eaters, staring around at
them all. “Now, we are to return to the manor.” The Dark Lord declared, his voice returned to normal volume, though it was as high and cold as ever. “You shall all attend me to the West wing, forthwith, there are matters of import I must impart to you.” He spun around on the spot, his long robes billowing as he disapparated.

All the Death Eaters followed suit, appearing on a large landing that branched off in different directions. They tramped through the manor toward the West wing, everyone murmuring with excited anticipation about what the Dark Lord was going to share with them. They finally came to a door that was steeped in gloom and swung open at their approach. As they stepped into the room, Astoria realised that it was in fact, a solar. It was evident that the Dark Lord had imposed his personality on the place. All the curtains were drawn; the only light came from the fire sconces set into the wall and a gargantuan green and silver Slytherin banner done in silk hung from the Western wall. Potions and poisons were everywhere, ancient looking books were stacked on shelves and Astoria saw a blackened, shrivelled human hand submerged in bubbling green liquid. On the Eastern wall there was an enormous map of Europe projected on its surface that glowed green. Each country that the Dark Lord had conquered had been blacked out with a small likeness of the Dark Mark emblazoned over it. Astoria could faintly see dusty spots where artwork in the room had been taken down, and most likely destroyed, leaving the walls blank and stark. She faintly heard the sounds of Nagini hissing, but she could not see the snake, and glanced down nervously for fear of stepping on the venomous creature in the half darkness. The Dark Lord was seated behind a desk in an elaborately carved chair, his chalk white skin shining out of the gloom, Bellatrix standing to his left. He waved his wand and the map of Europe was now replaced with a single, enormous map of France.

He looked up at them all with those evil, cat like eyes of his to address them, “I am pleased with what has been achieved here.” Announced the Dark Lord in his high, cold voice. “However, the losses I have sustained are more than I care to think about. Therefore, I have decided that the time has come to put another of my plans into place which will bring me a step closer to victory. I shall be calling upon an old friend who is known to many of you from the First Uprising and whose loyalty to the Dark Order has never wavered.” The Dark Lord turned his scarlet gaze upon Bellatrix. “Show them, Bella.” He hissed softly, his lipless mouth curving into a terrible smile. Bellatrix grinned back at her beloved Master, and quick as a flash, she drew out her curved, black throwing dagger in the likeness of a snake. She drew back her arm and flung it as hard as she could in the direction of the enormous map, and it spun end over end, blindingly fast to land with a thud, quivering in the wall. Many of the Death Eaters laughed softly when they saw where it had landed, but Astoria was filled with dread. The knife had hit a spot on the Southern coast, and the location was marked in burning black letters: "CHÂTEAU DE L'ENFER PRISON, CALANQUE DE L'ESCU, FRANCE.

Chapter End Notes

So I want to point out that Astoria isn't losing her mind after she killed the wizard in the first battle, she's just very traumatised by everything she's been through so far. I also
wanted to bring back some of her 'fire' and even though it's kill-or-be-killed, I thought it was interesting to show that this is the first time she has ever killed out of anger.

I wrote this chapter because I didn't want too make it 'too easy' for Lord V to win the battle for the border as that would be rather dull and even though this is in JKR's magical universe, it wouldn't be realistic either. Failing that, people always rise up and rebel during war, even if the odds seem stacked against them, so that's also what I was going for in that respect.
XXVI. - Château de L'Enfer

Chapter Summary

Don’t want to give too much away right now but this chapter basically follows the ‘mission’ from the end of the previous one. There’s a new original male character in this chapter, let me know your thoughts.

Same disclaimer applies
Warning: graphic material

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There was much excitement and a sense of anticipation in the air at Dracula’s Castle the night before the Death Eaters campaign against the Château de L'Enfer Prison. Raucous laughter pierced the air, wine was quaffed in copious amounts and the courses of rich food seemed never ending. Astoria however, was filled with fear and the thoughts of foreboding would not stop teeming around her head. She merely played with her food, unnoticed by her husband who had largely ignored her throughout dinner as he was in deep conversation with Travers.

“I wonder how this prison will compare to Azkaban?” Came Antonin’s voice from what seemed like very far away.

“How bad can it be?” Came Travers’ reply, “They have no Dementors, that filthy Mudblood Minister outlawed them years ago. I daresay the guards and the magical defences they have put in place shall be the most troublesome.”

Astoria shuddered, Travers may think that this prison was naught to be feared, but she felt elsewise and was sure their task would not be accomplished easily. The Château de L’Enfer Prison had a notorious reputation, on par with Azkaban. It was where the Ministry sent the worst of the worst of Dark wizards who had committed the most atrocious crimes, and the saying was: “They do not send you to Château de L'Enfer to serve out a sentence, they send you to Château de L'Enfer to die.” Indeed, the prison was only for those serving life sentences; no one had ever been released. Over the years many French Ministers, including the now deposed Gustave Clément had tried to close the prison down as it was said to be a cesspit of disease, starvation and systematic torture of prisoners by the sadistic guards that manned it. However, the other, more moderate prisons had refused to take in the mad and dangerous wizards that were entombed in Château de L'Enfer. Thus, the grim fortress
had endured, undermanned and poorly maintained as it fell into disrepair and decay while the prisoners languished within its walls.

The Death Eaters had spent a fortnight at the border receiving instructions from the Dark Lord and making their preparations for the ensuing campaign. They had been commanded to break open the prison and free a wizard called Marcel de Sade. Astoria knew a little of the wizard, though his wanton brutality had earned him a few choice paragraphs in some of her school books after all, including: *Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts: Europe*. Years and years ago when the Dark Lord was gathering followers, he had spent a lot of time travelling around Europe, experimenting with magic, and seeking out foreign Dark wizards. The claim was that his Lordship wanted to be sure of allies he could turn to when he finally spread his rule from Britain to abroad. With the support of other Dark wizards, he would have an easier time conquering the country and have more wands to serve in his army. At some stage in his travels, he sought out de Sade, who was a fanatic supporter of Pure Blood supremacy and wizard rule. The Dark Lord had tasked De Sade with recruiting French wizards to the Dark Order’s cause, and he had taken on the duty with relish. De Sade had gathered all manner of Dark wizards to join the Death Eaters, who terrorised France in the Dark Lord’s name. He had effectively been left to ‘oversee’ France while the Dark Lord wrought havoc in Britain. De Sade’s gratuitous cruelty and the way he commanded his underlings with ruthless barbarity had earned him the nickname: *Le Diable de Bourgogne* – The Devil of Burgundy. It had been de Sade who had originally recalled the giants from their banishment to terrorise Britain at the request of the Dark Lord; he fought there for close to two years before returning to France. When the Dark Lord fell from power, however, de Sade and a band of loyal Death Eaters had fled France to search for him, refusing to accept that he was dead. As it was, however, they were caught in Romania; most like making for Turkey where they were likely to be given sanctuary by Minister Yildriz, an open Dark Order Sympathiser, even at that time. Instead, de Sade and the surviving French Death Eaters were dragged back to France to face trial. It was said that de Sade refused to yield any information on the Dark Lord in exchange for a more lenient prison, and he had laughed like a maniac when the French Wizengamot had pronounced him guilty of mass murder, rape and torture. Even as he was thrown into his cell hours later, he had apparently continued to shriek with mirth.

Astoria was jolted out of her musings of Marcel de Sade by Snape’s cold voice cutting through the air. “Silence, if you please.” The noise at the table subsided, and everyone directed their attention to Snape, who had risen. “You are all to report to me and collect one of these potion vials.” Snape conjured up a tiny purple vial and twitched it between his yellow fingers. “It is of the utmost importance that you drink this before you sleep, if you do not wish to die a most painful death on the morrow, that is.”

“Pray tell, why is that?” Demanded Silas in his reedy voice, scowling at Snape.
“Hold your tongue, Norton!” Snapped Snape. “You will find out on the morrow, it was what the Dark Lord commanded, and I obeyed, I suggest you do the same.”

Hours later, Astoria was cradling Leo in her arms in the Nursery, though according to Rathburne and Clayden, there was no need. In her absence, her baby boy had taken his first steps at last. She was so upset that she had missed out on such a precious moment, but just now she was glad just to be able to hold him, however much it made her arms ache as he had grown so much. Antonin was watching her shrewdly, and she was careful not to show too much affection toward Leo in front of him. Antonin then took Leo from her arms and stared down at him. Astoria’s heart began to race, and she wanted to scream as she watched her husband, terrified at what he might do. He looked up at her, his cold blue eyes gazing at her, almost appraisingly. “It has been a year since the boy. You need to do your duty and give me more children.” Antonin stated, brusquely. Leo had become very still and oddly silent in Antonin’s clutches. Perhaps he senses something.

“As you say, husband.” She replied, her voice almost a whisper. He smiled unpleasantly and handed Leo back to Rathburne. Antonin then seized her arm and marched her out of the room, and she did not have a chance to kiss her Leo goodnight. When she arrived back in their bedchamber, Astoria gazed down at the purple vial that Snape had given her. She unsealed the wax and drank the potion down in one, a burning feeling arising in her chest. Astoria sighed as she heard the sounds of Antonin banging and crashing about clumsily in the bathing suite, and began to undress. As she slid into bed, she wondered, with an ominous feeling, what dangerous and Dark magic they were going to encounter that warranted a protective potion.

As the Death Eaters apparated onto the shore of a deserted cove the next morn, they were hit with salty, ice cold air. Astoria thought it was just as well that she was cloaked and gloved, the cruel ocean wind felt like a thousand knives on the exposed skin of her face. Her eyes were drawn to the enormous ship on the water which was oddly still, yet the sea was lapping softly upon the shore. Its many sails were as black as jet, each one emblazoned with the Dark Mark as they stretched high into the sky from the mast, all held together by complicated rigging. The hull was black, polished wood and the figurehead at the front of the ship was in the likeness of a hissing snake, its mouth wide as it bared its fangs. Astoria saw that she was not the only one staring at the dark forbidding ship and suddenly, as though in answer to their mute interest, it began to glide soundlessly over the water toward them. As the ship kissed the sand with a gentle thud; the curling silver words painted upon it read: Salazar’s Pride. Naturally, she thought, as the Dark Lord’s snake like face appeared above the black iron railings of the ship, staring down at them all. “In.” Commanded the Dark Lord curtly. Silently, they all trooped up the gangway that had appeared in front of them, their many boots thudding upon the dark wood to join the Dark Lord up on the deck. “You all know the plan. It is essential that you do not fail me, or there will be dire retribution for all of you.” None of the Death Eaters said anything, though Astoria saw several of her fellows fidget, or else move uncomfortably on the spot. The Dark Lord ignored this and tapped the side of the ship with his wand as it smoothly and swiftly departed from the shore, the water beneath barely audible as they began their voyage toward the infamous prison.
Their journey had passed without much incident; they had left from just outside the French city of Marseilles, which was about twenty sea leagues from their destination. Halfway through though, the seas had become very rough, causing the ship to rock about violently amidst the waves. The Dark Lord had screamed for them to get below deck, and blasted curses into the sky, as though he thought he could control the weather. After a few hours in hiding as the ship groaned and creaked, Astoria and the Death Eaters emerged, cautiously, on deck when the water grew still. The Dark Lord was gazing out upon an isolated beach, fronted by towering, limestone cliffs, his large white hands grasping the rails of the ship with a desperate strength. “We are here.” His Lordship hissed softly. “Here, at last.”

There were multiple thuds as Dracula and his Vampires landed on the deck, one after another. “My Lord, I am being at your service. Dracula and his Vampires await your command, is it your wish that we proceed as instructed?”

“Dracula, you know what to do.” Replied the Dark Lord in his cruel, clear voice. He did not turn or acknowledge the Vampire, his red eyes still fixed upon the cliffs in front of him. Dracula bowed and rose into the air with his fellows, leaving as quickly as they had come, gliding serenely toward the prison to claim the first victims of the siege. The Dark Lord turned to the watching Death Eaters on the deck and suddenly screeched, “Now, Death Eaters, see the extent of Lord Voldemort’s powers!” He whirled back toward the sea and began to speak in Parcelfont, making those hissing, spitting noises without drawing breath, the way he always did when he spoke to Nagini. The water before the boat began to churn violently, turning purple and making a deep, rushing sound. The water churned and churned so that it made the boat shake and tremble, and then suddenly, something huge spiky, scaly, burst from the sea water, drenching them all. Astoria gazed upwards as the monstrous creature began to uncoil itself and saw that it had many snake heads connected to a single, serpentine body. She now knew the reason behind their protective potions. It was a Hydra, a creature that had supposedly been extinct for a thousand years. Astoria knew that even the creature’s breath was poisonous, causing its prey to die slowly and in agony. The Hydra gave an unearthly, screeching roar as purple smoke billowed from its many jaws and its forked tongues lashed the air. The creature was covered in spines, it had lethal, sharp fangs the size of swords, and glowing purple eyes, each of its monstrous snake heads at least fifty feet thick. The Dark Lord was laughing manically as the Hydra roared again and began to slither from the sea onto the pebbly shore, its many heads thrashing about wildly as it made for the enormous limestone cliffs that protected the prison. Astoria saw figures on brooms appear, only to topple and splatter on the rocks, or else fall into the sea when the Hydra breathed out its deadly purple smoke. Flashes of light could be seen from the other side of the wall when the Hydra loomed above it, though these seemed to have no effect whatsoever and seemed to irritate the creature more than anything. It shook its heads and let out a roar that seemed to go on forever, and it was all Astoria could do not to cover her ears at the deafening sound. The Dark Lord had stopped laughing and was now gazing at the Hydra with his blank, red eyes, a grin frozen on his serpentine features. Then, without warning, he made a strangled, rasping sound. The Hydra screeched as if in answer and smashed its heavy tail into the Western limestone wall of the prison, causing huge chunks of rock to go tumbling into the sea, water flying everywhere as the seafoam churned. The Hydra’s tail collided with the wall again, and more of it fell
away this time, leaving a gaping hole almost fifty feet wide. The Hydra gave another screech and
began to slam its entire body into a thicker part of the wall in the centre over and over again.

“Now!” The Dark Lord screamed, “Take the prison and fetch me de Sade!” The ship rocketed
forward to land with a smash on the shore. The gangway swung downward with a crunching sound
as all onboard dashed down it, making for the smoking ruins of the prison wall. As Astoria shoved
her way through the jagged limestone, she briefly got a look at the prison. She was in a gloomy
courtyard of an enormous dark grey stone fortress that seemed to sprawl on forever as its colossal
walls loomed above her. Archways with portcullis gates barred their way to other parts of the prison
and she saw wizards running toward a bridge connecting two of the stone buildings. Acrid smoke
plumed from blackened chimneys and there were many watchtowers and high battlements tipped in
cruel, metal spikes. They were then confronted with more prison guards who had spilled out into the
courtyard, wands raised. The Death Eaters scattered in all directions, hurling themselves into the
fight. Astoria saw Avery running up the stone stairs at the head of a group of Death Eaters to meet
the guards who were teeming on the battlements as they grappled with the Vampires, some clutching
spurting neck wounds. Bellatrix charged in the direction of the large watchtowers, wand raised and
shrieking incoherently. The Dark Lord meanwhile, struck down all in his path with absurd ease, and
some of the guards ran from the sight of him. The Dark Lord laughed again and hissed at the Hydra,
whose many heads were thrashing above the fortress as it continued to screech over the bangs and
shouts. The creature plunged downward, and the centre wall went toppling over, crushing those
beneath it as it billowed out the purple smoke to cover them all. Astoria could not see anything but
the smoke, until she saw a plume of orange flame through the purple haze a few feet ahead of her.
She braced herself for a guard to come running at her but no, it was worse, a thousand times worse
than that. A fire breathing lion, leapt at her, roaring. No spell occurred to her, so she flung herself
aside and sprang back to her feet almost at once. The creature landed clumsily and rolled, and as it
righted itself, snarling, Astoria saw that it was no lion, it was a chimera. The beast was quite huge,
and though it had the body of a lion, the head of a goat arose from its back, and its tail ended in a
snake’s head. The chimera advanced upon her, rumbling threateningly, the goat’s head on its back
had lethal looking horns and its red eyes were rolling in all directions as it made an awful, gargling
sound. Astoria shot a jet of green light at the beast, but it caught her spell as it spat out flame and
lashed its serpentine tail menacingly. She shot out every spell she knew and that seemed to keep the
chimera from attacking in earnest, but it simply would not die. She sent a poisoned dagger flying
towards the creature’s neck and it struck home. The creature howled in pain and was now bleeding
heavily from the neck, but was still attempting to swipe at her with one of its clawed paws, while the
snake on its tail spat venom. As she backed away, Astoria saw that she was not the only one
struggling with these foul beasts; there looked to be about a dozen of them and they were keeping the
Death Eaters in the courtyard at bay. Astoria glimpsed the Selwyn twins shooting fire at one, while
Alecto Carrow was attempting to hex another, wheezing angrily. Then, Astoria jerked her head
upwards, for she had felt something pass over her head, she looked around wildly expecting flying
monsters, but no. The Dark Lord was now gliding over the fray, flying downwards in great arcs.
Without warning, he pointed his wand at the sky and screamed a spell in a foreign tongue that
Astoria did not know. There was a loud BANG! And at once, the chimera’s turned on the guards and
began to attack them. Astoria saw one wizard being torn limb from limb, another had been dragged
across the shore and was thrashing about furiously as the creature drowned him in the shallow sea
water.
A wizard ran across Astoria’s path, he was being chased by another of the bewitched chimeras and his whole back was aflame as he screamed in agony. Yaxley, seizing the opportunity, pointed toward a steel door that was unguarded and shouted, “There! There!” many others ran after him, Astoria among them. When they reached the door, Yaxley pointed his wand at it and blasted it open, brick and metal flying everywhere. There were more prison guards behind it, but it was almost impossible to take aim, let alone utter an incantation as the Death Eaters and the guards were all mashed up against one another in the passageway, the crush of bodies pushing and shoving.

“I shall take care of this!” Snarled Lyle Nott, who was wedged next to Astoria. He raised his wand as high as he could, while trying to keep balance and screamed, “DELEO!” Faint popping sounds emitted from his wand, followed by a deep, ominous one. A burst of luminous, blue light burst from Lyle’s wand tip and the prison guards were blasted backwards down the passageway. Many were writhing upon the floor, their bones smashed to bloody ruins, but others were rising groggily, dazed by Lyle’s attack. The Death Eaters took advantage of this and struck them down one by one, until there was only one guard left who was duelling Yaxley. Yaxley was hit in the shoulder by a flash of silver light and fell, grunting in pain. The wizard raised his wand again but Antonin, Rookwood and Lyle all fired out curses which hit him straight in the chest. Their spells had been so powerful that the wizard was lifted into the air and smashed into the stone floor, dead.

Yaxley mopped his brow and stood up, panting. “Right, our orders are to search every inch of this place until we find de Sade. Dolohov, take ten and go left, Rookwood, do the same and go right, Amycus, go upstairs, Travers, go down. Break open every cell you find!” He roared. Astoria ran after Travers after he had gestured at her, Adelaide, Theodore, Silas, Elizabeth, Dashiel, Lancelot and three of Marcus Flint’s Half Bloods who she did not know.

As they ran further within, the ceilings became high and cavernous, but it was dark and gloomy, with only every other fire sconce lit. Astoria looked in all directions as they ran, half expecting more guards, but there was no one. Travers came skidding to a halt; he had nearly run past a sliding door covered in spikes. He pointed his wand at the door and it burst open, leaving a great gaping hole as the twisted metal hung limp and burned. One after another, they vaulted through the ruin and came to a gloomy entrance hall with a set of dark oak doors at the end. They made to run at the doors when more curses flew at them, sailing over their heads to smash against the stone wall where they left craters. Five guards had come surging into the hall from a concealed door to the right and were yelling incoherently in French as they sent more spells at them. The flashes of light from the spells lit up the hall and bounced off the walls; one hit a desk in the corner which erupted in green fire. One guard shot out a poorly aimed killing curse at Lancelot, who retaliated by conjuring up a hundred silver arrows which flew with blinding speed to impale the wizard all over his body. Silas killed another by performing Antonin’s own spell *Purpura Morta*, as he slashed his wand violently through the air to emit that deadly purple flame. Astoria disarmed another, and before the wizard could do so much as yell, she struck him dead with *Aveda Kedavra*. When the guards all lay dead, they vaulted over their bodies and threw themselves through the large doors to enter the main building.
The prison was as grim as Astoria had heard tell, the walls were filthy with mildew and grime, raw sewage splashed under their feet and there was the unmistakable stench of death in the air. They charged through several passageways until they came to a larger one lined with iron bar cells. There were yells and shouts as the prisoners rattled their chains and slammed against the bars that ensnared them. “Exolvo!” Astoria and the Death Eaters all cried in unison. CRASH! CRASH! CRASH! The cell doors all burst open, and one after another, filthy, tattooed prisoners were surging out of them, yelling with triumph at their freedom. Astoria and the others paid them no mind however, they pushed past the oncoming tide, and made for an archway at the end of the corridor. One after another, they skidded into an antechamber and flew down a set of narrow, dark stairs. Again, and again, they went down yet more flights of stairs, deep down underground. When they had finally reached the bottom, there were more guards waiting below who shot hexes and jinxes toward them, the stone walls down the dank passageway exploding with ear splitting crashes as the Death Eaters retaliated. Silas was knocked off his feet, screaming, while Theodore was slammed into a wall by a fire sconce, his robes catching alight as he stirred feebly. Elizabeth screamed and struck down a guard closest to her, hurrying over to her brother and dousing him with water from her wand to put out the blaze.

“Leave him!” Travers snarled as he blasted another guard into the ceiling, and Astoria heard his bones crack. “Our orders are to find de Sade and his men, that takes priority over all else!” Elizabeth began to sob as Travers seized her by the arm and dragged her away, leaving Theodore, the left side of his face horribly burned.

Blaise pointed his wand at a thick metal door and it swung open, though when they all attempted to run through, they were knocked backwards, Astoria gagged as she was smashed onto the sewage sodden floor, the filth soaking into the back of her robes and her hair. Adelaide wrenched herself to her feet with a splash and sent out various curses that emanated loud bangs when they made contact with the door. However, when she attempted to go through, she was thrown back yet again. “Stand aside, woman!” Silas screeched, his reedy voice echoing in the gloom as he shoved her out of the way. “Ultimum Exitium!” Silas’s spell blasted the door off its hinges and a roaring fire erupted on the ceiling. They all ran through the broken doorway and fled down more stairs to escape the smoke and flames now raging through the prison, slamming it behind them.

They were all coughing and spluttering from the smoke, Elizabeth was beside herself with worry and Astoria was trying to calm her down. Blaise then rounded on Silas, “Fucking hell Silas, you are going to burn the whole damned prison down, and us with it!” He screamed.
Silas let out a snarl of rage and pointed his wand at Blaise, but before he could utter, Astoria cried, “Protego!” And both wizards were knocked backwards against the wall. “Stop this madness, the pair of you, we have orders!”

“How you dare!” Silas shrieked shrilly, “Antonin will hear of this, mark my words, you-”

“No Norton, she has the right of this.” Travers cut in, curtly. “You are acting like children. Let us make an end to this.” He spun on his heel and sped down the musty passageway, Astoria and the other seven in his wake.

They were running for what seemed like an hour when they had to slow to a walk, for the passageway was becoming narrower and narrower. There seemed to be less air down here, and the darkness – the darkness was so utterly complete that Astoria could not even see a foot in front of her. They all lit their wand tips and continued to struggle downwards; no one speaking, even Silas seemed to have been struck dumb by this oppressive place. Finally, they came to a low, wooden door with a large, heavy padlock attached to it, bound in chains. Travers approached the door cautiously, and began murmuring incantations Astoria could not understand; highly advanced Dark magic like as not, she surmised. Before long there was an audible ‘click’ and the door slowly creaked open. More noxious air hit them as they stepped through the door, all of them having to bend as the doorway was so low. The dungeon they found themselves in however was large, there was a single fire sconce burning about fifty feet high above them on the opposite wall, dimly lighting the surroundings. Astoria had been expecting more rows of cells, but no, the weak firelight was glinting off twenty or so large, steel trapdoors which were sunk into the ground. As soon as Travers took one uncertain step forward, a terrible hiss rent the air and something large, slimy and pale was uncoiling itself from a crater in the wall. Everyone was yelling, Travers was trying to maintain order as jets of light shot everywhere, the bright wand tips spinning dizzily in the half darkness. Then, the creature reared up above them and Astoria’s stomach gave a horrible lurch. It was a Flesh Worm. Eyeless and terrible, with rows of sharp teeth lining its horrible red sucker which was opened wide as it continued to hiss, its breath smelling of a thousand rotting carcasses. Travers conjured up a shield charm just in time to cover them all as the Flesh Worm spat out dark green slime at them; Astoria knew it would melt their skin off if it made contact, and there was no cure. The slime made an ominous pummelling sound as it hit Travers’s shield, “Silence! Silence!” He roared, “We need to organise. The only way to kill one of these beasts is to aim fire down its gullet, we-” But Travers was cut off again as the foul creature slammed itself into the shield, which made an ominous, thudding sound as its slimy coils slipped and slid over the surface, desperate to get to its prey. Adelaide whirled, screaming, and made for the door, but it was sealed fast as she rattled it hopelessly. Astoria was scared, she felt that Travers’s shield could not hold much longer, somebody had to do something, or she would die down here in this fathomless, labyrinthine prison, never to see her son again. She made a slash through the shield charm where she had been standing and ran behind the Flesh Worm, ignoring the shouts of the others behind her, wand raised. The Flesh worm was blind, and was too intent on the others, so it did
not sense her running footfalls. Astoria took her chance, she made a whip like movement with her wand and fiery swords began to slash the creature all over its slimy, maggot like body, black blood spurting from the wounds. It gave another hiss and swung its back end, which finished in a lethal curved spine, and collided with the wall. Astoria had to throw herself out of the way to avoid being hit as bricks and dust began to rain down everywhere from the impact. When she looked up, she saw that the others had imitated her, and the Flesh Worm was hissing worse than ever, but now, its cries seemed more strangled, and it was not spitting out its lethal slime any longer. Please let it die, Astoria prayed as she staggered to her feet, watching Blaise dodge and dive away from the worm’s snapping jaws, sending out balls of fire, trying to get an aim down its throat, but he kept missing. Silas was smashed aside by the creature’s tail once again, and he went rolling across the filthy stone floor, shrieking obscenities. Astoria took aim with her wand, but was also knocked aside when the tail came lashing back to meet her. She was knocked off her feet and the worm’s lethal pincer started slamming into the ground, trying to impale her as she desperately rolled out of the way from the blows as the stone cracked beneath her, unable to conjure an incantation while she was in such a panic. Then, the pincer caught the fabric of the left sleeve of her robe, and she was pinned to the ground, unable to rip free. Terror seized her as the sucker of the Flesh Worm opened wide and it hissed as she desperately pulled at her sleeve, but to no avail. Astoria’s face grew hot as some of that horrible green slime dribbled from the worm’s jaws to plop on the floor with an ominous ‘fizzing’ sound, melting the stone. The worm was drawing closer and closer, she choked as she breathed in its putrid breath; those rows and rows of fangs were going to be the last thing she ever saw before it devoured her. Astoria closed her eyes and thought of her baby boy, wanting to weep, but then a sudden, guttural sound erupted from the creature’s throat. She opened her eyes and saw that its head was on fire and it was writhing wildly, smashing into the walls and ceiling raining dust and stone down upon them all. Adelaide was pointing her wand upwards, her whole arm trembling like a leaf as she set another fireball at the worm, her face white, but determined. She has saved my life, Astoria thought, dazed, as the worm writhed and let out a high pitched scream as it exploded, its slimy entrails drenching them all and the remnants of its long, thick body thudded onto the ground, smoking. There was a long silence as everyone stood there, panting, taking in the bloody scene. Then Travers finally spoke, his voice shaking, though he was trying his best to conceal it. “Open the trapdoors.” At once they all rushed towards the thick, heavy slabs of metal, wands raised. There were faint sounds of shouting coming from within. One by one the doors flew open with a creaking of well rusted hinges, accompanied by an even fouler smell that permeated the dungeon. Astoria had opened the cell on the left furthest from the door, and looked down.

A wizard with long, straggly brown hair and a face like a skull was staring up at her, his knees were huddled to his chest and he was dressed in ragged grey robes, wallowing in his own filth. “Can this be?” He croaked, “Or am I merely dreaming?” He sounded as though he had not used his voice in years, cracked and constricted as it was.

“You are not dreaming, Sir.” Astoria replied. “I am one of the Dark Lord’s Death Eaters, here to release you from this wretched existence.” The wizard was in a sunken pit made from stone, at least fifteen feet deep, too deep for her to hold out her hand and fish him out, so she conjured up a rope and lowered it down to him. The wizard grasped the rope and began to haul himself out of his squalid captivity, his wasted face growing more triumphant as he drew ever closer to the surface. Finally, the wizard grasped her outstretched arm and she pulled him out with all the force she could
muster, and had to stifle a gag when his scent found her nose. He smelled of urine, sweat and
excrement which was so forceful that it made her eyes water.

The wizard got to his feet unsteadily, but then drew himself up tall, and held himself in such a way
that led Astoria to believe that he was a high born Pure Blood. I do not like his eyes, she thought.
They were pale as moons and seemed to shine out of his skeletal face in the half darkness; cold,
cunning and cruel. “Many thanks to you, good lady.” He said, bowing low and kissing her gloved
hand with his filthy, chapped lips, which in his current state of dishevelment, seemed almost comical.
“I am Marcel de Sade, my dear, a faithful servant of the Dark Lord and ready to put my wand at his
service once again.” He swept his filthy, matted hair out of his face; the outline of the Dark Mark just
discernible on the grubby, filthy skin of his left arm. He took a deep intake of breath as though he
were drawing in fresh air. “I have not been out of that chamber in over sixteen years, I feel awake at
last.” He rolled his head on his neck and gave an insane grin; what little teeth the years had left him
were black with rot. “So, the Dark Lord has done what no wizard has done before, he has
successfully broken open the infamous Château de L’Enfer Prison. I confess, I thought I would die
within these walls, you see how well we are guarded here.” He gestured at the remains of the Flesh
Worm. De Sade’s pale eyes roved over her form and darted over to Adelaide who was helping
Elizabeth free another prisoner, eyeing them. “Well do I recall those early days when the Dark Lord
did not allow witches to serve; Madame Lestrange changed his mind though, I think. Ah well, It
shall do me some good to see some pretty faces after all that time in the darkness.” De Sade’s lips
twisted in a horrible smirk.

Astoria inwardly shuddered, and felt outraged, and despite herself, slightly amused that this filthy
prisoner would presume to address her as such. “I thank you Mr. de Sade, your comments are most
kind, but I am a married woman.”

“Do I know the lucky gentleman?” He asked, leering slightly. “And, call me Marcel, my dear.”

“Perhaps.” She replied, smiling sweetly, “I am wife to Antonin Dolohov, Sir.”

“Indeed.” De Sade replied, his colourless eyes widening slightly from the ruins of his ravaged face,
“Then I shall only admire you from a distance my dear, I know that your husband can be most
fearsome.” He laughed - a jarring, cracked sound which sounded like snapping chalk. She took the
opportunity to take in the rest of the dingy dungeon. Two of the Half Blood wizards Astoria had
heard Travers call ‘Bones’ and ‘Clearwater’ were supporting a ragged prisoner between them as he
was unable to stand up by himself, knees trembling. Lancelot was talking quietly with two others and Dashiell was attempting to revive another who appeared to be unconscious. De Sade saw her watching and said “The last of the Death Eaters from France. We were once sixty strong, but many were killed by aurors and others perished within these walls. When will his Lordship-”

Astoria opened her mouth to answer, but Travers had come striding over, an awful smile plastered across his cruel face. “Marcel!” He cried, grasping de Sade’s wasted hand. “Freedom at last, justice has been served!”

De Sade gave his twisted grin. “I can scarcely believe it, Edward, as I was just saying to your pretty little friend here.” He glanced at Astoria and smirked. “I was just enquiring as to when the Dark Lord will receive me? I wish to thank him for this wonderous gift he has bestowed upon us.”

“His Lordship awaits you without. We shall make for the courtyard and see if all is well for us to pass through. As you are unarmed, I counsel you to stay at the back of the party should we come across any of those pestilential guards.” De Sade inclined his head and barked something in French to the other prisoners, and everyone began to file out of the dungeon.

It seemed to take forever as they tramped through the prison to get to the surface. Now that they were not running blindly through the corridors and hexing guards who leapt out from the shadows, the going seemed far slower. Astoria’s legs were aching from all the stairs already, the bumps and bruises from the siege now making themselves known as they stung. When they arrived in the passageway, all was still and silent, but for the drip, drip of water. Astoria peered into the large cells, they were filled with ankle deep human filth and hard stone beds. They looked as though they were meant to hold eight or so, but judging by the number of prisoners that had come charging down the passageway, she surmised that far more had been held in each one. Theodore was still knocked out, and Lancelot strode over to him, held two fingers to his neck and said, gruffly, “He is alive.”

Elizabeth let out a cry of relief and Astoria grasped her by the shoulder “See, he is going to be alright.” She whispered in her ear, and Elizabeth grasped her tightly by the wrist in turn. Lancelot flicked his wand to put a hover charm on Theodore’s body and they all continued to stride down the passageway, their footsteps splashing.
Astoria was grateful when she felt the cool air from outside lightly brush her face after being entombed in the filthy, dank prison for what seemed like an age. Before they stepped out into the open, Travers peered through the destroyed metal door, cautiously taking in the surroundings. After a few moments, he gave a jerk of his head, indicating that it was safe to go outside. There was nothing but grey cloud in the sky, but de Sade and the others screwed up their eyes and hissed in pain, having not seen daylight for over sixteen years. They blinked furiously as their vision adjusted and were eventually able to step outside in earnest. A scene of total devastation met their eyes. There were bodies everywhere, so many that it was hard not to step on them as their limbs began to stiffen and the blood from their wounds congealed. Those who had been killed by the Hydra’s poisonous smoke were rotting at an alarming rate as the smoke rose from their corpses, giving off a foul smell. There was no sign of the Hydra itself, however. One of the prison’s watchtowers had collapsed completely, blood spattered upon the stones from those who had been crushed beneath it. Half of the Western wall of the prison had been blasted away with great scorch marks running up it, darkening the grey stone. Astoria and her fellows made their way to where the other Death Eaters were stood, with more dirty, dishevelled prisoners among them, just as emaciated as de Sade. The prisoners were wizards in the main, but she saw there were about fifty witches standing behind the stocky form of Alecto Carrow.

“You took your time!” Called Yaxley in amusement as they trudged over to him. A score of bound and gagged guards were at Yaxley’s feet, struggling madly, but he paid them no mind.

“Yes, well, we did run afoul of a damned Flesh Worm, Yaxley. It was there to guard de Sade and the others, took us completely by surprise.” Yaxley’s eye’s widened as he stared at de Sade behind Travers, as though unable to believe what he was seeing, but did not utter.

Avery whistled through his teeth, shaking his head. “And I thought our lot we were the unfortunate ones.” He gestured at the group of Death Eaters standing behind him, which included Draco. He looked tired and heartsick, his white blonde hair was dull, and his skin had a greyish tinge to it. Astoria wanted nothing more than to take him in her arms just then and hold him close. “There were giant bats on the upper floors, one almost took my eye out, the bastard!”

Many of the Death Eaters laughed, but were distracted by Marcel de Sade moving forward in their midst, his pale, silvery eyes gazing up at the battlements. Astoria mirrored him and looked up too, as did many of her fellows. The Dark Lord was standing at the highest point of the battlements, his black robes swirling in the wind as he gazed out over the sea, his chalk white skin contrasting sharply with the grey sky above. After a heartbeat or two, he turned to look down at them all, and
many of the prisoners began to mutter to one another. “Quiet!” Hissed Bellatrix. She sported a nasty cut on her left cheek and her robes were singed, but otherwise seemed unharmed.

The silence was absolute as the Dark Lord began to pace up and down the battlements, staring down at them all with his scarlet gaze, Nagini draped around his shoulders. Then he spoke, his voice magically magnified and imposing “You all have Lord Voldemort to thank for your freedom, as you can see I am a generous Master. Join me and my Death Eaters in conquering France and I can show you extraordinary magic. All your wildest desires are possible when you serve Lord Voldemort faithfully, and you may exact your revenge on the country that threw you into a filthy prison and left you to rot!” There was a brief silence, though it seemed to stretch on forever. But then - an eruption of shouting and cheering, exploded around the ruined courtyard. Many of the crazed prisoners were swearing retribution on their countrymen and others applauded the Dark Lord. The Dark Lord’s lipless mouth curved in a smile and he descended down the stone steps swiftly. When he reached the bottom, all knelt before him on the debris strewn floor. Astoria heard his Lordship’s footsteps crunching as he made his way toward where she knelt, knowing who he was going to address. “Marcel de Sade.” Came the high, cold voice. Astoria’s eyes darted to her right and she saw de Sade crawl forward and kiss the hem of the Dark Lord’s robes. “Sixteen years it has been, are you ready to serve Lord Voldemort faithfully once again?”

“Yes, My Lord” Came de Sade’s voice, low and excited. “I knew you had returned, for I would often feel my Mark burn, though I confess I never dreamed that such a miracle could be achieved. You have my thanks, and my eternal service, Master. You truly are, the greatest sorcerer in the world.”

“You all have my leave to rise!” Cried the Dark Lord, as his new made servants and Death Eaters alike all got to their feet. “Now, let us go!” The Dark Lord spun around and began striding toward the collapsed wall which led down to the beach.

When they reached the shore, many of the prisoners let out shouts of astonishment when they saw the enormous Hydra coiled on the sand, part of its body in the water and seemingly docile. The creature then rose its many heads slightly at the sight of all these people and let out an ominous hiss. But the Dark Lord hissed back in return and it merely watched them all file onto Salazar’s Pride, its glowing purple eyes unblinking. Antonin and Yaxley dragged the captured guards onto the ship and threw them at the Dark Lord’s feet. “What do you want done with them, my Lord?” Antonin asked.
The Dark Lord looked down on his captives with his merciless red eyes. “Feed them to the Hydra, Nagini has eaten today.” He said coldly, stoking the snake’s snout with a long, white finger.

Antonin grinned and tore away the gags from the captives’ mouths and they began to scream in earnest. “Please, Please!” One begged. “I join, you, I join you, please do not!” The Dark Lord ignored him and was already starting to command the Hydra in Parceltongue again. It glided through the water, hissing as one by one, Antonin and Yaxley threw the guards overboard. The last Astoria saw of the wizards they were screaming and thrashing about, attempting to free themselves from a whirlpool of seawater. The Hydra rose up above them, tendrils of purple smoke escaping from its jaws. Then in one fell swoop, the Hydra screeched and dived into the whirlpool with a crashing of waves, silencing them forever.

Chapter End Notes

So I thought it’d be interesting to introduce the idea of overseas Death Eaters as in the original books we are told that Lord V travels extensively in his first rise to power so I guess it’s not completely inconceivable that he would seek out foreign wizards for ‘the cause.’

Château de L'Enfer translated means ‘House of Hell’
Chapter Summary

This chapter goes into detail about the 'charming' Marcel de Sade and the French Death Eaters and the other moves Lord V is employing against the country for domination.

Same disclaimer applies
Warning: distressing and graphic material

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When the Death Eaters apparated to their commanded location, their many feet hit the gravel below with a loud crunch. Thick mist surrounded them, and all was still and silent but for the lapping of water nearby. Astoria thought she could make out towering trees and hills looming above them. Their party was somewhat diminished from the huge numbers that had been on Salazar's Pride hours ago. The Vampires had taken the rest of the prisoners back to Dracula’s Castle to be washed, fed and armed, while Rosier and a clutch of Half Blood wizards had escorted the other Death Eaters back to their respective homes. Marcel de Sade was the only one who remained.

“There, that way.” Came de Sade’s voice to her right, and she saw him point a bony finger straight ahead.

At his words the Dark Lord appeared at the head of their group in a swirl of black robes. His chalk white skin seemed to glow in the grey mist, his red, slit pupiled eyes looking especially sinister through the haze as they swept over them. He did not say a word, but wheeled around and began to stride ahead, all of the Death Eaters following suit. After they had walked through the mist for a good ten minutes, Astoria saw the outline of a large and imposing chateau which became more defined as they drew closer. The chateau was done in pale grey stone and was protected by an enormous outer wall. Numerous minarets of varying heights littered the elaborately developed roofline with black statues of wild beasts and birds adorning the columns. Only one or two of the castle’s hundreds of windows were lit, the rest were black and still. The great keep seemed to swallow them as they marched through its shadow and toward the outer wall. They finally came to a grand hall decorated in dark blue marble and silver, a towering arched staircase taking pride of place. There were three witches waiting at the foot of the stairs, two looked to be in their teens while the other looked older, in her middling thirties perhaps. De Sade's wife and children, no doubt, Astoria thought.

“Marcel! Mon amour!” The elder witch cried across the hall. But de Sade raised a hand "Silence, Ediva.” He turned to the Dark Lord. "My Lord, the Estate of de Sade is yours for as long as you require.”
“The scrolls de Sade” the Dark Lord said coldly. “I require the scrolls.”

“Certainly, my Lord. The scrolls are still in my solar, I should be pleased to show you the way if you –”

“I do not require assistance, de Sade.” The Dark Lord hissed, colder than ever.

The Dark Lord paused his ascent up the arched staircase. “de Sade” he called, his high cold voice echoing off the stone walls. “I have a guest gift for you. Rookwood, hand it over.”

Rookwood grinned broadly through the fall of his greasy, unkempt hair. “At once my Lord.” But the Dark Lord’s robes were now swishing behind him as he disappeared onto the darkened landing above. “Bones! Clearwater!” He barked. The two Half Bloods appeared at once, supporting a female captive between them, her face hidden behind the long fall of dirty hair that hung over her face. They flung her onto the floor at de Sade’s feet and she gave a dry sob as her face smacked on the marble. The Half Blood wizard who Astoria now understood to be called James Clearwater seized a handful of the woman’s hair and savagely yanked her head backwards so de Sade could have a clear view of her face. “Your very own slave, old friend. You may do as you please with her.” Rookwood announced, smugly. “This amulet –” He roughly yanked the iron collar around the witch’s neck which had been set with a dark opal as she let out a whimper. “Ensures that she will obey your every command and cannot use any magic against you. She is a Mudblood, you see.” Many of the Death Eaters laughed but Astoria had to suppress a gasp of shock as she saw the witch Clearwater had in his clutches. No, no, it cannot be… I thought she was dead, I thought she had been killed long ago.

De Sade’s pale eyes gleamed. “A Mudblood.” He whispered as he stared down at Hermione Granger, the devoted friend of the now deceased Potter. Astoria thought she looked dreadful; the scar that Silas had given her had healed to an ugly, reddish brown, her eyelid drooped over her black, empty eye socket and there were both new and old bruises, burns and cuts all over her face. Granger was painfully thin, and she twitched oddly, doubtless from the many beatings and rapes she had been forced to endure during her captivity. Astoria felt nothing but pity, it was incredibly sad to see the once vivacious, intelligent young witch reduced to such a shrunken, defeated state. “I shall deal with you later you little thief. Take her to the tower!” Bones and Clearwater hauled Granger to her feet once again and dragged her from the hall. De Sade then turned his attention on his wife and daughters.

“Mon amour!” His wife Ediva cried once again, and she flung herself into her husband’s arms, sobbing into his chest and speaking words Astoria could not understand. De Sade murmured to her in French and stroked her dark hair before shooting questions at his daughters. When Ediva had recovered herself, she wiped away her tears and conjured up a wand. “Pour toi, ma chère,” she purred, kissing his filthy face and pressing the wand into his hand.
De Sade held his wand high above his head and Astoria could almost see the magic surging through him as a demonic smile lit his wasted face. “Yes! Yes! AT LAST!” He screamed. De Sade whirled around and pointed his wand at a statue across the hall which exploded, stone flying everywhere and sliding across the floor, the debris melting, such was the power of his spell. “The Devil of Burgundy, is BACK!” Wild and crazed laughter burst from him then, his face alive with excitement, those pale, mad eyes practically popping out of their sockets as de Sade glowered in his freedom. He is mad, Astoria thought, staring at the demented wizard as his almost toothless mouth gaped wide open as he continued to laugh, tears of sadistic joy leaking from his eyes. Many of the Death Eaters laughed with him, which only served to increase his madness. When de Sade’s mania had eventually subsided, he finally managed to utter coherent words once again. “My friends,” He panted, “Do make yourselves comfortable, my daughters shall show you to chambers. Pray excuse me, there is only one thing I wish to do just now.” He gave his wife a lustful look and kissed her hand suggestively as she blushed and tittered. The wizards roared and whistled as de Sade clambered up the stairs, arm in arm with his lady.

The next time Astoria glimpsed Marcel de Sade, he was almost unrecognisable from the dishevelled, dirty prisoner she had first laid eyes on - had it not been for those pale eyes that she loathed so much. He was sat across the table from her now in his audience chamber that the Dark Lord had commandeered for his own. De Sade was wearing costly, blood red robes, his long brown hair pulled back tight from his face which emphasised his gaunt features and his teeth had been mercifully restored, crooked as they were. Though tall, his build was naught but sinewy muscle and his face was hollow and wasted, making him look far older than his sixty years. Astoria hated him, she hated everything about this monster and she was glad that her Leo and the other babies had been settled on the other side of the cavernous chateau, far away from him. She did not know how long they would be forced to stay here, it was worse than being at Dracula’s, for de Sade was nothing short of insane. He would burst into shrieks of laughter at any mention of pain in other beings, would fly into crazed rages if he chanced to hear the word ‘Mudblood’ and he said that his dearest wish was to set the world ablaze for the Dark Lord so as to destroy the Muggles forever. It was therefore incredibly unnerving to see de Sade behaving normally at other times; kissing his wife, laughing with his daughters, or else being cool and collected as he talked with his fellow Death Eaters.

Astoria quickly looked away when de Sade’s pale eyes flicked from the Dark Lord to stare at her. His Lordship was studying an ancient looking scroll covered in complicated runes she did not recognise. She could not help but wince as the Dark Lord’s hairless head flicked upwards abruptly, staring around at them all with those blank, red eyes. “You all have my leave to go!” He announced sharply into the silence. “I shall have no further need of any of you until our… engagement this evenfall.” His high, cold voice was laced with disdain.

Astoria could not help but share his Lordship’s feelings, for there was to be a gathering at the Estate that night. De Sade had invited all his old Pure Blood allies who had aided him during the First Uprising so that they might ‘acquaint themselves with those building the New World.’ In truth though, this was merely an excuse for de Sade to throw an extravagant ball now that he was freed from prison. Astoria had no interest in this ball whatsoever, she may as well walk on cracked ice as Antonin would want her to be ‘perfect’ at such a formal occasion.
As they filed out of the audience chamber, Elizabeth slipped her arm through Astoria’s. Astoria did her best to ignore the nastier aspects of her character, but she could not help but feel comforted by the older witch’s presence these passing days. Elizabeth was the closest thing to a friend she had ever had since she had been wed to her brute of a husband. “I am pondering on what to wear this night, I daresay we must endeavour to look our best as we shall be in the presence of royalty.” She laughed and gave a toss of her chestnut tresses.

Astoria grimaced, apparently one of the guests was an exiled African prince who had been banished from his native Namibia for practicing Dark magic rituals that involved the killing of Muggle babies and children. Before she could answer, however, she heard Antonin’s sneering voice crack through the air. “Wife! What do you imagine you are doing? Get over here, now.”

As the sky darkened outside, Antonin summoned Granger to dress Astoria for the dratted ball. Granger worked in silence, her eyes downcast as she combed through Astoria’s golden hair, laced her into a rib crushing whale bone corset and hung purple diamonds at her neck and ears. The gown she wore tonight was one of the grandest she owned, crushed lilac velvet to match her eyes, scalloped in silver lace with a heavily jewel encrusted bodice. Finally, when Granger slid the pear shaped diamond that was her wedding ring onto her finger, Astoria got to her feet to await her husband who was presently in the bathing suite. She shot a quick look at Granger, wondering if she should dare speak. The sound of running water came from the bathing suite, surely it would serve to quieten her words. “I am so sorry.” She whispered. The one good eye that Silas had left Granger finally met Astoria’s gaze. Something seemed to flicker in the dismay and hopeless look in that brown orb and there was nothing but rage there, nothing but the vilest contempt. Her expression was so frightening that Astoria thought she was going to scream at her. What do you expect? You are a Death Eater, you stood there and watched as she was raped by your husband while her friends were slaughtered.

Their gaze was broken when the door to the bathing suite flew open to reveal Antonin, wearing deep blue dress robes and his arrogant sneer. “You look beautiful tonight my lady, shall we?” He held out his arm and they swept from the room, her husband not sparing Granger so much as a glance. When they arrived in the entrance hall they were greeted by a burst of noise and chatter as Antonin led her over to where Marcel and Ediva were stood, greeting guests. “Evening, Marcel.” Antonin said, “And good evening to you, old friend.” De Sade replied, “And your lovely wife of course.” Astoria dutifully stepped forward and held out her hand, which he took in both of his own as he kissed it, those horrible pale eyes never leaving her own lilac ones. “Madame Dolohov, good evening to you, I daresay shall remember that face until I die.” He proclaimed extravagantly still holding her hand, “The face of the angel who sprung me forth from that vile pit.”

Antonin exchanged a smirk with de Sade and they moved further into the entrance hall to join the others. The place was a swirl of silk, velvet and sparkling jewels, the long trains of ladies’ gowns swishing by as all the nobility of France’s Pure Blood aristocracy laughed, chattered and drank with the Death Eaters. She recognised some of them from when her Father had taken her to various balls...
all over Europe to parade her in front of foreign nobles in the hope of finding a suitor. No one was ever good enough though, were they Father?

She was distracted from her musings as the hall suddenly fell silent. Astoria turned to see what everyone was looking at and knew why they had stopped talking. Bellatrix was sweeping down the left side of the arched staircase hardly making a sound. She was dressed in a gown which was such a deep shade of green, it looked almost black against her milk white skin. As was her wont, Bellatrix did not bedeck herself in jewels; her only adornment was an emerald and diamond brooch in the likeness of the Dark Mark which was pinned directly above her heart. She swept across the blue marble, cutting a path through the crowd with many bowing their heads respectfully as she strode past, holding her chin up high in her characteristic, arrogant stance. Sure enough, moments later, the Dark Lord himself appeared at the top of the arched staircase, staring down at them all with his blood chilling, scarlet eyes.

There was a great ripple of colour as the wizards bowed and the witches curtsied for the Dark Lord. “You may rise.” Came the high, cold voice after a few moments. “I have achieved, extraordinary things thus far and now, my plans for the New World are finally falling into place. Soon, the natural order will be re established, and Pure Bloods will once again rule over all the beasts and lesser beings of this world! To Blood Purity!” He screeched to an upswing of cheering and applause with many echoing the phrase.

After the Dark Lord had made his entrance, the noise crept back up again as they all made for the ballroom. Naturally the Dark Lord took the Lord’s seat, while many lined up in front of him, waiting to see if he would receive them. Fools, you are merely dice to be rolled and discarded at will as the Dark Lord plays his savage games. Antonin led her across the room to present them to the guests; it was deemed improper for a witch to make the introductions; thus, her spouse needs must do it for her. Let the tedium begin. The Death Eaters they had pulled out of Château de L'Enfer prison looked barely recognisable now that they had been washed, combed and cut, garbed in their grand dress robes. The French nobles seemed determined to look their best, the witches wore their most fabulous jewels and sumptuous gowns, the wizards had gold topped canes, sparkling cravats and wore shoes made from polished dragon hide. Astoria smiled sweetly for them and mouthed all the empty courtesies she knew by heart as she was presented to each one them by her husband. Prince Gyasi Adimba – N’zogu; the Namibian exile, was simply delighted when she addressed him as ‘Your Highness’ and even more so when she complimented the stunning Egyptian looking witch on his arm on how charming her gown was. Astoria’s behaviour seemed to please Antonin as well, for she did not get one sharp comment in her ear, nor the tightening of his hand over her own as was his wont when he was displeased. Well, she thought, grimly as she took her seat in the dining hall. This is what I am good at. This is what I have been trained to do for my entire life.

As Astoria had predicted, de Sade set a sumptuous table; she could hardly be surprised after all those years of having nothing to eat but wormy meat, dirty water and mouldering bread, not to mention wanting to ‘put on a good show.’ The Dark Lord was not at table, but that was not unusual, I wonder if he even needs to eat? she wondered, taking in the elaborate display of food and flowers. There were innumerable roast swans still in their magnificent white plumage, stuffed with oysters and creamed mushrooms. Platters of fresh tiger prawns in their colourful shells, buttered salmon, baked crab pie, spring greens, blue cheese tarts, thinly sliced peppered beef, mussel stew… practically every extravagant dish under the sun was in front of her. Astoria’s appetite did not stir however, she found it grotesquely perverse that they were walled up in de Sade’s lavish estate, drinking fine vintage wine and gorging on stuffed squid and the like while starvation, disease and red
murder ravaged through the country. *Yet here you are.* It was a rancorous prospect that she shoved to the back of her mind as she forced down the clawingly rich swan meat.

“Swan not to your liking, my dear?” Came a voice from across the table. “They come from my own lake on the Estate, you know.”

Astoria looked up and saw de Sade staring at her with those pale eyes like chips of dirty snow. She barely repressed a shudder; every time he looked at her she felt as though something dead was slithering upon her naked skin. “Oh, no Monsieur, it is excellent.” She lied, smiling for him.

Antonin turned around, goblet in hand, and frowned. “She does not eat, hardly ever.” He said to de Sade. *And why do you think that is, husband?* “I daresay if she ate a little more then maybe she would have another baby in her belly by now.” His mouth twisted in annoyance and Astoria could not help but flinch.

De Sade threw back his head and cackled while Ediva gave a little smirk. *“You never change, Dolohov, always speak what is in your mind do you not?”*

Antonin gave de Sade a stupid grin before turning to fix upon Astoria with his cold blue stare that seemed to pin her to the spot. “You will clean your plate, wife.”

“As my Lord husband commands.” She replied softly. Astoria felt Elizabeth move uneasily next to her but did not dare look in her direction.

“Beautiful and obedient.” Drawled de Sade, upending a goblet of wine in one. “You are a lucky man, Dolohov.” Ediva pouted, but de Sade gave her a playful pinch and started speaking to her in French as she giggled madly.

That seemed to be the end of the matter, for Antonin turned his attention back to his neighbour, Avery, and they continued to talk. Astoria gazed furtively up and down the dinner table, taking in all the wizards who had swollen the ranks of the Dark Lord’s army. In truth, she had become less fearful of the Death Eaters whom she had spent close to three years around now – always excepting Antonin of course – but these unfamiliar Frenchmen frightened her. She had not been in such close proximity to them since the prison breakout and after having been formally introduced tonight, she could now put names to faces. There was Armand Fersen who had a shaved head, was covered in tattoos and had feverish amber eyes that ogled every passing witch. Didier Aubin, who wore a gold ring through his nose, had skin as black as night, a sharp tongue and quick hands that looked like they liked to hurt. Or the sinister Louis Clavette, who was built like a bull and made cuts up his arms for every woman he had raped; Astoria heard him jesting with Amycus Carrow in the ballroom.
earlier that he had moved onto his legs long ago. Thibault Breton, Alexandre Heroux, Adrien Levant, Elias Malfait, Jacques Sauvage and so many more; she hated and despised them all. They were cruel and dangerous, and what was worse is that they were out for revenge as well as being desperate to enforce the Dark Lord’s commands. De Sade however was the worst. Yes, he appeared to have affection for his wife and daughters, but Astoria felt sure that if they needed to be sacrificed for the Dark Lord then he would offer them up without hesitation. The feasting and drinking went on for hours and Astoria was exhausted. She had drunk too much wine and her tightly laced corset beneath her gown was beginning to grow even more uncomfortable. It seemed that everyone had drunk too much, to be sure. Silas went crashing to the floor to roars of laughter when he tried to stand, Blaise was being violently sick into a large urn, Theodore was sprawled across the table, half of his face in his apple tartine, and de Sade and his wife looked as though they were going to lie with each other right then and there as they kissed fiercely, their hands busy. Predictably though, Antonin was the drunkest and loudest out of everyone and had to be supported by Rowle as they both staggered up the stairs. Astoria scurried in their wake like a good little wife as they made for their bedchamber.

Granger was waiting for them when Antonin stumbled through the door, almost falling. His bloodshot eyes fell upon her at once and he grinned “Undress my wife, Mudblood.” He slurred, “And yourself. I think I shall have the both of you in my bed tonight. Purity and filth, I wonder if they will mix well.” He laughed, his body reeling.

Granger had gone as pale as milk, but the neck iron ensured that she had to obey, and she took tremulous steps toward Astoria. As she unlaced the back of her gown, Astoria could feel her hands shaking. When she was clad in her silk bed robe, Granger reached behind her and attempted to see to her own gown. The time had come for action, the other witch had suffered enough, and she was determined for Antonin not to have his own way for once. It was unlikely that the male Death Eaters would send for her, they were all so drunk. If Astoria could save Granger from just one night of the horror that was rape, then she would do so.

“Husband.” She said with an affected little pout. “Must we have this filthy thing in our bed?” She walked daintily over to him and pushed her hand up under his shirt, tracing the hard lines of his muscular stomach. Antonin did not answer, but she could feel him responding to her touch, his heart was hammering, and his breathing quickened as she pressed her body against his. “I daresay Marcel will be loath to burn the sheets after she’s been in it.”

Antonin burst out laughing. “Did you hear my lady, Mudblood?” He shouted across the room, “I have no need of your dirty body this night, now get out of my sight.” Granger hastily pushed her dress back up over her shoulders as Antonin buried his face in Astoria’s neck, taking in her scent and breathing hard, groping her breasts roughly. As Granger turned to flee, their eyes met. Astoria gave her former classmate the tiniest of nods, and she could have sworn that Granger nodded back.

In the following weeks, the nobles who had been at de Sade’s ‘welcoming ball’ flitted in and out of the Estate. De Sade would discuss the Dark Order’s plans with them and they would request personal favours for when the new regime was in force. One such afternoon, they were all seated in
a large parlour sipping on sweet wine and being served fresh fruit by Granger when Ediva stepped into the room on the arm of an unfamiliar wizard. Astoria did not recognise him, he had certainly not been at the ball, for if he had attended she would have definitely remembered him. He was the fattest wizard she had ever seen, his overlarge robes were straining on his broad stomach, his face was red and sweaty and he was wheezing as though he had just run up a hundred stairs. “Ah, Philippe.” De Sade went striding over to the fat wizard and grasped his fleshy, thick fingered hand in his own sinewy one. “Do come join us. My friends this is Philippe Rousseau, a fast friend of the Dark Order.” De Sade kissed his wife on the cheek and whispered something in her ear that made her giggle. She curtsied to them all with a smile and drifted out of the room.

“De Sade, it is a true miracle that you are back with us once again. My apologies for not being able to attend your gathering.” The wizard named Philippe panted, still seemingly out of breath as he dabbed his sweaty, balding head with a silk handkerchief. De Sade smiled and clapped him on his fleshy shoulder.

The Death Eaters murmured greetings, some even raising their glasses to Rousseau as he waved a fat hand at them all in acknowledgement. Silas however, childish as he was, looked like he was fighting down the urge to burst out laughing and took a large swallow of wine at a stern look from Rookwood. “Over here my friend.” De Sade led him over to the cluster of chaise longues and sofas where Astoria was sat by Antonin and Elizabeth and Adelaide were either side of Yaxley. Astoria had a shrewd feeling that de Sade wanted to keep the females in full view of Philippe Rousseau as he was opposite them now. Indeed, as the grotesquely fat wizard slumped onto the chaise with an ominous creaking sound, his pig eyes roved over each and every one of them, lecherously. Astoria was revolted by him, despite the heavy perfumes he was wearing, the stench of Rousseau’s flesh was apparent even from a few feet away. She also saw the outline of sagging breasts – larger than most women’s – resting over his huge stomach under the costly velvet robes. De Sade settled his spare frame into an armchair facing his stout companion. “Slave!” He barked at Granger, who jumped. “Fetch us brandy, the vintage!” Granger scuttled away to the drinks cabinet and returned almost at once with two brandy balloons as well as the bottle on a silver tray. Rousseau groped at her backside idly as he leaned forward heavily to take his drink, his rounded cheeks flushed with depraved pleasure. “Now, to business I think.” De Sade announced, a horrible smile twisting his hollow features as Granger hurried away, looking terrified. “The Dark Lord requires fifty wands from your household and an annual sum of half a million galleons to fund the conquest of Europe and the expansion of the Dark Order.”

Rousseau’s small eyes narrowed, almost disappearing in his many folds of flesh. He did not answer immediately but conjured up a large cigar which began to smoke as soon as he took a long pull on the end. Astoria hated the smell, it was so pungent and harsh despite the parlour having high ceilings. “These demands, are very steep; however, I have several requests of my own, so we shall see what you have to offer.” Rousseau replied, letting out the cigar smoke with a slight wheeze. This one will be in his grave before the war is even won, Astoria thought, wryly.

De Sade’s jaw clenched for a moment and his smile flickered, but he recovered himself almost at once. “Come now, come now! You are the richest man in all of France!” He cried, smiling, though his pale eyes were now boiling with anger. “Do not tell me that is too much for you, Philippe. I shall
listen to your requests, however. What is it that you require from the Dark Order?"

Their bartering seemed to go on forever as they discussed land rights, marriages, positions for Rousseau’s sons, and gold. Astoria could not help but notice that de Sade’s brandy glass did not change, his colourless eyes were as cold and conniving as ever and fixed intently on the fat wizard before him. Rousseau on the other hand was quaffing the brandy like water, getting drunker as every minute that ticked past. An hour later, he was shouting, his massive form swaying heavily from the drink, beckoning Granger over to fill his glass and groping every part of her that his stubby fingers could reach. “Where can I get a slave like this?! Is she for sale?!” Rousseau bellowed drunkenly, brandy spraying from his plump mouth.

Granger cringed away from him, looking repulsed and frightened in equal measures. De Sade stood, “I fear not, Philippe, she is not for sale at the present.” Philippe’s pallid, pie face grew dark with fury and he opened his mouth to argue, but de Sade forestalled him. “I have something that you will like even more that will not cost you a single Sickle.” He shot a meaningful look at Armand Fersen and Didier Aubin who strode to a door on the Eastern wall. They reappeared almost at once, parading a dozen, half naked Muggle girls and women in front of them all, the Delacour sisters bringing up the rear. *I thought them long dead too, Astoria thought despairingly, death is preferable to this, surely.* The wizards all whooped and whistled, though some called insults, while others threw the remains of the fruit at the girls, jeering. Astoria saw that all of them had bruises and whip marks up and down their backs, their eyes were heavily bloodshot, and they were oddly groggy as they stumbled into the room. They were all dressed in lingerie made from cheap fabrics such as cotton and thin satin as Fersen posed them in front of de Sade and Rousseau, whose anger seemed to have vanished as he gaped at the slender figures before him.

All the male Death Eaters were openly admiring the backsides of the women and girls, and Avery shouted, “I wouldn’t mind fucking that sweet arse!” Gesturing his goblet at a blonde haired girl who could not have been more than fourteen as she slouched lazily before Rousseau and de Sade, one hand on her hip, her head lolling to one side.

“There you are my friend,” De Sade leered, raising his voice a little over the torrent of mocking laughter. “This is just a taster of what we can provide our devoted friends. To be sure, these are Muggle and Veela whores, but they are some of the comeliest among our many prisoners. They have been pumped full of opium, so you can do anything, *anything* you want without you even having to pick up your wand, I do know how you like to… ah, experiment with your chattel. What do you say to that, Philippe?”

Rousseau licked his thick lips and finally found his voice, “I think, I will start with this one!” He roared, pointing at a dark haired young woman who had been tarted up in red. Aubin seized her by the arm and flung her into Rousseau’s lap as she let out a small whimper. Rousseau smiled and buried his fat face between her breasts, while a single tear crept down the cheek of the beaten, intoxicated girl.
Rodolphus then came striding forward, a throwing knife clutched in his massive fist. “Those are pretty lips.” He stated to the young blonde girl all the Death Eaters had been letching over. “Suck my cock, you filthy Muggle whore.” The girl struggled feebly and wept, trying to pull away while her companions trembled like frightened animals and the Delacour sisters held one another. “No?” He sneered, grabbing a fistful of her hair and throwing her to the floor. Rodolphus straddled the girl and dug the point of his knife into her cheek until blood blossomed upon her skin. Her tears were falling thick and fast and her eyes were rolling from the excessive doses of opium she had been given, but she did not cry out in earnest. “Well, if I cannot have those lips, then you cannot either.” Astoria heard Bellatrix give a delighted cackle and shivered slightly, despite the roaring fire in the hearth. Rodolphus grabbed the girl by the jaw, and slowly and deliberately drew the knife across her bottom lip. The girl then found her voice. She let out a strangled scream as flesh parted from flesh. Moments later, she had no lips. It was a grisly sight, her teeth stood out shockingly amidst the red ruin of flesh as she howled in agony.

The girl’s screams were so loud that Astoria thought that the very glass in the windows would shatter and her lungs would tear. De Sade was screaming too, but he was screaming with laughter as the girl thrashed and writhed about upon the floor underneath Rodolphus. The girl’s cries grew louder as Rodolphus shoved her legs apart and yanked her toward him brandishing his knife tauntingly at her. “I think I shall cut off your lower lips too.” The elder Lestrange announced to whoops of glee, his brother urging him on in the background. Astoria saw Rodolphus lower the knife between her legs and was inwardly thankful that she was not in full view of what he did next, for the girl gave another terrible scream and a moment later, he was holding the bloody tatters of her womanly parts between his fingers, grinning, as the rest of the wizards roared. De Sade, who had been transfixed by the gruesome display, then seized a brown haired Muggle woman and began to strangle her with her own hair, panting excitedly, his pale eyes alive with savage pleasure as she struggled and choked. At this, Antonin got to his feet, “Witches, OUT!” He bellowed over all the noise. Astoria did not need to be told twice, her stomach was roiling, but Hestia Carrow looked disappointed as her aunt Alecto took her firmly by the shoulder and led her from the room. Astoria glanced back down the corridor and shuddered as she heard de Sade’s voice shrieking with glee as a woman sobbed and begged.

The next few weeks were much of the same; wizards continued to visit the Estate and the Death Eaters spent their days with their French counterparts, plotting and planning their cruel dreams. Finally, as the day dawned grey and bleak, the time had come to enforce the Dark Lord’s worst, and cruellest command. They had the names and locations of wizarding families who had been forced into the cities to escape the horrors of the Death Eaters and the plague rampaging through the countryside. The Dark Lord had been explicit in his instructions and Astoria was dreading having to carry them out. This is pure evil; how will I even be able to face myself in the mirror each day after this? De Sade was to head the campaign, so they were required to obey his every command. The notion filled Astoria with disquiet. Giving de Sade any measure of power seemed a very bad idea; the man was wild, crazed, singularly unfit to command even his own household, let alone hundreds of bloodthirsty Death Eaters. Scarcely an hour after they had risen from their beds, they apparated to the outskirts of a city named Toulouse, hidden by powerful disillusionment charms. The Death Eaters had not attacked this city before, but it was plain that the ravages of war had scarred the place all the same. The city looked to be deserted, but for the rotted and bloated corpses that were littered in the streets. Many windows had been boarded up and there were old, yellowing wanted photos and posters warning of the plague pasted to many doors. This city is dead. She thought, staring at the bleak surroundings. Well with any fortune, they would find no one here. As the Death Eaters came to a rusted bridge above a foul smelling, stagnant river, Astoria felt rather than heard her fellows splitting into groups as she and nine others trooped across the bridge, led by de Sade. He had
commanded the Death Eaters to search every single street that were known to have the homes of witches and wizards so that they might accomplish their terrible task. Just before they reached their destination, a rabid black wolf slunk from a burned out building, sniffing the air, its mad eyes rolling as it rumbled a growl. Before Astoria could blink, however, the beast turned tail and scurried up a dark alley, vanishing just as quickly as it had appeared. She heard Antonin’s soft chuckle come from somewhere to her right.

They made their way up a miserable street lined with abandoned homes which were falling into disrepair. The houses were of a middling size, but fairly close together and Astoria grimaced when she saw that many had graves in the front gardens.

“Flint, Clearwater.” Came de Sade’s excited voice when they were all stood outside the house. “As a precaution, I command you to keep watch outside.” Astoria heard their murmurs of assent and the shifting of footsteps as they hastened to obey. There was the faintest popping sound and she beheld de Sade and all the others crowded by the stone pathway that led up to the front door of the house. The expression on de Sade’s face was unnerving – a look of savage anticipation. Wordlessly, he whirled around and pointed his wand at the door which burst open, green flames licking the ruins of the mangled doorframe.

With a scream of triumph, de Sade went running through the front door, Astoria and the others right behind him. She could hear screams coming from upstairs and Antonin, Travers and Didier Aubin went flying up the staircase, panting excitedly. Suddenly, a curse flew above her head, hitting a light on the ceiling so that glass flew everywhere. An emaciated wizard was standing in the hallway, his whole body trembling he raised his wand once again at the oncoming Death Eaters. De Sade reacted with blinding speed. Just one flick of his wand sent the wizards wand flying through the air, it was caught by Blaise who snapped it in half at once. There was a loud BANG and the wizard went smashing into a pair of glass doors, shrieking in pain as the cruel shards shredded his skin. De Sade cackled and kicked him so hard that the doorframe broke and he went crashing to the floor into the next room. Howling, the wizard tried to crawl away but – “CRUCIO!” De Sade screeched at the top of his lungs, his wand slashing the air. The wizard screamed louder than ever as he writhed upon the floor, the shards of glass biting deeper into his flesh as de Sade laughed and laughed. To spare herself this awful sight, Astoria ran to the back of the house with Elizabeth and Blaise, their wands pointing in all directions as they searched each room for the rest of the family but there was no one. She had to steel herself as they walked back to the drawing room where they had left de Sade, for there were horrendous screams echoing off the walls. De Sade was still torturing the wizard who was now covered in blood, and there were five more people in the room; a witch and four children. They were all bone thin and it was their screams that mingled with the wizard’s.

“Maman! Maman!” They all sobbed, for Armand Fersen was atop the witch, plunging in and out of her and laughing while she beat her fists fruitlessly against his chest, wailing in agony. There were twin boys, no more than six years old, an elder boy of eleven or so and a little girl of perhaps eight. The elder boy was in Antonin’s clutches, Didier Aubin held the struggling twins, but the small girl merely cowered in the corner, terrified and confused.
De Sade ceased torturing the Father of the family and waved his wand so that he was bound in ropes and a cloth gag appeared in his mouth as he continued to thrash about upon the floor, bleeding and bruised. At this, the elder boy attempted to shake Antonin off, trying to reach his parents. A mistake. Antonin dealt the boy a vicious backhand and Astoria heard his cheekbone shatter as he screeched in pain. As the boy fell to his knees Antonin began to beat him remorselessly as his family wept and screamed. When the boy had lost consciousness, Antonin kicked him aside and strode toward where the Mother was now being raped by Louis Clavette who was grunting like a pig. “My turn, Clavette!” He shouted and Clavette rolled off the sobbing witch, grinning. Antonin then proceeded to take his pleasure, grabbing a handful of the witch’s hair and biting her all over.

De Sade sauntered over to a moth eaten armchair and scooped up the little girl in his arms. He sat and placed her on his knee, bouncing her up and down as he toyed with one of her plaits, a horrible mockery of a grin twisting his face as she continued to sob. “Shh... shh now little one.” He cooed sarcastically in her ear before kissing a wet cheek, smacking his lips in apparent relish at the salt taste of tears. “All will be well if Mummy and Daddy do as they are told. If they love you enough that is.” De Sade finished, nastily.

The Mother crawled forward, blood poured from between her legs and all her limbs were trembling. “Please, please, Monsieur de Sade,” she croaked, her voice hoarse from screaming and constricted by fear. “We will do whatever you ask, please, just do not hurt our family anymore!”

De Sade leered, his hollow face flushed with pleasure. He was where he belonged, beside himself with happiness; taking huge pleasure in causing pain and misery to others. “Good, that was not so difficult now was it?” The witch gave no reply, but knelt there, quivering, as de Sade jabbed a bony finger at her. “You shall have the honour of purifying the wizarding race by producing the next generation of wizarding children in a place we like to call the Purification Institute in London. Who knows, maybe one of my friends here has already blessed you with a bastard this day.” There was a great gale of laughter at his last words and the witch began to sob, shoulders shaking. “Your pathetic excuse of a husband will serve in the Dark Lord’s army or your children will be killed. They are now the property of the Dark Order and shall be raised in the Institute so that their minds might become uncorrupted. Your daughter-” He gave an evil grin, “Shall join you in your duty of whelping children as soon as she has bled.”

“Mercy Monsieur, mercy!” The witch screamed looking up imploringly into de Sade’s amused face. “You can have me, all of you, my body for my children!” de Sade hit her across the face and she fell. He then proceeded to pinch the little girl in his lap so that she shrieked in pain. The bound and gagged Father struggled madly upon the floor, trying to speak, but Blaise casually pointed his wand at the wizard and hit him with the *Cruciatus* curse. The wizard’s back arched and muffled yells of pain escaped through the cloth that had been shoved into his mouth. Astoria hardened her heart seeing as she could not look away. She knew that such atrocities had been committed in Britain, but she was deemed to young and inexperienced at the time to take part in this monstrosity.

“You do not make demands upon me, you Half Blood scum!” De Sade then sprang to his feet and as he did so, he shoved the little girl onto the floor where she lay, curled into a ball and crying. “One
more outburst like that and I shall have your children chopped to pieces before your very eyes!” He screamed down at her, looking utterly demented as she shrank away from his fury, terror etched on her face.

“Marcel,” Didier Aubin interrupted, his black eyes glinting in his dark face, “This brat, is a Squib.” He snarled, shaking the twin to his left roughly. “A few simple spells told me all I needed to know about this abomination.”

“Very well then, let us make an end to this.” De Sade replied. “Take the brats and kill the Squib.” He said in a bored voice to the surrounding Death Eaters. Aubin and Travers tore the screaming boy away from his twin and flung him at de Sade’s feet as he shook with terror.

“NO!” screamed the witch as the other children began to scream. But too late, de Sade and Thibault Breton waved their wands and fiery whips burst from the tips. Breton’s whip coiled around the boy’s neck and the smell of seared flesh filled the room as the child screeched in agony. De Sade’s began to lash the boy mercilessly all over his body; great gaping wounds tearing through his skin.

“DIE SQUIB, DIE!” De Sade shouted over shrieks of raucous laughter so that he was practically raving. “ABOMINATION! FREAK! MONSTER!” He continued his savage attack until the boy was nothing but tattered flesh and broken bones upon the floor, exulting in the horrific sight.

The witch was attempting to crawl across the floor as de Sade was murdering her son, but Travers hit the witch with the *Cruciatus* curse. Her screams increased in pitch and she shook violently, eyeballs rolling while the Death Eaters laughed. Antonin dragged the Father by the feet while Rowle had the elder boy and the remaining twin under each of his huge arms, both of them kicking and screaming. Astoria swiftly strode over to the hysterical girl and grasped her by the arm as she set her on her feet. She was just about to lead the half starved child from the room when de Sade seized her by the throat and flung her over his shoulder like a hunting trophy as her tears fell thicker and faster than ever. De Sade cackled as the child beat her fists against his back, desperate to be free from his monstrous clutches and screaming for her Mother who lay beaten and defiled upon the floor.

By the time the grim day was done there were cages of weeping children and babies, many of them covered in welts and bruises. Witches and wizards had been separated into cages too, some desperately reaching through the bars to try and get to their precious offspring. This did not amuse de Sade however. One witch would not stop screaming and was fighting tooth and nail to get to a small girl in the cage nearest her who appeared to be unconscious. De Sade calmly walked over to the cage and gave a flick of his wand, and the witch’s screams of misery turned into ones of pain as her arms now ended in two bloody stumps where her hands had been. He grinned as he watched the other witches within the overcrowded cage shriek and jostle about, many becoming spattered by the blood gushing from the angry red wounds.
“When will you fools learn to do as you are commanded?” de Sade sneered, strutting in front of the cages as though he had won some great victory. “That should serve as a warning. Anyone else making trouble will watch as I do the same thing to your brats.” He kicked one of the nearest cages containing children and they all screamed, begging for their parents for help. But the imprisoned witches and wizards did nothing by word or deed to interfere, terrified of what de Sade would do next.

Bellatrix appeared then with a faint ‘pop’ grasping a sobbing teenage girl by the arm, her expression triumphant. She was accompanied by Walden McNair, Minister Yildriz and half a dozen Half Bloods, who also had children of varying ages in their clutches. “These are the last of them, de Sade.” Bellatrix announced in her harsh voice, throwing the girl to the ground. “They were hiding out in a building on the Western side of the city along with some dirty Muggles, who we slew.”

There was a ripple of laughter and de Sade nodded, smiling unpleasantly, “Very good Madame Lestrange, throw these urchins in with the others.” Bellatrix gave an equally nasty smile and complied, shoving her captives into a crowded cage as the children within wept and screamed.

That evenfall, when they returned to de Sade’s Estate, Astoria was permitted to visit Leo before dinner as a reward for being ‘good.’ Naturally she treasured these visits, but she was distracted, even as her baby boy giggled and played with her diamond necklace, enthralled by the fire from the stones. The campaign had left her shaken and on the verge of tears. The poor children. When she looked at Leo she could only think of the babies and children housed in the outbuilding on the grounds of the Estate, stolen from their families to be raised in the brutal Purification Institute. They must be so scared, and it will only get worse for them. The Dark Lord had decreed that they were to be removed from the country two days hence to begin the ‘process.’ The stolen Half Blood children were to have their memories wiped and given new names. Their ‘lessons’ were to begin as soon as they arrived at the Institute, which would involve Victoria Avery and her underlings preaching anti Muggle sentiments, Pure Blood supremacy and that the Dark Lord was their ‘absolute ruler and saviour.’ Punishments for misbehaviour were severe, Astoria knew; beatings, the Cruciatius curse, or else being locked in a dark cell for days on end without any food or water. By the time they were ready to attend Hogwarts the children would be cold blooded and twisted by years of conditioning and ill treatment at the Institute. They would be scarcely shadows of their former selves, ready and willing to serve the Dark Order. Astoria stared out at the dark grounds of the Estate as she stroked Leo’s hair absently, wondering what fresh horrors the Dark Lord had in store for the people of France next.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was heavily influenced by Nazi Germany. During WWII it was pretty common for SS Officers to spend the day brutalising concentration camp prisoners and then go to some lavish/over the top party where they would have alcohol/women etc while the country was in open war. They also kidnapped loads of children from neighbouring countries like Poland to ‘turn them German’ which is somewhat mirrored in this chapter by what Lord V has commanded the Death Eaters to do. Many of the
atrocities in this chapter (and some others) were also derived from the Rwandan Genocide in the 90’s which was particularly sadistic, especially the treatment of women and children. With regard to Hermione, I never actually state in any of the chapters after she is tortured whether she dies/had been killed, Astoria just assumed that she was dead.


Please remember the men, women and children that are still suffering atrocities like this today all over the world.

S x
XXVIII. - Blood and Fire

Chapter Summary

Hi everyone, sorry for the late update. I can't really summarise this chapter without giving too much away, so I'll leave you guys to it! I've added a slightly different element this time which will be explained in the end of chapter notes.
Thanks to those who continue to read and contribute,
Peace x

Same disclaimer applies.
Warning: graphic and distressing material.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Dark Lord was relentless in his savage course as the Death Eaters continued to rip wizarding children from their families. Astoria was heartsick from all this wanton brutality, and there was not a single thing she could do about it. Her own role in these monstrous crimes often found her being sick at night, long after Antonin had passed out drunk. It was just so hard now that they were dealing with the torment and misery of children every single day. They are just so innocent. Astoria sighed inwardly and pushed up from the breakfast table, tossing her napkin on her plate before bending over and kissing Antonin on the cheek, her hand touching his shoulder briefly. Antonin glanced at her but did not break off his conversation with Amycus who was describing some vile sexual act he wanted to ‘try out’ in minute detail. She took that to mean that she could leave so she swept over to where Elizabeth was standing by the ornate double doors, her expression most ill natured.

“Ready to go?” Astoria asked her, hoping she sounded casual as opposed to mortified.

“Tsk! We do not have a choice, do we?” She muttered furtively under her breath. Elizabeth surveyed Granger with open hostility as she came scurrying over to join them. “You take the Mudblood today, Astoria. I did it yesterday.” Her grey eyes were as hard as stone. Astoria made no reply but turned on the spot, clutching Granger’s arm. “I hate doing this!” Elizabeth hissed in Astoria’s ear as they appeared in front of a grim, stone outbuilding with a heavy metal door, though the sobs from within were audible even from here. “I am not some common Nursemaid to these dirty Half Bloods!”

Astoria made a non committal sound in her throat in reply. She pointed her wand at the door so that it swung open and the screaming and crying increased in pitch. My morning duties she thought, grimly
as she stared around the dimly lit room as beaten, soiled and half starved children huddled upon the floor, cringing away from their approach. This experience never got any easier to bear. Every morn they would arrive at the building armed with bread, cheese and milk. Every morn she would have to try and coax screaming babies to feed from milk bottles, desperate for their own Mother’s touch. Astoria tried to be as gentle as she could without arousing suspicion, for Elizabeth treated the task with distain. They had both been chosen for this task as they were ‘Mothers’ and this was seen as ‘witches work.’ Granger accompanied them as the Dark Lord did not trust her to be alone with the children for fear she may try and help them escape, despite the slave amulet around her neck. After the children came the witches who were kept in a similar state, though at night the comelier ones were dragged inside both to provide ‘entertainment’ for the male Death Eaters and so that they might be impregnated before their imprisonment at the Institute. They were only to be used for that purpose however, for De Sade and his wife were severely punished by the Dark Lord for murdering a witch in their bedchamber one eve. He had claimed that it was an ‘accident’ while they were at their bed sports, but this did nothing to abate the Dark Lord’s fury at this destruction of ‘his property.’ Astoria doubted de Sade’s story too, for she had seen the witch’s body which had been riddled with stab wounds with a dark ring of bruising adorning her neck. Ediva had wept and begged as the Dark Lord Cruciated her over and over again, but de Sade’s screams eventually turned into hysterical laughter as he writhed upon the floor, foaming at the mouth, his pale eyes rolling. The Dark Lord had also commanded Snape to brew powerful fertility potions which were force fed to the witches daily. The captives were only fed food once a day; the Dark Lord wanted them alive after all for his twisted vision of the ‘New World’ he was carving out for himself. He was making plans to construct a new Purification Institute in France once the war was won, Astoria knew. Victoria Avery had sent several letters requesting permission to enlarge the London Institute and more Death Eaters to oversee the children as she was “Besieged with brats and whores.” Astoria could well believe that, for the witches and children would be portkeyed from the Estate three days after their arrival. The numbers being brought in were staggering now that the Dark Lord had unleashed the other inmates from the Château de L’Enfer Prison to do his bidding. Captured Squibs who were very young were simply killed and decried as abominations, or else subjected to cruel and pointless experimentations by the Dark Lord who wished to ‘study’ them. The elder, able bodied Squibs were kept as house slaves; serving at table or scrubbing de Sade’s chateau until their hands were red and raw. The wizards did not fare well either, for they were tortured into submission or else threatened with the killing of their children to force them to serve. Most broke easily, however half a moon ago, one wizard refused to be cowed and even tried to escape as he was brought food one morn. For this ‘crime,’ Marcel de Sade had presented the wizard with his daughter’s head that very evening in his audience chamber. Astoria recalled with painful intensity how de Sade had flung the girl’s head at the wizard, screaming with laughter as the other dissolved in misery. There was not a day that went by that Astoria did not feel terrible guilt and shame for aiding the Dark Lord in setting de Sade loose upon the world.

The next morn Astoria was gazing up at her bed canopy as Antonin lay beside her, drenched in sweat, chest heaving. The bed sheets were tangled about their legs the way they always were after her husband had taken his morning pleasure. Antonin began to fondle one of her breasts idly, but the gilded clock mounted upon the wall began to chime and he gave a growl of frustration when he saw the time. “I suppose we had best make haste, the Prince should be arriving soon after all.” There was amused derision in his voice. To be sure ‘Prince,’ was not a title that was recognised, nor legally accepted in Europe. However, in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia; who were ruled by families, not Ministries, such titles were the norm. Another wealthy ally, and this one with a grudge too, just what the Dark Lord needs, she thought bitterly as she pulled on her Death Eater robes.
Prince Gyasi looked very pleased with himself as he swaggered into the grand entrance hall where they were all congregated. It was odd to see the Prince garbed in Death Eater robes compared to the extravagantly decorated African robes and the many golden rings on his fingers that he had donned at the ball. Gyasi crawled toward the Dark Lord and kissed the hem of his robes.

“My Lord” He rumbled in his deep Namibian accent, “The task you set me is done, they await you within the grounds.”

Gyasi had given handsomely to the Dark Order, Astoria knew, for when his kingly Father had banished him, he had been given a handsome amount of gold on the understanding that he was never to return. From what she knew of the Prince thus far, whoever or whatever he had ‘procured’ could not possibly be anything good. Her fears proved true, for when they apparated to a remote area of the Estate they were greeted by deafening roars and growls accompanied by the unmistakable scent of fresh blood. Behind a magical blue perimeter teemed no less than thirty five Graphorns as they tore apart deer carcasses and shoved at one another, snarling as bones crunched and entrails flew. They walked on all fours on large, clawed feet and were quite huge, at least fifty feet long with humped backs and long, sharp tails. They tossed their horned heads and attempted to gash one another with their claws, but to no avail; their hides were said to be tougher than a dragon’s. When the creatures noticed the newcomers, many began to slam their dark, scaly bodies against the perimeter; baring their teeth from between the tentacle like appendages lining their mouths.

The Dark Lord stared at the creatures triumphantly, “Very good, Gyasi, you have Lord Voldemort’s gratitude.”

Gyasi bowed low, smirking. “My Lord knows that I am here to serve him despite being new to the cause. I still have my old supporters in Namibia who helped me acquire these rare beasts.”

“Quite. Now, release one.” The Dark Lord commanded. It was all Astoria could do not to gasp in horror, this was madness. She glanced furtively around and could see that several of her fellows looked apprehensive too, but de Sade’s pale eyes were gleaming with excitement as he beheld the teeming Graphorns.
With the tiniest hesitation, Gyasi complied and gave a flick of his wand. At once one of the Graphorns burst free and charged toward them, the ground shaking so badly it felt as though cracks would soon appear. The Dark Lord calmly raised his wand and spoke in the same queer foreign tongue Astoria had heard him use once before. As the Graphorn was on the point of trampling them all, it came to a skidding halt, its flanks heaving, its bulging yellow eyes fixed upon the Dark Lord. His Lordship spoke again, and as docile as a dog, the Graphorn laid down upon the ground, its scaly eyelids drooping. At this there were many shocked gasps and impressed murmurs.

“My Lord, might we know how you have achieved such- such wonderous magic?” Travers asked breathlessly, looking in awe at the subdued beast.

The Dark Lord stared at Travers almost appraisingly as though deciding whether to answer him or curse him. Travers obviously scented danger too as he began to bluster but the Dark Lord cut him off. “I have been studying the scrolls that I procured from de Sade, Travers. They contain ancient magic that has proven invaluable in my experiments. I am now able to control powerful Dark creatures at will as possessing them has proved ineffective thus far.” De Sade was smirking as though he had something to do with it and many of the Death Eaters shared approving looks with one another. “Now, we return to the chateau!” Came the Dark Lord’s high, cold voice, slicing through the chatter like a sword.

The Dark Lord kept them in de Sade’s audience chamber for hours, detailing what his plans were for the next phase of breaking down France’s all but spent defences. Aaemon Burke; great nephew to the long dead Curactacus Burke and now the Dark Lord’s Chief Spymaster joined them for a time, telling them all he knew about how many witches and wizards they could expect to meet on this campaign and what defences they may encounter. Astoria had not seen the servile wizard for close to two years and in that time, she had forgotten how much she loathed him. Burke had a weak face but when he smiled he looked very sinister with his crooked teeth, greasy brown hair and greyish skin; she was no fool either, craven as he was, Burke was also capable of great cruelty. Snape also addressed them all at tedious length, handing out protective potions and other concoctions he said would ‘keep them alert’ for the strenuous mission ahead. Just when Astoria thought that the meeting was finally drawing to a close, the Dark Lord held up a white hand to indicate that he wanted silence which of course, fell at once. He then conjured up a thin, unfamiliar looking wand as black as jet. He twirled it between his long white fingers, his expression seemingly musing.

“Dracula” He called in his high, cold voice. Dracula swiftly got to his feet and strode forward,
bowing low before his Lordship.

“How might I be serving you my Lord?” Dracula rasped, keeping his head bowed subserviently.

“Lord Voldemort is pleased with your service thus far, Vampire. And Lord Voldemort rewards those who are faithful and obedient. May I present this wand that I have crafted myself. It is fashioned specifically for the use of your kind as a wizard’s wand will not work properly as I am sure you are aware. I daresay you shall get plenty of… practice with it in the wars to come.”

There was a stunned silence after this pronouncement and Dracula seemed to be struck dumb for a moment before coming to his senses. He flung himself onto his knees in a ridiculous bow and kissed the hem of the Dark Lord’s robes. “My Lord,” He whispered, his voice hoarser than usual such was his shock. “My Lord, thank you, this is a wonderous, wonderous gift. We Vampires have been dreaming of this for centuries, we are being yours to command, always my Lord.” The Dark Lord nodded in reply, his face expressionless as Dracula continued to grovel at his feet.

As they all filed out of the room, Astoria mused on all she had heard. She thought that arming Dracula and his fellows with wands was a singularly bad idea - nothing good would come of this. Part human magical creatures had always been forbidden to carry a wand, and with good reason. Any magic that was conjured from a wand by a non human could be unpredictable and dangerous, there was just no telling how weak - or how powerful the spells would be. Should the Vampire’s wands prove adept at their brand of magic, it would provoke even more chaos and bloodshed, especially with creatures of their murderous nature. Which is just what his Lordship intends I’ll wager.

The time flew by far too quick for Astoria’s liking. Every day that she looked out of her window more and more tents appeared outside, littering the greenery of Marcel de Sade’s Estate like mushrooms after rainfall. There was always anticipation in the air before a campaign, but this was… different somehow. The tension was so thick it was as though one could cut through it with a blade and scuffles would often break out between the wizards over trifling, childish matters. They are nervous, even though they would not dare say so to one another. As for herself, Astoria was nothing short of terrified. She had heard all the stories that Antonin and the others would trade with one another about how many died on campaigns of this scale and she prayed she would not be one of them, her son needed her. Alas, the day she had been dreading had finally arrived. Today they would march upon the French capital of Paris where most of the surviving population had fled from the
Dark Lord’s bloodthirsty conquest of their homeland. The Death Eaters were now six hundred strong, not including the Vampires, Werewolves and other malevolent… beings that now made up the army.

After Astoria had dressed, she was led downstairs by Antonin; the Dark Lord had commanded the Death Eaters to assemble outside before he summoned them. The morning air was crisp and sharp, but the sun hid behind a thick haze of gloomy cloud. There was a great buzz of excited chatter coming from many throats as they waited on the pristine grass. Astoria saw Marcus Flint sharing a drinking flask with one of his men, a young wizard was fiddling around with his wand looking nervous but determined and the Selwyn twins were talking with one another animatedly, occasionally bursting into fits of laughter. Then without warning, Astoria’s left arm burned white hot. The summons. She saw that she was not the only one in discomfort, for many of her fellows were trying to conceal grimaces of pain. Now that the Dark Lord was growing so powerful, the summons burned worse than ever before.

When the Death Eaters apparated to the soot blackened, windy field, they were greeted by an ear splitting, mind churning racket of noise, for all manner of savage beasts were spitting, snarling and growling in their midst. Chimeras that the Dark Lord had seized from the Château de L’Enfer Prison billowed flame and clawed at the ground, dragons – including the Amazonian Vipertooth soared through the sky, roaring, while Dementors and Vampires twirled, almost gracefully, between them. There were Thestrals too; but there was something terribly wrong with them. They were milk white rather than black so that the blood vessels beneath their hides stood out shockingly, slaver ran from their jaws and their eyes were scarlet, just like the Dark Lord’s. Giants swung their clubs and stamped their huge feet, Greyback and his pack were in their wolf forms as they bayed excitedly, giant black king cobras lashed their tails furiously and huge bats flew in great twisting arcs making unearthly screeches. Trolls mounted on the Graphorns jostled against one another as the beasts roared in unison with savage Sabre Toothed Panthers. The Dark Lord appeared at the head of the monstrous army he had built, a look of vicious satisfaction upon his snake like face as he surveyed them all. Wordlessly, he pointed his wand at the ground which began to tremble, and Astoria almost lost her feet. Earth flew in all directions as great mounds began to erupt everywhere followed by dark black shapes. Huge Acromantula were now scurrying all over the place, their many eyes glinting as they clicked their pincers angrily. Elizabeth shrieked and jumped backward as one of the massive spiders burst not two feet from her. “Calm yourself woman!” Astoria heard Yaxley bark over all the din.

Astoria felt Antonin’s iron grip on her arm. “See that, wife? Do you see it?” He whispered in her ear. “We are sure to have an easy victory this day.”
“SILENCE!” The Dark Lord screeched over the din, his voice magically magnified. “Today, we shall make an end to this conquest and scourge this land of filth. When you go forth this day, you are to use whatever means necessary to subdue the people. You are to slay every man, woman or child who attempts to fight, and imprison those who yield. Victory is in sight, Death Eaters!” At his Lordship’s words there was a roar of assent, the Death Eaters cheered and shot jets of light into the air, whooping and whistling, eager for battle. “Now, MARCH!” As one, the Dark Lord’s savage army moved forward as he rose up into the air to fly ahead of them. The Death Eaters made their way across the scarred countryside; much of the greenery was blackened and burned, while many of the corpses had rotted down to bones. Villages were set alight, despite them being dark and deserted. There was a woman who was dying from the plague, twitching feebly and staring blankly up into the sky. Her life was swiftly ended, however, when a giant’s foot slammed down on her, blood and bone flying everywhere. Anyone else they came across was dead or dying as they continued their march to Paris.

On and on they went, with many Death Eaters setting fire to any villages they came across, despite them being empty. Countryside gave way to large, square Muggle buildings Astoria had glimpsed before in other cities. They came to Muggle roads which were littered with abandoned… cars? Yes, that’s what they are called, which the Death Eaters blasted out of their way so that their grim procession might pass freely. The army was stopped by an invisible force when they came to a sign that read ‘Beinvenue à Paris - La Ville de L’Amour.’ Astoria took the last part to mean – ‘The City of Love. Not for long she thought grimly, as the Dark Lord came gliding down to the ground to stand at their head once again. He whirled around to study the road ahead of them and shot a curse into thin air. There was a loud BANG and the curse ricocheted off thin air, hitting a tall tower and blasting part of it away. “Begin.” The Dark Lord hissed, his back still to them. As one, the Death Eaters raised their wands and pointed them upwards, directing spells at the invisible shield. The dragons landed with a crash, destroying the road beneath them as they did so. They all let out deafening roars and spat flame; aiding the Dark Lord in breaking through the last thing that kept the people of France safe. Before long the ground was shaking and there was a great groaning sound as though a building were about to collapse. Harsh pops rent the air like firecrackers and there was a rushing sound as though a fierce wind was blowing in Astoria’s ears. Then there was silence. The Dark Lord took one step forward over the threshold, unimpeded by the spell that had held him back only moments ago. Bellatrix let out a scream of triumph and a jet of flame blazed from her wand. Other Death Eaters shouted their approval and the mass of Dark creatures among them howled and screeched louder than ever.

“Forward!” Screeched the Dark Lord and as one, the army continued further up the deserted road.

Astoria did not know what happened next, but as they drew level with two tall buildings there was a deafening explosion. She was knocked to the ground in a tangle of arms and legs of those closest to her. She coughed as white dust obscured her vision and tore at her lungs, there were moans of pain and the ground crunched as many of the Death Eaters stirred feebly among the ruins. Astoria then heard the unmistakable cracks and bangs that could only be duelling. An emaciated Muggle woman
then came flying out of the dust, howling and brandishing a kitchen knife. Astoria sent a jet of green light at the woman, but it flew over the other’s shoulder and instead hit a dark figure who crumpled to the floor. She tried to curse the woman again, but she had to jerk backward to avoid being slashed by the blade as the woman lunged, still screaming incoherently. Throwing all caution to the wind, Astoria balled her left hand into a fist and hit the woman on the side of her face, gritting her teeth in pain as the woman dealt her a slash on her forearm as she fell.

“Aveda Kedavra!” Astoria panted, hitting the Muggle straight in the chest as the latter struggled to rise.

The dust had now cleared slightly, and Astoria could see starved looking witches, wizards and Muggles swarming everywhere; France’s last defenders had come together to fight them, refusing to bow to the Dark Lord’s tyrannical rule. There were suddenly sharp jarring bangs which rent the air, she looked up and saw that the buildings either side of the road contained Muggles holding… Guns! Those foul metal things they use to kill one another with. She flung herself aside as a spray of bullets erupted in the ground before her, instead making contact with a young Death Eater, mowing him down in an instant as he clutched his chest, screaming. He could not have been a day more than seventeen. Astoria pointed her wand at the Muggle man who was now shooting down other Death Eaters with such deft accuracy and yelled “Ecfingo!” The gun was wrenched out of the man’s hands by an invisible force and turned on him, riddling his bony chest with red bullet holes. The Muggle slid lifelessly from the smashed window frame with a sickening thud; his pulped entrails scattering all over the floor upon impact.

The Dark Lord was now circling overhead, “KILL THEM! KILL THEM ALL, NOW!” He screeched as one wizard sent the Dementors flanking him flying in all directions with a well aimed Patronus in the likeness of a lion.

The giants roared and began to swipe at the buildings with their huge spiked clubs, sending the Muggles within flying everywhere along with all the glass, dirt and plaster. Some of the Muggles attempted to shoot down the giants too, but the bullets merely bounced uselessly off their thick, tough skin. This only enraged the savage beasts and Astoria saw a large male giant pulling people out of the ruins and biting their heads off, tossing the corpses over his shoulder as he continued to destroy the building. Flying Muggle contraptions that made a ‘chopping’ sound flew above the giants trying to bring down the dragons, but they were melted as easily as flying insects. As Astoria blasted a wizard out of her way she looked up just in time to see a dragon grasp one of the flying devices and fling it away with absurd ease, screeching its displeasure. It landed not twenty feet from her and she backed away. The thing was causing mayhem; it had huge blades on its roof which were slicing through both the rubble and the flesh of anyone in its vicinity. Both Death Eaters and Muggles
screamed as they sported bloody stumps and deep slashes from the bizarre contraption. She pointed her wand at the floundering blades and performed a freezing charm which mercifully stopped the chaos. The roaring Trolls riding the Graphorns charged through the turmoil, trampling all in their path to death as the creatures themselves gored other people savagely with their horned heads.

With their path further into Paris now clear, Astoria heard the Dark Lord shriek: “Take the city! Take it for me NOW!”

As one, the Dark Lord’s savage army surged down the road to pour into the city of Paris in earnest. Astoria found herself in a large square with a decaying statue in the centre. Everyone was charging off in different directions; some ran up streets, some apparated to other parts of the city and others began to destroy everything they could reach. Muggles were running and screaming while scores of plague victims were wandering about aimlessly and raving nonsense to themselves, seemingly unaware of the red terror unfolding around them.

“To the Dark Lord!” Bellatrix screamed as she set a tree ablaze, cackling madly as the orange flames licked the dying brown leaves, her gaunt face alive with excitement. She was suddenly distracted from her fiery work when she spotted a family dashing from a nearby townhouse, desperately trying to make an escape up a side street. But Bellatrix flew after them like a hungry She-wolf, hurling out jinxes and insults.

“Drag those dirty Muggles out of their hovels!” Antonin bellowed at a group of Half Bloods. They obeyed without question and began smashing down the doors of townhouses where screams and shouts could vaguely be heard over all the din.

Before her husband could notice her, Astoria fell in with another group of Half Bloods led by Avery who were streaking in the other direction. They all came skidding out onto a wide street littered with abandoned cars, and almost at once, the wizard next to her fell to his knees as a jet of green light hit him in the chest. She heard the gunfire before she saw the bullets and conjured up a shield charm just in time; Avery however was not quick enough and he fell to the floor with a scream, clutching at his arm.
“Spread out, get behind the cars!” Astoria commanded them all before hastily casting a shield charm over Avery, who was moaning and bleeding upon the ground.

The words had barely left her lips when a Muggle man darted out from behind a car with an enormous gun done in black steel, spraying bullets at all of them. Astoria flung herself behind a burned out car and peeked over the surface just in time to see one of the Half Bloods blasting the Muggle backwards. As the shouts and gunfire intensified, she crept among the cars to mask her footsteps, her wand close to her chest as she swept her surroundings. More curses flew over her head as she weaved her way through the labyrinth of rusted metal when she saw a wizard aiming curses at the Half Bloods on the other side. She took aim and was about to cast her spell when the ground began to shake violently with fresh shouts and screams ripping through the air, a giant roaring in the distance.

Marcel de Sade and five others came pouring down the street at the head of a swarm of giant bats, hounding a crowd of terrified Muggles as they ran from the bloodthirsty group. The bats savaged the slower Muggles at the back, clawing at their limbs and sinking their teeth into their faces. Astoria ran from the oncoming tide and she saw the wizard turn, realising for the first time that she was behind him. As she fled, a jet of red light flew past her ear and she aimed a curse at the wizard who was pursuing her. She also missed, for the wizard chased her up into an alley, his curses flying off the cracked stone walls. Astoria whirled around and repelled a curse that was heading directly for her face which rebounded upon the wizard, knocking him back out into the street. Astoria raised her wand to finish the other, but she reeled backwards as the ground shook once again with enough force to knock her over. A huge foot slammed down right where her combatant had just been stood. She flattened herself against the wall and gazed upwards in shock. A giant was roaring in pain and blundering around wildly, holding huge hands up to reddened eyes where it had been hit with a conjunctivitis curse. Many of those upon the ground were crushed as the giant continued to stagger all over the place, being reduced to nothing more than gory masses of flesh upon the ground. Confused and enraged the giant tripped and fell backwards with a CRASH over a pile of rusted cars, half crushing a large building behind it. The creature howled worse than ever and its enormous limbs flailed about dangerously as it lay upon the ground, for the tall spiked spire that protruded from the building’s front had impaled the giant right through its eye. The street was awash with blood as it pumped from the giant’s grisly wound and everyone scattered. Astoria whirled and ran back up the street to get back to the square. As she emerged, she felt someone seize her arm and whirled around to curse them, but it was only Elizabeth, her face bruised and her hair matted with blood.

“Not that way!” She yelled over noise, dragging Astoria in the opposite direction. “They have more of those wretched guns down there!”
They ran down the street and made to run across a road, but a huge bus exploded into a fireball not twenty feet from them, knocking them backward in opposite directions. Then there was an almighty roar and Astoria saw that the sky had been plunged into shadow. She shoved her hair from her eyes and peered up to see a green dragon flying so low that she could almost count the scales on its great stomach. The dragon’s heavy tail smashed into a building as it flew higher into the sky with another great roar; much of the debris that fell killed many who were on the ground, caving in their skulls. As she pushed herself to her feet, Astoria saw Gregory Goyle surrounded by Muggles armed with knives, their blades rising and falling as the fat craven screamed in agony while Amycus Carrow lay face down in a pool of blood. Frightened, Astoria turned away from the sight and went into Rookwood as she ran blindly to try and find Elizabeth. She almost fell, but Rookwood seized her arm in a vice like grip and hauled her to her feet.

“Concentrate!” He snarled before plunging back into the fray.

Astoria then found herself shoved into a group of Death Eaters led by Silas. The group were tormenting a large crowd of Muggles, chiefly women and children. *It is because they have killed many of the men already, most like.* Hestia Carrow pointed her wand at a small boy who soared into the air, screaming with terror. She then proceeded to bounce him up and down on the cold hard ground, laughing as the boy became covered in more blood and bruises upon each brutal impact. When she grew tired of the sport, Hestia merely left the boy twitching and bleeding on the floor. There was then a guttural screech and Astoria turned to see a pack of the rabid Thestrals prowling menacingly toward the Muggles. The savage creatures bared their teeth and tossed their heads; slippery ropes of slaver flying everywhere. Silas vaulted onto the back of one of the Thestrals, cackling, with many others following suit. They began to rain more curses down upon the group of Muggles, who either fell to the floor, dead, or else shrieked in pain. The Muggles attempted to flee but when they turned around they came face to face with Astoria, Travers and a dozen other Death Eaters.

*“Daemonium maxima!”* screamed Blaise from behind her.

Black smoke plumed everywhere, churning and swirling above their heads. The smoke took the form of winged demonic creatures with red eyes and wide gaping mouths with cruel fangs. They let out cackles of sinister laughter which mingled with the Muggles’ screams of terror as they ran from their tormentors who plunged after them ruthlessly. Alecto Carrow was next to Astoria, running as fast as her short legs would carry her and panting with indecent excitement as they chased the Muggles up a riverside while the Death Eaters in the air continued to brutalise them with vicious hexes. All they could do was weep and scream even harder, dragging terrified children behind them as they fled across a bridge, desperate to get away. But when the Muggles reached the other side of
the bridge a snarling chimera leapt out of nowhere, blocking their path and spitting flame furiously. A man threw himself at the beast, attempting to distract it as his daughter tried to escape. Quick as a flash, the chimera turned its cruel fire on the girl and a moment later she was running around disorientated and shrieking with half of her face aflame, scattering all those in her midst. Her Father desperately tried to put out the flames but ended up catching alight himself. The girl continued to run about wildly before crashing into the ledge and falling headfirst into the ice cold river. Her Father threw himself after her, screaming and sobbing, his whole body now ablaze. Astoria jerked her head up and saw Silas wheeling about on his Thestral, beside himself with glee as he surveyed the horror beneath him. He waved his wand in a huge arc and she heard the metal whining and nuts and bolts springing from their fastenings as the bridge began to twist. The Muggles screamed and were scrabbling around on the rapidly tipping surface but to no avail; one by one they were thrown into the water beneath them. Some of the Muggles who had survived the fall were attempting to climb the mossy, mildewed river walls, but the Death Eaters forced them back into the water with vicious hexes. Then the screams increased in pitch as some Muggles were dragged beneath the surface. It took a moment for her to realise what was happening, but then Astoria gave a gasp of horror and took a step backwards. Hundreds and hundreds of Inferi had begun to crawl up the river walls while their fellows strangled and drowned the remaining Muggles with their slimy, dead hands. She stood there and watched, transfixed with horror as the Inferi oozed from their watery resting place to befoul the streets of Paris, dragging other fleeing Muggles to their deaths to join them in their watery abode of doom. A woman sobbed helplessly as one Inferius pried her child from her grasp, while another petrified family were backed against a wall, besieged on all sides by the vile creatures.

Terrified, Astoria turned and ran off after McNair who had just pounded past her, wand raised. She had only run for a few strides when McNair was thrown aside as a ball of fire exploded above them, but Astoria dodged and ducked, not knowing what to do or where to go. Half of the city was ablaze now and she could not stand it; the blood the terror and the screams, it was unendurable. She did not know how long she ran for, but she eventually came to a quieter street, barely noticing a soot stained, cowering family as they huddled in a doorway. They all screamed when they saw her, but she paid them no mind and continued to run, dodging Lancelot Mulciber as he chased after a young woman in a torn dress, calling out obscenities and laughing while she wept hysterically. Astoria burst from another small side street only to find herself on a gaping wide avenue where there was more fighting between Muggles, witches and wizards. She looked around wildly and saw that this avenue was called Champs-Élysées. Astoria ran towards an enormous arch, cursing Muggles out of her way as she did so. Bellatrix, Snape and at least ten others were attacking the arch, trying to bring it down and Astoria added her spells to their own. The thing did not look like it could stand much longer; it was covered in cracks, craters and ugly black burn marks. Indeed, a few moments later the ruined arch began to creak and sway and brick by brick, it began to crumble, huge tidal waves of dust billowing into the sky and down the street as it collapsed, stone flying everywhere. Bellatrix gave a scream of delight at the destruction and promptly ran back off into the chaos, hunting down a woman who was clutching a screaming child. Astoria gazed around, blinking the grit from her eyes. I am in a world of blood and fire, she thought, for what had first been a battle had now descended into a massacre. Everybody seemed to be running in all directions; and the screams, the screams were unending. Men, women and children were struck down mercilessly, the Werewolves and Vampires savaged the flesh of young and old alike while dragons wheeled above, destroying entire streets as they spat out their deadly flame. She saw the mounted Trolls hacking off heads with huge machetes, giants were stamping on people, eliminating them in one red stroke as they turned things like lamp poles and cars into weapons, flailing them about and roaring in their incomprehensible tongue. A Sabre Toothed Panther had a dead child clutched in its jaws as it slunk away up a smoking street to
devour its prize, and Astoria saw that Travers had a man and a woman pinned to the wall, naked, while he, Antonin, Yaxley and Theodore beat them with red hot bullwhips, all of them laughing. Louis Clavette was openly raping a young girl in the street while a man and a boy were being savagely tortured by Aubin and Fersen as they screamed and sobbed. Parents desperately tried to shield their children from the tides of Acromantula that were swarming over them, tearing them to pieces with their venomous fangs. She watched as Prince Gyasi set a pair of black vipers on a helpless young boy and Rowle causing utter chaos by firing out curses everywhere, the spells ricocheting off everything in sight. A sound like a clap of thunder reverberated through the air and Astoria looked up. The Dark Lord himself was atop a tall building, pointing his wand directly at the sky, his long black robes flapping wildly around his skeletal form as though in a high wind. A jet of green light was spurtng from his wand tip and the sky began to churn, turning a deep greenish grey as cars flew in all directions, smashing into buildings – and people, killing them instantly. Trees were uprooted, huge glowing cracks appeared in the ground and Astoria was thrown backward, but she saw a hoard of Death Eaters and Muggles alike falling into the deep fiery crevasses, shrieking. She dragged herself to her feet and conjured a shield charm to protect herself from the debris that was flying everywhere. The Dark Lord’s maniacal laughter seemed to boom from the heavens above as it assaulted her ears; he had never looked more evil and demented to her as he did just then. An unearthly screech of pain suddenly rent the air and Astoria was momentarily distracted from the horrific scene. One of the smaller dragons was now writhing and twisting through the air, its orange eyes bulging as it spat out dangerous plumes of flame everywhere and causing several buildings to catch fire. There was a jagged piece of metal lodged in the side of its neck and one of its wings looked torn. Despite the dragon being in the air, Astoria dodged about nervously on the ground, not knowing where the beast would fall. The dragon gave another loud roar and began rolling through the air drunkenly to smash into a large, dome shaped building across the street. Its whole body went crashing through the roof, lost from sight as tiles and stone came smashing down from the blackened hole. She turned and ran as fast as she could as she could as dragons could sometimes explode after they died. Astoria was too intent upon her escape to see the spell hit the building she was running past, but the next moment the very sky was blotted out as wood, stone and metal came rushing up to meet her before everything went black.

The air was thick with dust and smoke. Where am I? Astoria thought groggily. Her ears were ringing as she raised her pounding head which felt a thousand times heavier than it ought to. She clumsily scrambled away from the corpse of a Death Eater who was lying next to her, blood covered his face and his blue eyes were unseeing. Astoria shoved aside a plank of wood that was covering her and righted herself, trying to take in her surroundings. She was not aware of getting to her feet, but she began to walk, almost dream like, around the ruined city that had once been Paris. The screams, shouts and the billowing of roaring flames had subsided. There was almost complete silence. Many of the buildings had been destroyed, with missing walls or facades so that the stairs and the various floors could be seen within. Some were burning, others were merely smoking, blackened and scorched. The crack that had torn through the road on the Champs-Élysées was now forty feet wide. Trembling, she peeped over the edge; though this great gaping wound was no longer afire, molten lava oozed through the deep abysses below that seemed to go on forever. Death surrounded her. Muggles and Death Eaters alike were in the piles of corpses that were strewn everywhere while others lay alone, still and bloody. She was unsurprised to see that many heads had been impaled on spikes and the mutilated, half naked bodies of women and girls lay openly for all to see. A naked man had been strung up on a lamp pole by a chain around his neck; he was blood from head to foot and his eyes and teeth were gone. I helped create this horror, this evil. When Astoria turned a corner, she let out a scream. The dragon who had fallen from the sky lay dead in front of her, its body facing
upwards so that its unseeing, orange eye glared right at her. There was laughter and Astoria raised her wand, looking about wildly. But it was only the Zabini brothers and some Half Bloods who were walking over the dragon’s huge body, many with large strips of dragon hide slung over their shoulders.

“Alive, then are you?” Josiah called as he smiled unpleasantly down at her. They were all in similar states of dishevelment to her, bloody and bruised with torn robes. “I daresay, your husband will be –” But he was not able to utter, for he grabbed his left arm and gave a hiss of pain - Astoria felt it too, as did the others.

“Let us go.” Blaise said curtly after half a heartbeat. And as one, they all turned on the spot into crushing darkness.

When they apparated to the summoned location, Astoria had to suppress covering her ears to the racket that greeted her after the near silence. The survivors – or rather the Dark Lord’s slaves now – had been rounded up into a huge square in the centre of the city. After the slaughter she had seen in the streets, Astoria was surprised to see so many; hundreds of thousands of them they were. The survivors struggled and jostled making a tremendous amount of noise as they were pinned in place by Death Eaters and the other savage creatures from the Dark Lord’s army. Looming above them all was the tall metal Muggle structure Astoria knew was called ‘The Eiffel Tower.’ The Amazonian Vipertooth was perched on the side of the tower, surveying the scene below with its blank green eyes as faint smoke drifted from its mouth and nose. There was then a sudden upswing of drunken cheering, shouts and jeering coming from the far side of the square. A crowd of wizards were parading down the main pathway of the square which led up to the tower. Because of their height, Antonin and Rowle were prominent among the group and they seemed to be dragging someone. When they drew closer she saw that it was none other than Gustave Clément bound in chains and dressed in rags with a long scraggly beard and hair – a shadow of his former self. Clément walked along meekly enough, but Antonin and Rowle kept roughly yanking the two thickest chains that were bound to his neck as the other Death Eaters laughed. Marcel de Sade went skipping in their wake - cackling joyfully as he swung the heads of two young women by the hair. Then came a lumbering Graphorn being led by a huge troll, a body chained tightly to its humped back. The victorious procession made their way up to a stone dais that had been erected near the base of the Eiffel tower, all assembling, waiting. Moments later, all the Death Eaters began to sink to their knees as the Dark Lord himself came striding down the pathway, unable to conceal the twisted look of triumph upon his serpentine features. When he reached the centre of the dais, he gestured toward the troll who dragged the body from the back of the Graphorn. The Dark Lord waved his wand and levitated the body to sink onto what looked like a meat hook. When the troll grabbed a handful of the corpse’s hair and yanked the head backwards, Astoria saw who it was and could not be surprised at the angry yells and roars of outrage that came from the crowd. The head of Harry Potter had been clumsily re attached to his body, but his face looked almost the way it had been in life, though he was now completely bloodless. The Dark Lord then stepped forward and drowned out all sound with his high, cold voice that filled the air around them.
“People of France, you are defeated. My army vastly outnumbers you all and the borders have been sealed, there is nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. Lay down your arms, yield to the Dark Order, kneel before me and you shall be spared. Anyone who continues to challenge my rule will be slaughtered, as well as every member of their family. From this day forth, you put your faith in me as your absolute overlord and ruler. I bring you the body of Harry Potter, who is dead by my hand. I have your vanquished Minister here, who begged for death when I caught him. There is no one to save you now; from this day forth, you put your faith in me. Watch!” The Dark Lord nodded to Antonin and Rowle who forced Clément to his knees, each of them clutching a chain around his neck. The Dark Lord stepped forward, and slowly raised his wand which was pointing directly at Clément’s face. Quick as a flash of lightening, his Lordship swiped his wand through the air. As he did so, blood spurted from Clément’s neck and his head parted from his body. Astoria felt blood pepper her face as she was being standing right beneath the dais and she gritted her teeth determinedly to keep her cool composure. Many from the crowd were jostling furiously and screaming insults but the Dark Lord ignored them, wordlessly holding out a large, white hand. Antonin stooped and seized the head, handing it to his Master with a look of vicious satisfaction upon his twisted face. The Dark Lord grasped Clément’s severed head by the hair, holding it up high in the air for all to see. “You see, fools!” He screeched over the now roaring crowd, “Both your precious leader and Harry Potter are both GONE! There is now no one to threaten ME, Lord Voldemort, the greatest sorcerer in the world!” The Dark Lord then pointed a long white finger at the trapped crowd. “Death Eaters, seize them! Seize them all NOW!” At this the Amazonian Vipertooth launched itself from the Eiffel tower and landed on the Western facade with a crash. It spread its enormous wings and gave a deafening roar, spitting out its molten green fire directly at the base of the tower. The heat coming from those green flames was so intense, Astoria felt as though she were in a furnace, the sweat plastering her robes to her back as the dragon continued to roar. The smell of molten metal filled the air and Astoria heard the tower groaning in protest. The iron grew red hot and glowing, the colour spreading upwards so that it was no longer a black tower, it was a red one - radiating its terrible glare into the darkened sky. Astoria felt a sense of sinking doom as she watched the pointed tip of the Eiffel tower beginning to sag and droop like a spent candle upon the backdrop of the burning, defiled city.

Chapter End Notes

Okay soo I thought it’d be interesting to have the Muggle/Magical worlds collide in terms of ‘battle’ as that isn’t something that has been covered in this story so far. Yes the ‘Muggle’ weapons turned out to be inferior in the end, but I thought it unrealistic that the Death Eaters would just march into the city and win just-like-that which is why I made it more of a struggle. By having both Muggles and ‘good’ wizards come together to fight the DE’s it’s also a testament (I believe) to the human spirit of resisting against evil and oppression even if the odds are stacked against them. I had Lord V display HP and kill the former minister as it’s a way of instilling even more terror/despair in his enemies to get them to submit to his ‘rule.’

I felt it was also necessary to describe the ‘dark creatures’ that make up the army to as this is often alluded to in the original (JKR) books, but we don’t get that much info other than giants/dementors/giant spiders. For those who have not seen/read Fantastic Beasts or Harry Potter and the Cursed Child, this is a Graphorn: https://i0.wp.com/wiki-fx.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/FB-TRL3-878901.jpg?fit=1200%2C503
PS. Let me know if anyone liked the use of ‘Muggle weapons’ in play, if yes then I may put more of that in later, if no then I’ll never do it again! :-)

XXIX. - Out of the Ashes

Chapter Summary

This chapter focuses the type of 'world' that Voldemort seeks to carve out for himself and the ripple effects it has on everyone else.
Thanks again to all those who continue to read/comment.
Same disclaimer applies.
Warning: graphic and distressing material.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The struggle for France was all but done. The Dark Lord had proclaimed victory only two days past despite having spent close to four moons transforming the city of Paris, which was now unrecognisable. Meanwhile, the Death Eaters had been commanded to scour the rest of France for any more survivors to drag back to Paris. This was accomplished with relative ease, despite the numbers that had been lost during the sacking of Paris. Almost two hundred Death Eaters had perished during the attack; Gregory Goyle, Evan Rosier and Amycus Carrow most prominent among them. Many had been severely injured including Lucius who was rumoured to have a mangled arm. Astoria was surprised he had survived at all seeing as he had been forbidden to participate in combat since he lost his wand.

_Poor Draco_, she thought sadly, _an opium addicted Mother and a desperately wounded Father_. This would have hit him hard, Astoria knew, for Draco was incredibly close to his parents and loved them dearly. She could not pretend not to have a twinge of envy in that respect; she had loved her Father very much, but as a little girl she had dreamed and dreamed of having a Mother to dress her in lace and tuck her in at night and sing her songs. Perhaps that was why she was determined to give Leo as much love and care as she possibly could.

The courtyard where Astoria stood was thick with so much smoke that she rather felt that she needed to conjure herself a Bubblehead charm. It was so early in the morning that the sky was still dark as the bright orange flames danced upwards, the black smoke from all the parchment barely discernible but still vexing. Her eyes stung, and the acrid fumes were making her cough as she levitated a huge pile of books to add to the raging bonfire where all the rest were burning. The firelight danced off a smashed and burned glass pyramid in the middle of the courtyard which Astoria found queer and at odds with the baroque French building that loomed above. A few days past they had been tasked with laying waste to this large Muggle museum named _The Louvre_ – all Muggle art, books and history were to be destroyed as the Dark Lord considered their content to be ‘libellous filth.’ His Lordship had decreed that possession of any such material was tantamount to treason and the accused must be made to suffer the consequences. Pure Bloods would be subject to fifty lashes and a fine if caught, but HalfBloods were treated far more harshly. The unfortunate would be stripped of their wand and sent to toil in the Goblin mines to procure jewels, or if the material was offensive enough then they would be sentenced to death.
It is as though his Lordship wishes to re forge history... in his own name to be sure. The fires had been burning for days now as other Death Eaters sent to purge the country of the ‘harmful texts and illustrations’ added their material to the flames daily.

“Wife!” Antonin’s voice cracked through the roaring of the flames like a whip. Astoria turned to face her husband who was overseeing the endeavour today. Half of his face was in shadow and his blue eyes were gleaming in the flames making him look incredibly sinister. “I command you to search the Eastern side of this hovel for anything that has escaped our purge and tell anyone who is still inside to get back out here at once. We would not want them to miss the fireworks, now would we?” He sneered. “I want you back here forthwith.”

“As you command.” Astoria said at once - it was as though those words were now engraved into the forefront of her mind.

Antonin smirked before turning to bark out more orders to the other Death Eaters who were mirroring Astoria and heaving great piles of statues and furniture onto the flames which swallowed them greedily, feeding the hungry fire. Dutifully Astoria strode toward the once grand building, privately feeling relieved to escape the choking smoke which was beginning to make her feel unwell. The corridors were full of smouldering debris, all the fine wallpaper had been ripped away leaving grey flaking walls with black ugly scorch marks all over the ceiling. The only things that had been saved were ancient wizarding artefacts that had somehow found their way into the Muggle museum archives. All the Muggle made china, paintings, tapestries and many queer metal devices that Antonin told her were called ‘electronics’ had been destroyed. The Muggle built building had been very grand with rich colourful murals on the ceiling outlined in carved gilded gold, and it made Astoria feel a little sad to think of the beautiful vibrant place it had once been. She walked through the destroyed corridors, her footsteps echoing in the silence. All of a sudden, she heard a screech of raucous laughter ring out from behind her and followed the noise. Her footsteps took her to a large cavernous room where she found Silas and Bellatrix sitting atop an Egyptian statue in the likeness of a Sphynx, cackling madly and quaffing wine from the bottle like uncouth ruffians. Silas had donned a golden crown which was askew as he hiccupped and sniggered.

“Astoria!” Bellatrix shrieked drunkenly as Silas reeled, “Come, come have some of this wine!”

Astoria forced herself to smile. “I thank you, Bellatrix but I believe the building is to be razed in due course at my Lord husband’s command.” Though it would not go amiss if you and Silas were to be destroyed along with it, she thought savagely.

Silas sprang to his feet before promptly sliding down one of the arms of the Sphynx to land with a crash upon the floor, his golden crown rolling away with a metallic, tinny sound. Bellatrix followed suit, though Astoria and Silas had to haul her to her feet because she was so drunk.
Astoria strode through the building, trying to recall where she had come in while Bellatrix and Silas stumbled in her wake, guffawing like fools. At last she found the doorway that had been blasted open hours ago and stepped out into the smoky air, willing herself not to retch and cough. The Death Eaters were all congregated around the fires which now leapt almost twenty feet into the sky, Antonin at their head. Astoria weaved her way to the front of the group, knowing that was where her husband would want her to be.

Without turning around to face them, Antonin said in a hard voice “Do it.”

As one the Death Eaters made identical slashing movements with their wands. For half a heartbeat, nothing happened, but then… BANG! The first Eastern column exploded in a great gush of green flames and Astoria heard Silas and Bellatrix’s screams of delight before they were drowned out by another great explosion. One after the other the explosions continued all the way up the building that framed the courtyard as the malevolent green flame began to take hold like a snake slithering through grass. The Death Eaters cheered as brick and dust flew everywhere and Astoria heard great cracking noises as wood splintered and metal groaned. There were two great towers that stood across from each other which had not yet succumbed, though the green flame had engulfed them. Antonin flicked his wand casually and the green flames formed a demonic face which let out a terrible laugh before splitting into hundred evil faces which rushed at the towers. When they hit there were numerous bangs and crashes; the towers swayed and creaked before collapsing inwards onto the courtyard and a huge billowing mushroom of green flame rose up high in the air, lighting up the sky from the ruins. The Death Eaters whooped and clapped as they were all bathed the malevolent green glow. Silas and Bellatrix were arm in arm in arm, jumping up and down like evil sprites and cackling madly as dust and green cloud swirled around them all.

“Good, very good.” Antonin said softly as the building melted and caved in like some great cake. “Let this filthy Muggle building burn to ashes, it is time we took our leave of this place, the Dark Lord is expecting us. Silas, Bellatrix, pull yourselves together at once.” He added sharply. Silas gave Antonin an innocent smile as the firelight flickered over his disfigured face, but all the same he conjured up two black vials and shared them betwixt himself and Bellatrix to reverse the effects of the copious wine they had both consumed.

The Death Eaters grumbled audibly as they walked away from the ruined museum; an apparition ban had been put in place due to all the… changes that the city of Paris was now undergoing and many resented having to ‘walk like those dirty Muggles.’ They made their way toward a slum that had already developed a notorious reputation during the relatively short time they had occupied Paris; it had been nicknamed Les Tenebres which translated as The Darkness. The attack on Paris had caused so much destruction that many of the modern streets and roads had been ripped up and destroyed, leaving a foul soup of mud, domestic waste and unicorn droppings in their place. The Dark Lord had segregated the city by Blood Status. Pure Bloods lived in the centre whereas Half Bloods were made to live in slums scattered around the area. It was strictly forbidden for any Half Blood to enter the Pure Blood section of the city without express permission under pain of death or the Dementors Kiss. Astoria grimaced as they trudged up a filthy street of Les Tenebres; a weak smog hung in the
air from the many chimneys churning out smoke, the stench of raw sewage was choking, and red lights glowed malevolently from every other establishment in sight.

She followed the lead of the others and muttered “Lumos” to see through the half darkness.

“Look at that pathetic creature!” Blaise jeered as they passed a wizard who was slumped up against a wall, a half empty bottle of Firewhiskey held loosely in his hand. He was covered in mud, vomit and faeces, barely conscious as his head rolled and spittle drooled from his mouth. Many of the Death Eaters laughed and Silas flung a rock at the wizard, causing him to sway and fall face down in the mud as the hilarity mounted even further.

Much like the rest of the city now, the streets were gloomy, depressing and rife with vice and depravity. In four short lunar cycles, the Half Blood sections of the city were now flooded with opium dens, seedy taverns and countless brothels. The brothels especially did a roaring trade as it was the only way Half Blood wizards could have a woman of sorts seeing as all their own were locked up in the Purification Institute. Substances which would normally be banned in most of the wizarding world such as opium, cannabis, Psilocybin mushrooms, coca infused wine and laudanum were now widely available in these verminous cesspits. The influx of these drugs lay at the feet of Masakh Shafiq, a Pureblooded wizard who was a few years older than Astoria and was currently annexing the Middle East in the Dark Lord’s name. There was said to be an abundance of these toxic plants in that part of the world and Shafiq had sent them over at the Dark Lord’s command with plans to expand this stratagem in all occupied territory. Snape had been experimenting with the substances to make them as potent and addictive as possible in order to control the vast amount of Half Bloods that the Dark Lord now had at his command. Naturally many became consumed quickly and thus were unlikely to stage a mutiny against the Dark Order while they were enslaved to their toxic habits. They would forget the families they had lost, many of whom were still in the clutches of the Dark Order; they would fight and kill when commanded or they would be denied their poison of choice. This rampant drug use was not limited to Half Blood’s, however. Most Pure Blood’s partook in one way or another; indeed, Antonin himself had developed a strong appetite for smoking cannabis leaves along with his excessive amount of drinking.

The huge amounts of gold raised from the drugs and brothels went right into the coffers of the Dark Order in order to fund the expansion of the Dark Lord’s monstrous Empire. Very clever, Astoria thought dully as her boots sucked in the sodden mud, very clever and cruel.

Bruised and dead eyed Muggle women stared blankly at her from behind panes of glass which glowed red from the lanterns within. It had been Antonin’s idea to display them half naked in windows like cuts of meat to lure in potential patrons. One girl who could not have been more than fifteen was waving at the male Death Eaters, tugging on her underwear and groping at her breasts; a vacant smile upon her face. Astoria turned away from this nauseating sight but could not help looking up again when a great roar of laughter erupted from the surrounding Death Eaters. Silas had been so engrossed by the girl, his mouth agape, that he had walked straight into a broken lamppost and almost fell.
“Later, Norton! Later!” Called Josiah Zabini who was still shaking with laughter as they turned a corner to be faced with the magical perimeter that separated the Half Blood and Pure Blood sections of the city.

“Who goes there?!” A voice suddenly rang out sharply from the dim, red shadows. Astoria could make out two lit wand tips and heard the snorting and swishing of tails she associated with unicorns. Sure enough, out of the shadows came two mounted Half Bloods on dark unicorns, the beasts’ flanks heaving and lathered, their lithe legs caked in mud. “Oh, forgive us Dolohov” came the voice again that she now recognised as James Clearwater’s which sounded far more nervous now. “We – we thought it may have been another fight brewing with so many voices, last night there was a brawl that lasted for three hours, five men are dead.”

Astoria saw her husband wave his hand in careless dismissal. “I am aware of it Clearwater, you will have more watchmen in due course.”

“That is most generous Sir, you have my thanks. May we have your leave to go?”

Antonin jerked his head in assent after which Clearwater and his companion wheeled their mounts around and trotted off, two abreast up another grim street and out of sight. Astoria knew that these watchmen were tasked with keeping order for when things got out of hand in the slums. The simple fact that they were mounted gave an immediate advantage when breaking up duels and fights, not to mention that unicorns were invulnerable to many common curses and jinxes.

Stepping into the Pureblood side of the city was like stepping into another world. Everything here was pristine, and Astoria could still smell fresh wood, paint and plaster in the air as some ‘construction’ was still ongoing. There were dozens of mounted watchmen here and others flew around upon broomsticks so that they might “Protect the most deserving of wizards” as the Dark Lord put it. The Dark Lord had wasted no time in imposing his mark upon Paris; flags emblazoned with the Dark Mark flew everywhere, there were large and imposing statues of snakes and the Dark Lord himself littered all over the centre of the city as a permanent reminder of who ruled here now. A new Purification Institute was being constructed and the city now boasted a gigantic amphitheatre. There were plans to have some of the largest streets devoted to the Dark Arts, others would have luxurious eateries and shops where Purebloods could go and waste their gold – again, with every last Galleon going to the Dark Order. Astoria and her fellows marched toward the colossal building that drew the eye; his Lordship had constructed a formidable fortress for himself where the Eiffel tower had once stood. The place was quite enormous with countless towers and turrets taller than the sky itself. It was fashioned in shiny stone as black as jet and the façade was adorned with skulls that had snakes slithering through their eye sockets and mouths. When Astoria chanced to look upward she saw the massive shadow of the Amazonian Vipertooth that guarded the top most tower which was lost in thick grey cloud.
A Dementor glided down toward them as they stood on the threshold. “We are here to see the Dark Lord, at his own request.” Antonin said calmly.

The Dementor pointed in the direction of the fort with a scabbed, rotting hand and a spiked drawbridge came smashing down in front of them so that they might enter. With Antonin at their head, the Death Eaters trooped across the bridge over the fathoms deep moat which was teeming with Inferi and Horned Serpents. The fort was surrounded by thick stone walls that went on for leagues; the heads of Muggles and disobedient Half Bloods speared on pikes for all to see what befell those who dared challenge the Dark Order. Dementors stood sentry at every entrance point or else glided around the fortress so that the air surrounding the place was freezing cold. They passed under a huge archway which had the words “MAGIC IS MIGHT” carved into the stone. Astoria shuddered and made her way deeper into the grim stronghold alongside the others. When they entered the Fortress the chill abated somewhat, but only a little. Nothing about this place will ever be warm. The windows in this cavernous structure which gave the place a foreboding and oppressive air. Fire sconces burned dimly in the wall, statues of monsters and malevolent beings were everywhere, as were the countless silk hangings of the Dark Mark and the Slytherin banner as they made their way further inside. Dark artefacts stood in alcoves and Astoria averted her eyes from a crystal box which contained Potter’s stuffed head. Muggle slaves stood silent and blank eyed by the walls, only moving to dip their heads to the Death Eaters who swept past them, ignoring them utterly.

They finally reached a floor situated deep within the fortress and made for an archway in the likeness of a monster’s gaping mouth where there was a low murmur of talk drifting down the corridor toward them. Sure enough, all the other Pure Blooded Death Eaters were stood behind their chairs, waiting. Aaemon Burke was stood next to the Dark Lord’s throne at the head of the table, his unctuous smile firmly in place and looking eager. Scarcely a few minutes had past when his Lordship came striding into the room, Nagini draped around his shoulders. Wordlessly, he sat and held out a large white hand in the direction of Burke. The stooped, greasy wizard shuffled forward and handed the Dark Lord a scroll of sealed parchment; he took it without comment and unfurled it with a flick of his wand. Those slit pupiled, red eyes moved from left to right as the Dark Lord read what was on the parchment. By the time he was finished, his lipless mouth was curved in a terrible smile.

“It seems that a civil war has broken out in Spain.” Came the high, cold voice to a ripple of chuckles and laughter, with some of the Death Eaters murmuring ‘To the Dark Order.’ “Yes, these Spaniards are fighting among themselves like children because of me, Lord Voldemort. They have seen what has befallen France and that has them running like whipped dogs. However, there is some disagreement between those who wish to put up a fight and those who think they should submit to me which is the main source of the fighting. See the terror Lord Voldemort instils with his powers, Death Eaters. This is all well and good, but Spain does not interest me at present. I have commanded Dracula to unleash a more powerful strain of the plague down upon them to… stoke the fire if you will.” His awful grin broadened as the other Death Eaters chuckled at the notion. My main concern is that of Germany just now.”

Astoria inwardly groaned. Germany. Germany was the Dark Lord’s latest obsession in his relentless
quest for power. It was the most magically populous country in all of Europe and boasted vast jewel mines, thus his Lordship would have even more new ‘subjects’ and he could extract every last nugget of gold and shards of gems from their land to fund his brutal regime even further. The Dark Lord had sent Gustave Clément’s mutilated head to the German Minister for Magic as both a threat and warning. She was said to be a fierce old witch, but his Lordship was yet to receive a reply from his grisly message. Furious at this silence, the Dark Lord had responded by commanding the forces stationed in Eastern Europe to exterminate German border towns and villages. He had also used his serpentine powers to awaken the monstrous Hydra once again to terrorise the German coast, killing thousands.

Well at least this meeting was not long as was usual and certainly not as gruesome as some I have been forced to endure thus far Astoria mused as she pushed up from her chair after the Dark Lord had dismissed them. Sometimes the Dark Lord would summon them down to the dungeons and torture chambers and show them all manner of his monstrous experiments. His Lordship had bred Vampires to Werewolves in an attempt to create a new species of monster to add to his terrifying army. Astoria had been horrified when she first beheld one of these creatures; it had had a human form, but it was covered in hair and had great long fangs like a Vampire’s. The beast was so aggressive that it had to be kept in an enchanted cage to keep it from attacking them all. It had growled and hissed and thrown itself against the bars in an attempt to slash their faces. The Dark Lord had found a way of growing the creatures outside of a womb and kept them in huge jars as they developed, pumping them full of aging potion so as to speed up their growth. This was Dark magic of the most shocking and heinous kind, it went completely against nature, but what was that to maniac like the Dark Lord? There is nothing he will not do to enhance his powers and the Dark Order’s army if it gave him the advantage Astoria thought grimly as a carriage pulled by unicorns drew closer toward them as they crossed the drawbridge. Even she had to admit that this business of walking and taking carriages everywhere was most cumbersome. She hoped the apparition ban would be lifted in due course as she settled herself grudgingly into the velvet interior of the carriage.

The journey ‘home’ such as it was now was not a long one, for the Pure Bloods had carved up huge portions of the city and built palatial homes for themselves which surrounded the area around the Dark Lord’s Fortress. After a few minutes they came to huge silver gates emblazoned with two poisonsly green King Cobras entwined about a jewelled sword; the Dolohov family coat of arms. They swung open at once to reveal a long sweeping gravel path lined by trees and thousands of flower bushes. As the trees began to clear, the huge manor done of all pale blue stone and carved white marble loomed high above. Four colossal pillars dominated the building’s façade with a carving of the Dark Mark placed above them. An ostentatious fountain in solid silver drew the eye upon the greenery directly in front of the manor, splashing softly as they creaked past. When Astoria and her husband strode into the opulent entrance hall decorated in green and silver they were greeted by Granger who Antonin had bought off Marcel de Sade and three Muggle slaves gifted to them by the Dark Lord.

“Mudblood.” Antonin stated harshly and without preamble. “I command you to get my wife ready at once for our engagement three hours hence.” He kissed Astoria upon the forehead before spinning on his heel and marching down the huge hall in the direction of the drawing room. Granger scurried up the baroque staircase in her haste to obey and Astoria followed, dragging her feet.
Two and a half hours later Astoria was ready for the ordeal to come. Diamonds sparkled at her neck and she was garbed in a gown of crushed royal blue velvet trimmed with ermine while a matching ostrich plumed hat sat upon her head. She was not fond of hats, she found them burdensome and only donned them for spring and summer weddings. Astoria did not usually mind fur, but the thick silver wolf stole that graced her shoulders made her shudder for it was one the grimmest pieces she owned. The beast’s head was still attached to the pelt and its eyes had been replaced with yellow diamonds that sparkled up at her accusingly; but wear it she must for it had been a gift from Antonin. Resigned to her fate she sighed wearily and gave herself the once over in the mirror before sweeping from the room.

When Astoria approached the top of the grand staircase she saw that Antonin, Yaxley, Elizabeth and Adelaide were waiting in the hall reclining on chairs and sipping wine. A Muggle slave was standing up against the wall clutching a silver tray. “Ah there she is.” Antonin called up to her lazily as both he and Yaxley got to their feet. “You look lovely today, my lady.”

After gliding down the last step Astoria greeted Yaxley first after her husband as custom dictated before kissing Adelaide and Elizabeth on the cheeks. “We had best make haste.” Yaxley declared as he looked down at a jewelled golden pocket watch. “Do not want to be late, do we? I daresay I would be most displeased to miss any of this grand show his Lordship has so generously organised for us.” He and Antonin leered at each other knowingly while Astoria’s flesh prickled as her husband took her waist and led her to the front doors.

Once all were seated within the carriage, the unicorns set off at a brisk trot; the highly intelligent creatures knew exactly where they were bound. They trotted down the leafy avenue lined with gated mansions, past the Dark Lord’s looming fortress and past Half Bloods who were toiling away constructing more buildings that had been commanded by the Dark Lord. Astoria, Elizabeth and Adelaide were silent; they all knew better than to speak without invitation in Antonin and Yaxley’s company. Unfortunately Astoria’s vague thoughts were soon harshly interrupted and all else was driven from her mind when they had to pass through a Half Blood slum area to get to their destination. She had never seen the slums in the day before and had no wish to, but her curiosity could not keep her from peeking out from behind the silk curtains. She wished she had not, for what she saw was naught but squalor and misery; a great gaping wound that could not be ignored. No grass nor anything green at all grew in this dark and putrid labyrinth. The narrow canyons of those tall, narrow, blackened buildings blocked out the sun and all colour had been leached away excepting for the dull greys of smoke and soot. Eyes watched their carriage greedily through broken window panes as they rolled past, and Astoria watched in horror as a ragged looking wizard approached a filthy butchers stall that was selling greenish, frightful looking cuts of meat not fit for even a dog to eat.

This is truly a living hell, she thought as wizards congregated outside of taverns pulling on opium pipes while giant rats scurried up and down the streets, drawing little to no notice of the wretched inhabitants as they streamed in the direction of the amphitheatre.

When they approached the amphitheatre itself, it swallowed them all in shadow. It was all of dark
stone and seemed to crouch upon the hill which it had been built like some great black monster, the Dark Mark glittering in the sky above. There were many other carriages coming and going from the place and Astoria saw the glimmer of rich furs trailing behind ladies while extravagant hats perched precariously upon their heads, the exotic feathers dancing in the light wind as they clutched the arms of their husbands or indeed, one another. Antonin held out his hand and Astoria took it, stepping daintily from the carriage before their party began to approach the monstrous structure. They made for an elaborately carved archway inlaid with snakes as others vanished into its shadowy depths. When she drew closer, she saw a large sign above the archway that read “PURE BLOOD ONLY. HALF BLOOD ENTRANCES TO THE EAST AND WEST.” Astoria grimaced and stepped through the magical perimeter which glowed green when she crossed the threshold. The place was sumptuously decorated but gloomy as dim fire sconces in the likenesses of snakes flickered upon the silken walls. Corridors and stairs branched off in all directions, the air was chill, and the place was oddly silent giving an ominous feeling of foreboding. A Muggle slave came creeping out from the shadows and gestured with his hand, his head bowed and not daring to speak. They all turned to see that a black iron lift had appeared in front of them, a faint glow radiating from its ceiling. The thing looked more like a cage. Before anyone could utter, the door swung open with a whine of metal despite it being newly wrought. The journey in the lift was short as they travelled toward the centre of the amphitheatre.

Antonin was jesting heartily with Yaxley as they stepped out into another gloomy corridor, the muffled sounds of shouts and cheering audible through a thick steel door ahead of them. When it swung open at their approach and they entered the amphitheatre in earnest there was a burst of noise from a howling crowd of drunken wizards seated on tiered stone steps. Their own seats were not so crude, however; the box where the Pure Bloods sat was sealed off from the rest of the crowd made up of Half Bloods, Werewolves and Vampires. The view from the box of the sunken pit covered in sand was perfect so the spectators were very up close and would not miss a moment. It had silken green and silver hangings with matching gilded, velvet chairs that were soft and comfortable. Sitting highest above all the other seats in the box was an imposing black throne that Astoria recognised from Slytherin Castle in Britain. It was empty however; the Dark Lord waits on no one to be sure. Naturally there were numerous wines along with cold meats, fruit, cheese and nuts on silver platters that hovered all about the place. Indeed, Astoria saw the massive form of Philippe Rousseau a few rows down, guzzling wine and stuffing every morsel he could reach into his fat face. She and Antonin were to be seated in the back row right underneath the throne with the rest of the married couples – with the exception of Bellatrix Lestrange, to be sure. After Yaxley had sent Adelaide off further down in the box with some female cousins, Astoria looked at the glowing pieces of parchment hovering over each elaborate chair. With a stab of revulsion, she saw that they had been placed right next to Marcel and Ediva de Sade. She tried not to cringe away as Marcel greeted her in his normal lascivious manner and could not help but notice Antonin’s gaze crawling all over Ediva as he kissed her hand – after all she was only in her middling thirties and still comely. Indeed, it was common gossip that Ediva de Sade was with child.

The gossip seemed to prove true as when Antonin and Marcel shook hands, Astoria heard him murmur, “Marcel you sly old bastard, still got it in you, eh? Well done my friend, hopefully a boy this time.” Marcel smirked, his pale eyes gleaming, but made no reply as they all took their seats.

Theodore Nott and Dashiell Selwyn were the last to arrive and by their lurching steps and sniggers of laughter, Astoria surmised that they had already started drinking. Indeed, she could have almost
thanked Antonin when he handed her a goblet of deep red spiced wine and found the wine half gone after scarcely a few minutes.

_I will need it to get through this awful day._

There was a murmur of excited talk in the box when everyone was seated, but those in the crowd continued to shout and howl worse than ever. All noise was annihilated however when the deep, deafening sounds of a horn ripped through the air that seemed to vibrate throughout the ears.

The horn sounded six more times before Astoria heard a high, cold voice come from directly behind her, “_Death Eaters!_” In one swift movement all within the box whipped around to gape at the Dark Lord who seemed to have appeared from nowhere with narry a sound. “_Today marks the first official day of my victory. In the short time we have occupied Paris, the New World order is already flourishing. Your generous Lord brings you these games to celebrate the first of many victories as we continue change the world for the better._” The Dark Lord swiped his wand through the air and screeched, “_Let the games begin!_”

Mingled with the roar of the crowd and the applause of the Pure Bloods there was a great bang and a set of double doors burst open on the Western side of the deep pit. A hoard of half naked, screaming Muggle men and children were running about the sand like trapped ants with some attempting to climb the hopelessly high walls that encircled the pit. No less than half a dozen Erumpents had come charging in after them, their huge curved horns glowing as they bellowed angrily and tossed their heads. There was an eruption of laughter at the sight. Marcel was bouncing up and down in his seat like a child, shrieking with glee, Astoria heard Prince Gyasi’s deep shortle somewhere to her left and Antonin was laughing so hard with Yaxley that wine sprayed from their mouths and noses. Even Elizabeth was chuckling politely behind her hand and Astoria hastened to imitate her, lest anyone notice her lack of mirth. But the loudest and cruellest laughter came from the Dark Lord as he watched the Muggles explode in a red tide of entrails and blood as they were forcefully gored by the enraged Erumpents. Many Muggles were trampled, their gruesome remains mashed into the sand by the Erumpents heavy hooves. Others managed to escape death for a time by ducking and diving around the huge grey beasts, for they could not manoeuvre quickly such was their size. However, this only seemed to add fire to the beasts’ fury and simply delayed the inevitable. Astoria saw a Muggle boy make a quick escape from one Erumpent only to be faced with another which promptly impaled him so viciously upon its horn that the boy did not even explode, his body merely slid down the Erumpent’s horn toward its leathery face, blood spraying everywhere as his head rolled sickeningly. When all the Muggles lay dead the beasts slammed themselves against the wall of the pit in an attempt to attack the spectators, but wizards on brooms appeared above them, raining down spells to subdue the creatures.

As the unconscious Erumpents were heaved away by trolls, Marcel recovered himself enough to say breathlessly, “_We have Gyasi to thank for many of the beasts performing today. Magnificent are they not? I knew my African friend would be of much use to Lordship._” He glanced backward at his Master, but the Dark Lord’s red, cat like eyes were fixed upon the bloodied sand, waiting for whatever gruesome spectacle was to come next.
Astoria was expecting more terrified Muggles to appear, but no. Armand Fersen came striding out onto the sand then; he was bare chested to show off his many tattoos and muscles, clad in naught but dark breeches and heavy boots. There was a great roar from the crowd as he postured and strutted about the pit, treading carelessly on the mangled remains of the slain Muggles. Fersen drew his wand, directing it at the Eastern wall of the pit. Once again there was a great bang and for a moment he was lost from view in thick black smoke. Astoria was filled with fear when she heard an awful growling sound over a half human voice that was speaking in some bizarre foreign tongue. Her worst fears were realised when the smoke cleared, and she saw a fully grown manticore snarling and speaking malevolently as its fiery eyes glared at the wizard standing in its path. Huge and terrible, the manticore had a face that was almost human, but no normal human had ever looked thus. Its teeth were long and sharp, the skin stretched over its face was gnarled and cracked and it had a long red mane that was matted and wild. Its lion like body with a lethal scorpion’s tail served to make the manticore a fully fledged monster of the worst kind. Fersen did not look the least bit afraid, in fact he was smirking as he aimed a curse at the creature which ricocheted off its head and blew apart a portion of the stone wall. Astoria could not hear the incantations that Fersen was uttering over the din being made by the crowd as the manticore charged, screaming in its inhuman tongue, its poisonous scorpions tail flailing about dangerously. Just as the creature’s jaws were about to reach Fersen he turned on the spot and vanished, re appearing behind the manticore, laughing at its confusion as it looked about wildly for him. He taunted the beast with another curse which dealt it an angry red welt on its back as it skidded to a halt, screeching in pain as it whirled around to face its tormentor.

This is a frightening, dangerous beast to be sure, but it seems so cruel to taunt it in this fashion, Astoria thought as the manticore flew at Fersen again who deftly rolled as the creature leapt upward, claws outstretched.

The manticore gave another howl of pain as it jumped over Fersen and Astoria saw a deep gash in its chest as it struggled to right itself upon landing. This spectacle went on for some time until the manticore was bleeding from a hundred cuts though it still refused to give up the fight. However, Fersen then misjudged the distance when the manticore swiped at him furiously and blood fountained from his shoulder. There was a great gasp and several groans as Fersen stumbled, clutching at his maimed shoulder, but the manticore was upon him once more and they both went crashing to the ground in a tangle of fur, flesh and fangs. It was not clear what was happening as Fersen rolled in the dirt with the beast as the dust and sand whipped up around the struggling pair. The manticore gnashed its teeth and was making terrible yowling noises, savagely jabbing its tail at Fersen as it tried to land a lethal blow. Then there was a terrible drawn out scream that sounded like a thousand nails on a chalkboard and the manticore was thrashing about, covered in blood and that was when Astoria saw it. Ever so briefly the silver glimmer of a blade winked in the afternoon sun when Fersen drew back his hand as he proceeded to stab the creature repeatedly. The screams of the manticore lowered in pitch and Fersen was on his knees now, his back to them and he seemed to be busying himself as the crowd whooped and shrieked with glee. The grisly truth as to what he had done was soon revealed when Fersen turned around to face them, red from head to heel. Clutched in one of his big hands was the huge heart of the manticore, bloody and dripping; a great ugly gash running down the creature’s chest as it lay upon the sand, dead. Fersen raised the beast’s heart high over his head as it continued to pump furiously, great rivers of blood running down his muscular arm as the crowd went mad for him. He then took a huge bite of the heart and tore off a piece with his teeth before chewing in apparent relish, his mouth bared in a terrible grin as blood covered half his face. Many Death Eaters exchanged amused looks as Fersen strode from the sand, revelling in his
victory and Astoria heard Silas cackling madly in the background.

“Mark my words, all the little girls will be getting wet for our dear Fersen after that heroic display.” Came Ediva de Sade’s French lilt from the excited chatter of voices and shrieks of laughter.

“Even you mon amour?” Marcel asked his wife teasingly as he grabbed her between the thighs and offered her a sliver of apple from his dagger while she giggled like a girl.

Their vulgarity was put to an end by a great trumpeting sound and when Astoria looked up she could not help but gasp, she had only ever seen drawings of these beasts; much less pictures. Two huge mûmakils were lumbering out onto the sand from opposite ends of the pit. There were towers lashed to their backs filled with what seemed to be bound Muggles struggling in vain to get free and shrieking at the top of their lungs. The beasts were grey in colour and almost thirty feet tall. They had long trunks, large flapping ears and four curved lethal looking tusks that looked like they were the thickness of a man’s body. They trumpeted angrily at one another until one mûmakil slammed into the other so that the beast stumbled clumsily to the right with many Muggles becoming dislodged from the tower and falling to their deaths, screaming. The mûmakil that had been struck turned its great ugly head and launched itself at the other, bellowing with rage. The elephantine beasts were locked in combat as their tusks tangled and their heads swayed wildly as they shoved one another back and forth while more terrified Muggles fell to spatter on the bloody sand below.

“Two thousand Galleons on the beast to the right!” Jugson roared as he shoved himself clumsily to his feet, red faced and reeling. He was splashing wine everywhere and had a huge fistful of gold coins which spilled between his fingers as he leered.

Avery chortled derisively. “I think not Jugson, look!” The larger mûmakil to the left raked the others face with its sharp tusks leaving a deep red slash through the tough grey skin. “I shall raise you four thousand and winner keeps all?” He yelled back, jangling a red velvet pouch and grinning broadly.

Their shouted conversation was drowned out by a great roar which seemed to rattle Astoria’s very bones. She fleetingly thought of a dragon, but no. Four Nundus had come slinking onto the sand, spitting and snarling furiously, their sleek, fluid bodies crouched low to the ground. Nundus were like leopards, only much, much larger and a hundred times more terrifying. They were yellow with black spots and covered in spines with razor sharp teeth and claws. When they roared, the spiny flesh around their necks fanned out alarmingly, making them look even more frightening. The Nundus launched themselves at the mûmakils at once, their eyes rolling as they roared and bounded forward. They started snapping at the mûmakils ankles and darting underneath them to deal them bloody slashes on their stomachs. The mûmakils trumpeted in rage and attempted to charge down the Nundus but the beasts were simply too quick – and intelligent – for them to strike a blow. The Nundus seemed to be working together; one would leap out in front of a mûmakil to distract it while another bit or slashed at the beasts to weaken them; the great lumbering behemoths could not seem to puzzle it out. Astoria thought vaguely that neither Jugson nor Avery would win their wager, for the
Nundus looked as though they would bring down both mûmakils such was the savagery and efficiency of their attack. One Nundu finally succeeded in clawing up the larger mûmakil’s thick leg before savaging the trapped Muggles within the tower on its back and many were dead before they hit the ground as they were killed by the vicious creature’s poisonous breath. The mûmakil roared in pain and fury and reared slightly causing the tower to slide dangerously. The Nundu hissed and dug its claws in deeper still as it clung to the beast’s rump as dark blood began to ooze down the mûmakil’s body. At the exact moment the mûmakil threw back its head, the other charged straight at it, one of its lethal tusks now lodged in its fellow’s throat. The scream the mûmakil made was almost human as it fell to its knees and the Nundus pressed their advantage. Two leapt upon the beast; one started tearing the flesh from its body while the other cracked one of its huge tusks with powerful jaws and fangs. There was a great red tide as blood washed everywhere from the mûmakil, the roar of the crowd mingling oddly with the beast’s dying cries. It gave one last groan and went crashing to the ground as the screaming Muggles in the tower were thrown in all directions as they made contact with the magical barrier that protected the crowd to shrieks of laughter. A Nundu was trapped underneath the great grey beast, a shard of bone poking out from its front leg; yowling and hissing until its last breath as blood streamed from its cat green eyes. The surviving Nundu was beginning to feast upon the flesh of mûmakil and Muggle alike, blood leaking from its jaws as it emerged with a great chunk of lung in its mouth. The other two Nundus were slashing at the other mûmakil’s legs trying to bring it down as the beast swung its head violently trying to impale its tormentors. All of a sudden, more shrieking Muggles were released onto the sand causing complete chaos. The Nundus, distracted from savaging the mûmakil gave great roars of fury and leapt into the crowd of Muggles on the ground, striking down many with their venomous breath or else slashing their faces open with those cruel claws, blood fountaining all over the place to darken the already sodden sand below.

Astoria was jolted out of her horrified trance when Antonin then threw an arm around her shoulder and drew her close to him; reeking of cannabis and gin. As soon as he spoke, Astoria could tell he was drunk. “Mmh… why must you torment me so by looking so gorgeous my lady?” He murmured in her ear before planting kisses up her neck which made her blood run cold. His hand travelled suggestively up her thigh, his mouth right next to her ear. “I am going to make you sing all night my love, would you like that?”

Astoria’s stomach roiled but she smiled sweetly for Antonin and grasped his arm briefly. “It would please me to please my Lord husband.” She said, knowing that was what he wanted to hear. Indeed, Antonin gave a satisfied smirk and drew her closer still so that she was leaning against his chest as he continued to watch the barbarous display with cruel amusement.

The savagery went on for hours as the Death Eaters drank fine wine and laughed at the suffering in front of them. No one had bothered to clear up the butchered remains of all that had died upon the sand so the pit was now choked with corpses. Half Blood wizards from the army who had been sentenced to death by the Dark Lord were compelled to fight one another with the promise that the last man standing would be granted his freedom. Only one wizard had succeeded thus far, and he had been so badly wounded as he was dragged from the sand that Astoria felt that he would be lucky to live through the night. Muggles were made to fight too, they were armed with the weapons of their kind; whips, spears, guns and axes so that they might hack and mutilate one another to death while the drunken crowd howled for more blood. A brown skinned Muggle man had fought off and killed all those who had attacked him, and he was the only one left. However, all this earned the poor Muggle was having a Sabre Toothed Panther set upon him by Marcus Flint rather than the freedom
he was promised. He was ripped to pieces before their very eyes, his screams of pain lost in the hooting and jeering of the crowd. Astoria watched as Muggles were thrown into huge vats of boiling oil by giants with many survivors trying to climb out; burned and screaming as the skin fell from their flesh. Half naked children ran in all directions as they were savaged by Quintaped’s; terrible five legged beasts covered in reddish brown hair with rows of sharp teeth and yellow slit eyes. Two Muggle boys of eight were forced to fight each other to the death with knives and hatchets. Wizards mounted on unicorns chased down men, women and children while mercilessly hexing them in their backs until they became too exhausted to run, eventually collapsing in the sand where they were trampled by the equines’ powerful hooves. There were a few Muggles who tried to end their lives on their own terms by flinging themselves in front of a wand or a rampaging beast. For ‘disturbing the show’ the Dark Lord commanded his trolls to cut off their arms and legs to leave them to bleed to death upon the sand. Astoria felt faint, she could not take much more of this bloodthirsty display. It was growing hot under the silken canopies and most within were very drunk or else out of their minds on drugs. She took another swallow of wine to dull her wits as Antonin, Yaxley and Marcel were shrieking at the top of their voices and Blaise fell backward down the stairs as he attempted to get up from his seat to gales of laughter. Every face was twisted in grotesque merriment at the relentless bloody show; Elizabeth lay in a wine soaked sleep and Rookwood was drunkenly bellowing for the trolls to ‘Fuck the Muggle whores’ while the devious Lestrange brothers collected gold gambling wagers, their faces alight with savage triumph. Over all this din the Dark Lord was screaming and screaming with malicious laughter; he was fulfilling his heart’s desire – the torture, humiliation and murder of the Muggles he hated so much and his complete dominance over them. Astoria felt sick as she watched a huge troll dragging a young woman by the hair as she kicked and screamed while the beast itself wore a terrible grin on its ugly face. Truly, out of the ashes has sprouted a world more savage and brutal than Astoria could have ever imagined in her deepest, darkest nightmares. With the Dark Lord’s relentless lust for power and control, she feared that this was only the beginning.

Chapter End Notes

The amphitheatre bit in this chapter was inspired by Romans/Gladiators etc. and the segregation of Half Blood's is inspired by racial segregation in the States in the 50's and South Africa in the 90's.

Mumakils are creatures created by the one and only JRR Tolkien and are his intellectual property - https://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/press/images-1/2015/mumakil.jpg/image_view_fullscreen

Again for those who haven’t seen Fantastic Beasts:
Nundu - http://i.reddituploads.com/4f182c53326247dba9df07551d23bda9?fit=max&h=1536&w=1536&s=8222e2273862e359a78831cd608cc98f

The Louvre is a real place in Paris - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louvre#/media/File:Louvre_Museum_Wikimedia_Commons.jpg
Hi everyone, so this chapter explores the persecution of Muggles in Pureblood Society now that the war in France is effectively ‘over’ and a glimpse of what power crazy Lord V’s plans are for the future.

Warning: Graphic and distressing material
Same disclaimer applies.

The Dark Lord was in a high mood of late; for no wizard in history had ever amassed so much power and conquered these many countries before as he had done. The building blocks of his Lordship’s twisted vision were falling slowly into place; the Pure Bloods were more prosperous than ever and everyone else was doomed to short lived, miserable existences. Even so, it seemed as though his insatiable lust for power could not be sated; for he had set his cruel sights on crushing the rest of Europe and beyond. In just two lunar cycles or so, the Death Eaters stationed in Eastern Europe had brought Italy to its knees in a bloody takeover that left over half a million slain. After what had befallen Italy, Switzerland yielded without even putting up a fight, the Swiss Minister had served up the country to the Dark Order with pleas for mercy, but naturally he was granted none. The Death Eaters still burned down villages, plundered cities, enslaved their people and raped their women. Minister Yildriz had been dispatched to the Middle East to aid Masakh Shafiq in savagely plundering Syria which was the latest country to be in open war under the Dark Lord’s rule.

As the shadow of the Dark Order continued to engulf Europe it naturally brought the worst kind of Dark wizards crawling out from the woodwork, eager to be a part of the terror and monstrosity that the Dark Lord had caused. Like bees to honey, Astoria thought grimly. Prince Gyasi had summoned packs of mercenaries from all the corners of Africa; queer witches and wizards who covered themselves in gold and had jewels pierced through their cheeks. A murderous Italian wizard named Adalberto Malvagità had also been granted access to France three days past. It was whispered that he had committed more than a hundred Muggle slayings and had evaded the Italian Ministry of Magic for close to a decade and a half. There was the Moroccan oddity Akhmed bin Khalid who specialised in Inferius, Rostyslav Andrukhovych from Ukraine who enjoyed burning his victims alive, or the terrifying Hiroaki Jaakuna from Japan who ate the flesh of his enemies and performed shocking and atrocious Dark magic rituals with their corpses. Again, and again they came to pay homage to the Dark Lord and to lay their wands down at his service. There were so many that Astoria had forgotten most of their names and despite some of their strange and frightening appearances but they all had one thing in common; they were all pure evil. Monsters. Thus, it was small wonder that they got along so well with the Death Eaters who welcomed them with open arms.

“Lot six!” Screeched Silas’ reedy voice, magically magnified so that his shrill tone set Astoria’s teeth on edge even more than usual, snapping her back into the moment. She was seated with all the other
witches on hastily erected, tiered seats under a velvet canopy in a large stone square, the Dark Lord’s Fortress looming high above them. They looked out onto a wooden platform and sipped wine, casually watching the spectacle in front of them. The male Death Eaters were crowded around the foot of the platform, wands in hands. Silas was striding up and down the platform, the wood creaking as he shrieked maliciously, in his element as he hounded the ragged Muggle man standing in the centre. He was armed with a brutal whip, a long, cruel piece of stiff leather with a sharp metal claw attached to the end. “Here we have a male specimen of twenty nine years.” Silas shrilled. And just because he could, he brought the lash down hard across the man’s chest causing him to howl in pain, a sheet of blood oozing from the wound while the surrounding Death Eaters hooted with laughter. “This creature is strong, so he will be ideal for working in the stables or any similar such place. He is suited to heavy lifting and should be able to work for long hours, a worthy purchase indeed to add to one’s clutch of slaves. Shall we start the bidding at two thousand Galleons?” There was a great burst of talk as the wizards jostled one another with many raising their wands.

“Two thousand and five hundred!” Clarence Avery shouted over the din.

His wand glowed green but changed almost immediately to red when Jugson countered “Four thousand!”

Silas was talking so fast to keep up with the bids and counter bids that his words were barely discernible, and his voice was becoming shriller and shriller such was his excitement. “Four thousand from Jugson, do I hear five? Five thousand from Selwyn – no six thousand from Rookwood, can someone make it eight? Eight thousand from my boy Theodore!”

The Muggle man eventually was sold for nine thousand to the Zabini brothers; their love of breeding magnificent unicorn mounts was well known but they were not about to ruin their perfect clothes grubbing about in stables – that was for their new slave to do now.

“We have something very special next, boys. Troll! Bring the whore.” There was a great upswing of whistling and jeering as a lumbering troll dragged a young witch onto the auction block. She had an iron manacle around her neck and was dressed in naught but rags which exposed some of her bruised, naked skin. The male Death Eaters were calling out obscene suggestions as she hung her head, terrified. “Yes, today gentlemen we have a rare find. A female of approximately twenty one years, captured in Italy a fortnight ago. This Half Blood has been rejected by the Purification Institute for being barren and the Dark Lord has given his leave for her to be auctioned off to the highest bidder. She is no maid, but rather comely and exotic, look!” Silas jabbed the witch very hard with the coiled whip in his hand to make her hold up her head, but she did not stir. Those mismatched eyes of his narrowed in anger and he shoved the handle of the whip up under her chin so that she was looking directly into the leering faces of her potential owners and Astoria gasped. She heard Elizabeth and Adelaide, who were seated either side of her, do the same; they had been in her year at Hogwarts after all. Hestia Carrow on the other hand, who was seated a few rows downward, let out a bark of cruel laughter. It was Cho Chang, the former Ravenclaw seeker and love interest of Harry Potter. Cho had always been slender, but she was positively gaunt now, her eyes were red from crying and she had a cut on her cheek, however her good looks were still visible
from behind the ruins. Astoria felt sorry for her as Silas tore open the front of her ragged shift to expose her breasts and forced her closer to the crowd of drunken Death Eaters as she cringed and tried to cover herself. Cold fingers walked up Astoria’s neck as she heard the unmistakable sound of her husband’s rough laughter just as Cho began to sob in earnest.

Silas ignored Cho’s outburst and turned back to the leering crowd. “Shall we start the bidding at fifty thousand Galleons?”

Astoria turned her head sharply as she heard a great sniff to her right. For the fourth time that morn, Elizabeth had drawn out a tiny golden vial and tapped the white powder within onto the back of her hand before snorting it up her nose.

Seeing that Astoria was watching her, Elizabeth held out the vial. “Will you partake this time?”

“I told you, I do not care for it.” Astoria replied, her eyes straying back to Cho briefly as she watched Elizabeth finish the rest with mounting disquiet, silently cursing the Dark Lord.

The Dark Lord, with the connivance of Severus Snape had managed to produce a fine white powder from coca infused wine which could easily be carried upon the person. It aided in keeping wizards alert and awake for far longer than they would normally be able to manage, thus it had proven useful on the battlefield as the toxic cloud of the Dark Order spread over other countries. However, it was highly addictive, and many witches and wizards used it for ‘fun’ – usually at dinner parties or as an aphrodisiac behind closed doors to enhance their lovemaking. Indeed, there had been more than a few occasions where Antonin had insisted that she take it with him when he stumbled into their bedchamber at night. Naturally Astoria had obeyed but she did not like it, the foul powder burned her nose and made her head spin which served to make her feel even more helpless as Antonin did whatever he wanted to her body as she lay there. Not only that, but it served to increase her husband’s warped libido tenfold which would prolong each awful episode of him shoving himself in and out of her every night. Snape had dubbed the substance, ‘Powdered Essence of Coca Leaves’ but Astoria had heard most people refer to it simply as ‘coca.’

Elizabeth dabbed her nose with a silken handkerchief scalloped with lace, rolling her eyes – whose pupils had now shrunk to the size of pinpricks. “You should tread carefully around that, Snape said it is unwise to take it too regularly.” Astoria counselled her.

Elizabeth gave a tinkling laugh and tossed her chestnut tresses. “Oh, come now Astoria, the effects are simply marvellous!” She lowered her voice considerably then, “And it makes facing Corban in the bedchamber each night all the easier, you should try it for yourself.” Astoria did not answer but pressed her lips together and turned her attention back to the auction block. There was a ripple of applause and murmuring around the witches while the wizards roared in triumph.
“I cannot believe it, seventy thousand Galleons!” Silas screamed at the top of his lungs. “McNair, will you counter Rabastan’s bid?”

McNair glared over at Rabastan who winked, and he turned back to Silas and bellowed, “One hundred and fifty thousand Galleons!”

The wizards all cheered and shouted incoherently, urging McNair or Rabastan or both on to continue their twisted bidding war, but Rabastan was shaking his head and frowning and Astoria distinctly saw his mouth form the words. “No way.”

At this, Silas screeched over the tumult, “This young filly for one hundred and fifty thousand Galleons going once! Going twice!... SOLD! Walden, you may collect your chattel when the bidding is done with.”

On and on it went; men, women and children were auctioned off, chiefly to be house slaves. But as with Cho Chang, any young women were all sold as bed slaves for the use of their new owners – though all of these subsequent girls were Muggles and bought for lower sums. When it was all done with, Astoria waited dutifully for her husband to come and get her as she watched a Troll drag away a rolling cage full of sobbing Veela. They had been bought by Alecto Carrow who oversaw a lavish brothel exclusively for the use of Pure Bloods in the centre of the city. Astoria pitied them; Silas had gleefully intimated to the crowd that they had all been made forcibly barren to prevent any births that would result in ‘filthy half breeds.’ Antonin of course was a regular visitor to all of these vile establishments as were the rest of the male Death Eaters. He would sometimes stay out from morning till night while he wasted what was rightfully her fortune on whores, drink, drugs and gambling. She knew that the slaves in the brothel would suffer terribly at his hands, but she could not help but breathe a sigh of relief when she was finally left at home with Leo – it was the closest thing to freedom she had.

He always comes back though, always. Whether it was morning, noon or evenfall when he returned, Antonin would haul her into bed and claim his marital rights to bed her for as long and as often as he wished.

When Astoria returned home, evening dawned, and the sky was beginning to darken, the Muggle slaves were scurrying about her bedchamber folding gowns and locking away jewels in boxes. I could do this packing with a flick of my wand, what does it serve to make them do it? She thought wearily as she watched the two men and elderly woman work away but did not dare instruct them otherwise. This evenfall they were getting ready to travel to the home of Philippe Rousseau for at least a fortnight of drinking, hunting and revelry at his palace. She was trying to keep Leo in hand as he squirmed in her arms which was not aided by the fact that he was so heavy now and big for his age. He had been sleeping when Antonin had commanded for him to be awoken and dressed for their journey and he was tearful at being disturbed. Another Muggle slave was to her right with the great navy and chrome pram that she barely used anymore; these days Leo wanted to walk everywhere, but not this night.
“No!” Leo wailed as he stretched out his arms toward her as she settled him onto the goose down cushions of the pram. “Me want Mama!”

“Mama is right here my love, see?” Astoria replied soothingly, kissing him on the forehead. “I will be at your side the whole time, Mama is not going anywhere.” That seemed to calm him, and Astoria fell in beside the elderly Muggle woman as they swept from the room.

“You took your time!” Antonin snapped at her as they emerged in the great hall. Leo flinched a little at the fury in his voice, but Antonin had not spared him so much as a glance. “Come, or we shall be late.”

The tree lined avenue with its manors was crowded with carriages drawn by Abraxan horses for the apparition ban was still in place. There was a great deal of noise as witches and wizards called to one another and the horses snorted and stamped, flexing their wings impatiently. The carriages were large enough to fit a score of them at least and Astoria followed Antonin to the carriage at the head as Leo gripped the sides of his pram. He was sitting up and staring inquisitively at everyone and everything his lilac eyes could reach. He is curious, this little son of mine. When they had all been crammed inside, Astoria placed Leo on her lap, but he remained restive; he would reach his second year before long and this was most like a bore for him.

“Mama where are we going?” He asked loudly, drawing the attention of many in the carriage – including Antonin who was swigging laudanum from a drinking flask.

“Hush now, sweet one.” She whispered, trying to keep the panic from her voice. “We are going to a friend of Papa’s, and you shall see Delphi there, won’t that be splendid? Now close your eyes and try and sleep.”

“But Mama, Leo is not tired! I want –”

“Shh my love” Astoria broke in, shooting a nervous glance at Antonin. She could almost feel herself wilting from the look her husband gave her, and when Leo looked up at his Father his lilac eyes went huge and he pressed himself into her furs. She gave her son’s small hand a squeeze to reassure him and he returned her touch at once, holding on to her tightly. Antonin did not have much contact with their son, but Leo was afraid of him all the same. On more than one occasion Leo had seen Antonin raise his voice to her, heard the way he spoke to her, but thankfully he had never seen him hit her… yet. Aside from being scared into silence in Antonin’s presence, doubtless her baby boy had heard Antonin’s drunken yells at night after returning from a brothel or drinking parlour, or else him smashing up half the manor after he had blown thousands of Galleons at the gaming tables. Astoria would curse herself daily for not being able to protect Leo from such monstrosities; her son
had a mischievous side to him, but his truest nature was sweet and gentle – nothing like his Father.

The home of Philippe Rousseau came as a surprise for Astoria when they arrived scarcely an hour later. She had been expecting the fat ogre to live in some gloomy stronghold like Dracula, but Rousseau’s Palace was… well, beautiful. The palace itself was vast and looked like an illustration out of a child’s storybook; it was all of pale gold and purest white with innumerable turrets and whimsical carvings decorating the façade. It was surrounded by a stunning valley that was positively teeming with life, unscathed by the savage war that had devastated much of France. Flowers of every colour bloomed from flutter bushes and rich orchards filled with fruit trees gave the air a pure sweetness. There were innumerable fountains and freshwater pools containing brightly coloured fish, while butterflies the size of dinnerplates beat their wings softly as they drifted lazily through the vegetation. A softly flowing river lined with trees flowed Eastward, it had a delicate looking bridge hanging above which was covered in wisteria while golden swans basked on the farther bank amongst thousands of bluebells. *Who would have thought that such a monstrous man lived in such a charming place?* She thought musingly as they strode toward the huge double doors of the palace while a rainbow peacock shrieked at them. Astoria did not delude herself however, with this many scheming and depraved Pure Blood aristocrats under one roof, stepping into Philippe Rousseau’s abode would be nothing short of stepping into a viper’s nest now, no matter how beautiful or vast.

Rousseau received them in his audience chamber; a great cavernous room with a barrel vaulted ceiling which was covered with huge elaborate paintings in equally elaborate gold frames. Great marble pillars framed the hall, girt in gold and studded with sparkling rubies while at least fifty House Elves lined the walls. Rousseau was sprawled in a huge, carved chair at the head of the hall and attended by a Veela woman clad in a glittering gown who was sat on a lower, plainer chair, fawning over him. Naturally she was stunning with rich brown curls, skin like cream and deep purple eyes.

“My friends!” Rousseau called as they all filed into the hall. “I trust naught went amiss on your journey? Come, come!”

The children were promptly whisked away by Nurse Clayden and a group of Imperioused, elderly Muggle slave women as many approached Rousseau and his slender companion to greet him personally, as was tradition.

“Good eve to you, Rousseau.” Antonin announced, inclining his head to the fat wizard when they were stood in front of him. “I believe you have been briefly acquainted with my wife once before.” He gestured languidly at Astoria who dutifully stepped forward and curtsied as Rousseau’s eyes crawled all over her.

“Ah yes,” Wheezed Rousseau, his face already flushed and ruddy from drink so that the broken veins on his nose were brought into greater prominence. He kissed her hand with his plump mouth and Astoria barley repressed a shudder at the touch of his damp, pudgy flesh. “Yes, your wife is hard to forget, Monsieur. You are a lucky man, she is splendid.” He leered, showing a mouth full of...
crooked yellow teeth.

The Veela gave Antonin a mechanical smile and inclined her head; her eyes oddly blank and unfocused. Astoria knew the Veela was a slave and not a bed warmer because she had been branded with a tattoo under her right collarbone which read: Property of PR ~ 132286. Due to the masses of newly enslaved Muggles under the growing regime it was proving difficult to keep track of all of them, thus the Dark Lord had decreed that slaves were to be tattooed with their owners’ initials and an identification number. Should they try to escape, the brand would burn so badly that they would be rendered incapable of even moving due to the agony it caused. This method was quite unlike what was employed against the few surviving Mudbloods who were forced to wear an iron collar like Granger’s to prevent them from using their ‘stolen magic’ against their Masters.

Rousseau could not fail to notice that the Veela was causing a stir among the wizards and he raised his voice slightly over the chatter as House Elves weaved squeakily through the legs of his guests, serving champagne. “Should you feel the need, my friends, I have a score of these beautiful creatures like Darya here,” He waved a fat hand carelessly at the Veela. “Just say the word and you shall have one waiting in your bed, you shall not be disappointed I promise you. These wonderful creatures have been trained in every act of pleasure, you shall all be very pleased I am sure.” Silas was staring at Darya the Veela with such avid intensity that he looked as though he was going to rip off her gown and take her right there and then on the marble. The Zabini brothers leered and Travers whispered something in the ear of Rabastan who smirked and nodded. “You shall of course find your rooms ready and supper shall be sent to you, forthwith.” Rousseau went on. “Be welcome my friends and rest easy, I daresay you shall all want to be fresh and alert for the first hunt tomorrow.” He gave another yellow leer as the surrounding Death Eaters chuckled and Astoria’s heart began to race nervously.

The riding habit Astoria donned the next morn was all of green and silver. Antonin had insisted that she wear this particular one for ‘the hunt’ today, despite the fact that it was far too elaborate to ride in for a long period of time. It was heavily embroidered with silver thread scrollwork in the likenesses of snakes; emeralds and diamonds sparkling between their coiling bodies and encrusted on the sleeves and lapels of the jacket. Today would be no true hunt however; Astoria knew that this so called hunt would not be chasing down big game for the feast table, today the Death Eaters would pursue different sorts of prizes. Her stomach roiled at the thought as she swept through Rousseau’s opulent abode, her boots thudding softly on the magnificently decorated marble.

When she stepped out into the crisp morning air she was greeted by Elizabeth and Adelaide who had been lounging on a carved bench under a great cherry blossom tree. Adelaide was radiant in red while Elizabeth stunned in royal blue, their jewels winking in the weak sun. There was an elaborate silken and tassled pavilion set upon the grass in the distance amidst Rousseau’s fantastical gardens with a considerable crowd beneath it. Astoria recognised Antonin at once, even though his back was to her, his build and height were an instant giveaway to his identity. Her husband had risen early for once and had gone off with Marcel de Sade and Yaxley so they might ‘prepare’ for the hunt which would most like involve the three of them getting as drunk as they possibly could beforehand.
“Good morrow to you Astoria.” Elizabeth called, smoothing her skirts as she rose. “Ah, your habit today is simply divine, I need one like that. Corban tells me that many craftsmen have been taken prisoner since Italy fell. I do hope they will send some of them our way and not hoard them all for themselves, my wardrobe needs something fresh and beautiful.” She tossed her head haughtily, looking displeased.

“As you say, Elizabeth.” Astoria replied, “Shall we?”

Arm in arm, with Astoria in the middle, she, Adelaide and Elizabeth made to join the crowd of witches and wizards gathered underneath the pavilion. Their skirts whispered softly on the grass as Adelaide talked excitedly about the day to come and Astoria forced herself to nod and smile.

“Ah, this beautiful day has become even more so!” Called Rowle as the three of them were within hailing distance.

The surrounding wizards laughed and those who were seated got to their feet to greet them excepting Philippe Rousseau who was too fat to rise that quickly. Ediva de Sade was sat next to him and despite her early pregnancy, she looked a stick in contrast to Rousseau’s massive frame. There were others underneath the pavilion who would not be taking part in the hunt, chiefly the aristocratic elders and the very young. Astoria was unsurprised to see that Hestia Carrow had donned a simple black riding habit with a severe cut; unadorned with jewels or embroidery. She stood aside from the group, gazing up at the purple mountains as she sipped from her goblet, looking sour. Astoria could not say if she had taken the death of her Uncle Amycus to heart like her Aunt Alecto who had been driven half mad with grief at the loss of her sadistic partner in crime. The Zabini brothers were predictably the most richly garbed out of all of the wizards. The brothers wore magnificently embroidered tailcoats of blue and silver and green and gold respectively, their family coat of arms picked out in diamonds on the breast: a dragon crouching on a moon, its wings spread wide.

Over the next hour, the crowd of witches and wizards underneath the pavilion grew larger and larger as they indulged in strong drink and rich canapes sprinkled with real gold dust. There was suddenly a great torrent of noise; the pounding of hooves and loud baying which made the ground tremble. Silas was mounted on a blood bay unicorn as he charged toward them herding a pack of howling red and silver wolves, his disfigured face alive with excitement. There were many cheers and the chink of glasses as Silas slowed; his mount blowing and heaving, its flanks lathered. Silas was once again armed with his cruel whip which he slashed through the air, cackling shrilly as the wolves teemed about on the grass. They were thrice the size of common wolves, heavily muscled and half mad; slaver was running from their jaws and their eyes bulged as they continued to howl – a sound which chilled Astoria to the bone.

“They have not been fed in three days!” Silas screamed over the tumult, his mismatched eyes gleaming. “I do believe the time is ripe for the hunt to commence!”
There was a great roar of assent at his words and Astoria saw her husband glugging from a bottle of Firewhiskey. *Good, perhaps he shall fall from his mount and break his neck,* Astoria thought vengefully. Muggle slaves then came into view jogging beside a hoard of highly strung unicorns; they were all big strong men to handle such beasts, but Astoria knew they would have been castrated all the same – that was the law by his Lordship’s own decree in all occupied territory. She had chosen a pure white mare for herself today; the creature was gentle and sweet but looked as though she would be swift and sure footed over the vast terrain of Rousseau’s land. Rowle’s mount was the biggest unicorn she had ever seen to take his weight and Prince Gyasi’s African mercenaries were mounted on queer, black and white striped unicorns with long, dark manes and tails like silk. Their horns were longer than that of a normal unicorn and they were far wilder. All of the party were mounted on stallions, even the witches and the striped beasts were causing a stir as they stamped and snorted, swishing their tails and screaming, eager to leave for the hunt. Their African guests garbed themselves in rich, colourful traditional cloth from their relevant nations and sat on ornate saddles with gold and jewelled fastenings, seemingly unperturbed by their half wild mounts. The vicious wolves were adding to the din, snarling and baying and snapping at one another furiously as everyone mounted up. Astoria saw a Muggle slave drop to his hands and knees at the feet of Bellatrix who lifted her skirts deftly and used him as a mounting block, leaving behind a dirty boot print on his back. Antonin suddenly seized the whip from Silas and cracked it over the wolves’ heads to incense them even further while the surrounding Death Eaters laughed.

When all were ready Rousseau called “Good fortune to you on the hunt! I shall see you at the banquet this evenfall.” He waved a fat hand lazily before turning back to talk with Ediva de Sade.

They set off at a blistering gallop toward a heavily wooded area; the wizards heading the hunting party while Astoria and most of the witches brought up the rear, though Bellatrix rode her dapple grey unicorn with reckless abandon at the front next to Silas. They thundered through trees and jumped small creeks as the wolves weaved around the unicorns’ legs, snarling malevolently. Birds burst from the trees and deer scattered as they flew past, Astoria saw a flash of green light and a great stag fell with a groan while the Death Eaters laughed. The wolves began to bay louder than ever and took them Westward through the forest. Then came the screams. Another great gale of laughter erupted from many throats and Astoria saw ragged Muggles darting through the trees. *Let the barbarity begin.* She fell in with Elizabeth who rode a chestnut as they pounded after the large group before hurtling out of the trees to be faced with a great gushing river. Two Muggle men were swimming for their lives across the river while the hunting party spread out upon the riverbank, many of them shouting out insults after them.

“*We may as well give them a good head start.*” Antonin sneered as his mount moved skittishly beneath him. He gave the poor animal a savage kick with a spur clad boot to quieten it as he drew out his drinking flask to take another great swig.

When the Muggles reached the other side of the bank Hiroaki Jaakuna screamed, “*Let’s KILL THEM!*” His red rimmed, slanting eyes were bright and feverish as he launched his mount into the river to splash after the Muggles.
The wolves leapt after him, just as eager and the other members of the hunt followed suit in a great tide of water as they all charged across the river. When they reached the other side, Silas cracked the whip through the air once again and the wolves bayed, plunging straight ahead into the trees. Astoria could hear the frightened shouts of the Muggles from here as they pounded through the woodland.

“Over there!” Screeched Bellatrix who raced after a man struggling through the undergrowth. She cantered up behind him and brought her wand down in a savage arc which split the Muggle in two, his blood and brains scattering over the moss covered ground.

The Death Eaters all cheered. “First kill of the day!” McNair shouted over the tumult. “Well struck, Bellatrix!”

Bellatrix merely cackled and rode on after Silas and his wolves as they went crashing up an earthen bank to career to the other side where they saw the other man running as fast as he could ahead of them. He threw himself at a tree and began to climb determinedly upwards as though he were some sort of monkey. The surrounding Death Eaters congregated around the base of the tree as the wolves gave blood curdling howls and slashed at the bark, tree sap fling everywhere as they looked hungrily up at the terrified Muggle. The man’s face was pale and his eyes wide as he clutched desperately at a thick branch amidst the leaves, staring down into the leering faces of the Death Eaters, many of whom had drawn their wands. *He knows he is going to die, yet he clings to life ever more desperately.*

There was a sudden screech from above their heads and when Astoria looked up she saw the monstrous form of a huge black eagle; Vlad, Antonin’s vile ‘pet’ had joined in the savagery. Antonin gave a yell of triumph as Vlad screeched again, his lethal talons outstretched as he soared toward the terrified Muggle still cowering in the tree. There was a terrible scream as Vlad slashed the Muggle across the face and he fell from the tree through countless branches and leaves as the Death Eaters roared. They closed in around the tree as Vlad continued to tear the man’s face to bloody ribbons as he screamed and writhed upon the floor, the unicorns jostling one another nervously at the scent of the blood. When Vlad had ceased his ferocious attack, the Muggle had no eyes and his face was so ripped and slashed it was a shock to see that he still lived behind the red ruin as he continued to howl in pain. The wolves made to lunge forward again but Silas dealt them another vicious slash to cow them.

Almost as if just for good measure Antonin then bellowed, “*Crucio!*” And the Muggle screamed harder still in unison with Vlad who was wheeling above their heads; his beak and talons awash with blood.

Bellatrix and Prince Gyasi added their wands to the torture and the Muggle was lifted into the air, such was the power of their spells as he continued to thrash about in agony. *This one is a fighter,*
Astoria thought as the surrounding Death Eaters hurled jinxes and hexes at this Muggle who refused to die.

She rather thought it a perverse sort of kindness when she heard Silas crack his whip once again and his reedy voice shrieked, “KILL!”

There were cries of sadistic joy as the wolves bounded forward, snarling, baring their teeth and shoving one another out of the way to get to the flesh Silas had so cruelly denied them for three days. The best thing that could be said was that the Muggle’s life was ended swiftly; a great silver wolf promptly tore out his throat, ending his suffering in a great spray of red which swallowed the scattered leaves upon the ground. Bones crunched, and intestines flew as the wolves tore the Muggle to pieces. When they were done, there were only a few cracked bones and a few tattered pieces of flesh. Jugson looked deeply satisfied as he helped himself to his drinking flask and Armand Fersen began to sing in French as they trotted away from the bloody scene.

The wolves followed a scent that took them through a golden forest carpeted in bluebells, up and down green rolling hills and around a great marsh before leading them to a vast grassland whose grass was so long that it brushed the bellies of the unicorns. The wolves were sniffing about confusedly as the hunting party milled around, trampling the long grass as they did so.

“Oh! Get the scent!” Astoria heard Antonin roar and she wheeled her mare about just in time to see him jerking the whip away from Silas once again and lashing it five times – so viciously that she heard one of the creatures yelp in pain.

Antonin’s beating seemed to have worked however for the wolves shot off once again into the trees and Astoria could tell from the way they were snarling that more Muggles were close. Moments later two screaming girls burst forth from the wooded area as they ran from the savage wolves at their heels who were hounding them toward the eagerly awaiting Death Eaters. One was completely naked, and Astoria saw malicious hunger flash across her husband’s twisted face, the other was dressed in some filthy ragged vest and knickers. The naked girl veered to the left but was cut off by a cackling Avery who urged his mount to block her path so that she tripped and fell. Cruel laughter rang throughout the grassland and Lancelot Mulciber dismounted, looking a little unsteady on his feet. The other girl was now being taunted by Silas who had knocked her to the ground and had her surrounded by wolves who were barking savagely in her face, their teeth bared, though they did not strike. Lancelot was bearing down upon the nude girl who cowered away from him as he threw his riding jacket aside and untucked his shirt, grinning like a cat in cream. As he drew closer her leg lashed out to kick him, but he caught her by the ankle which gave a sickening snap and the girl screamed louder than ever. Even as Lancelot clambered on top of her the girl beat his chest with her fists which he did not take kindly to; for he punched the girl so hard that half her teeth were knocked out in a great spatter of blood.

“If you try and fight me, I will fucking kill you!” Lancelot bellowed down at the dazed girl before
shoving himself inside her as she gargled feebly, blood bubbling from her mouth and empty tooth holes. “It is not every Muggle bitch that gets to have a Pure Blood inside her!” The surrounding Death Eaters roared with laughter at his last words.

“Yeah fuck her right into the dirt, young Mulciber!” Jeered Yaxley, “It is where the filthy Muggle slut belongs!”

The other Muggle girl wailed in terror as she gazed, horrified as Lancelot brutally raped her companion. More of the wizards had dismounted and they were crowding around the panting Lancelot and the weeping girl, doubtless awaiting ‘their turn’ as they jeered and shouted. Without warning, Silas began to lash the girl at his feet mercilessly with the whip so that great gashes erupted on her dirty skin. Great arcs of blood gushed from the wounds as the girl howled in pain; he was whipping her with such force that the lash bit so deep into her flesh that Astoria could see bone. Akhmed bin Khalid then leapt out of nowhere and began hacking off great clumps of her hair with a janbiya as he screeched incoherently in Arabic, his golden eyes glittering. Marcel de Sade was so drunk and was laughing so hard that he fell from his mount, clutching at his side as tears poured down his hollow face while the others joined in the hilarity. When he had recovered himself, he strode over to the battered girl; he tore apart the rags she was wearing and began to beat her very, very hard with his fists; his laughter mingling queerly with her renewed screams of pain. Astoria looked away as Theodore slashed open the other girl’s throat and chanced a glance at Elizabeth, but she was not taking any notice of her brother’s barbarity as she snorted coca off the back of her gloved hand. Now that there was only one girl left, the wizards turned their ferocity and lust upon her.

By the time the girl had been raped by almost every wizard in the hunting party, she was trying to crawl away from them, breathing raggedly through her swollen lips and bleeding from a thousand cuts with half of her hair shaved off. Antonin calmly walked up to her and slowly and deliberately pressed a heavy riding boot down upon one of her hands. The girl let out a screech of pain and coughed up blood as the delicate bones in her hand were crushed and Antonin twisted his heel down cruelly, smirking all the while.

“Time to make an end!” Shouted Rookwood to roars of assent, “There is more fresh meat out there and I want to hunt it!”

Antonin grabbed the girl’s knickers which were lying a few feet away, forced her to the grassy floor with his knee and wrapped them around her neck, laughing as he did so.

“Go on, fucking kill the whore!” Shouted Walter Selwyn drunkenly as Antonin savagely grabbed a handful of the girl’s hair and whispered something malevolent in her ear that made her whimper.

Sure enough, slowly but surely Antonin began to strangle her, panting with excitement as he twisted
the knickers tighter and tighter. De Sade was shrieking incoherently with glee as the other Death Eaters urged Antonin on. Astoria could not seem to tear her horrified gaze from the girl’s ravaged face; she was gasping and spluttering, desperately trying to throw off Antonin and grasping fruitlessly at the lace ligature around her neck despite her many wounds. Her face was beginning to darken and the light in her eyes began to dim as the surrounding members of the hunting party hooted and jeered. By the time she was dead, the girl’s face was as black as a plum and her eyeballs were two red horrors. Panting, Antonin got to his feet looking indecently pleased with himself and it was all Astoria could do not to be sick when she saw him stuff the knickers into a pocket of his tailcoat, a sly smile playing about his cruel mouth.

Bellatrix lingered long enough to spit viciously over the girls’ mutilated corpses. “Filth!” She shrieked before wheeling her mount around to trot back into the woods. Vlad re appeared then, landing lightly on the strangled girl’s chest as he began to peck out her eyes.

The Death Eaters spent the next few hours hunting Muggles, chasing them all over Rousseau’s vast lands. Adalberto Malvagità and Rowle backed four Muggle men off a rocky cliff to send them plunging to their deaths, shrieking, before their bodies smashed and spattered upon the jagged rocks below while the others cheered. Rookwood trampled a boy of nine over and over again until his flesh and bone were mashed into the ground, Veliane Ayim – a witch from the African nation of Ghana, flayed the skin from the flesh of a young man before chasing him into the den of a golden bear. The beast had devoured him so savagely that there were scraps of flesh and entrails clinging to the leaves of trees after it was done with its gruesome feast. Hestia Carrow tied a Muggle woman to the back of her mount and dragged her all over the rough terrain while she screamed as rocks, twigs and the cold hard ground slashed her body to bloody ruins. By the time Hestia was finished, all that remained of the woman were the bloody stumps of her feet where she had been bound to the saddle. Avery had the severed heads from his victims attached to his saddle, cackling with glee while the awful Hiroaki Jaakuna had the headless corpse of a woman slung over the back of his mount and Astoria dreaded what he had in store for his grisly trophy.

When the Death Eaters grew bored of slaughter, they galloped to a meadow filled with buttercups. A few wands were all that were needed to erect another silk pavilion as before; beneath it there were richly patterned rugs and piles of silk cushions. There were innumerable solid silver platters laden with food – as well as drink, piles of white coca powder, jars of dried ‘mushrooms,’ carafes of laudanum and countless small pipes stuffed with opium and cannabis.

Suddenly Dashiell and Walter Selwyn burst from the trees out onto the meadow, their faces shining with sadistic pleasure. Behind them were a dozen or so weeping Muggle women, all bound to one another in chains which had scraped the skin off their wrists, leaving them red and raw.

“Oh, it is about time!” Called Rodolphus Lestrange as Father and son forced the terrified Muggle women closer to their leering tormentors to be.
Now the ‘entertainment’ had arrived the Death Eaters wasted no time in indulging in every sick, twisted and depraved act they could think of and predictably Antonin paved the way for the debauchery. “Bring me that one” He called from the pavilion as he sprawled on the cushions, gesturing lazily at a teenaged girl with dark hair and deep blue eyes that were huge with fear.

Dashiell and his Father dismounted at once and tore what little clothing she had on from her body. The girl wept and begged in what sounded like Italian as they dragged her toward Antonin who was grinning malevolently. Her screams increased in pitch as she saw him fumbling with the laces of his breeches while he in turn chuckled softly – terror always aroused him. No sooner had the Selwyns flung the weeping girl down next to Antonin he was on top of her, his hand at her throat as he forced himself between her legs.

“No, no, per favore, ti prego! Ti prego!” She screamed as Antonin started to grind himself into her, breathing hard and chuckling.

While her husband was distracted, Astoria promptly seized a goblet of wine and flung herself down on a pile of cushions, wanting nothing more than to disappear into the silken wall as her husband grunted with pleasure and the girl continued to shriek and sob at the top of her lungs. The other Death Eaters fell upon the remaining Muggle women like the pack of rabid wolves that had been running with them that day. Lyle Nott and Lancelot Mulciber were fighting over a slender, sandy haired girl; one had her right arm, the other her left and they tugged at each one in turn as though she were a rag doll while the girl herself screamed and shook her head, imploringly.

“Get out of it, Mulciber!” Lyle snarled over the din as he twisted the girl’s wrist cruelly. “You can go next, I am the elder!”

Astoria saw that Draco was standing outside the pavilion, his back to everything as he gazed broodingly out over the landscape, a goblet of wine in his slender hand. Would that his hand were wrapped around me instead, she thought fleetingly before shoving the thought away almost immediately. No one else seemed to notice how ill at ease Draco was, for the other Death Eaters were largely ignoring him as usual. He was often ridiculed for his half hearted approach to their favourite sport of rape, torture and murder, Astoria knew. She took another great swallow of wine to try and dull her wits to the depravity unfolding before her very eyes.

“Stop! Please Stop!” a Muggle woman wailed, cowering away from the monstrous Ukrainian Rostyslav Andrukhovych. The woman was naked, and he had her backed up against a tree while he savagely poked at her with a sharp, burning stick, shaking with laughter at her pain and misery.

Rodolphus was taking a girl from behind, raping her like an animal while she screamed and wailed as he growled and grunted obscenely. Jugson was snorting coca off of Veliane Ayim’s thigh as she in turn locked lips with Avery at the same time, only breaking their embrace to take deep pulls off a
cannabis pipe. Blaise had his hand up the skirt of one of Marcel de Sade’s daughters as she gasped and giggled, but Marcel himself was completely unconcerned for he and Silas were taking turns in forcing their lengths down the throat of another girl, shrieking with laughter. The elder Selwyn was sprawled upon a pile of cushions, half conscious at having smoked too much, while the younger dragged a screaming girl by the hair toward a clump of bushes to have his way with her. It was all too much, Astoria refilled her goblet yet again with a wave of her wand and swallowed it down promptly. She felt her mind beginning to cloud but did not feel any better as she gazed around at the suffering and vile decadence surrounding her. Astoria stared disgustedly at Rookwood who was chasing a girl who could have not been more than thirteen and pondered grimly how much farther humanity would sink into darkness under the Dark Lord’s bloodthirsty and tyrannical rule.

Chapter End Notes

I didn't include Lord V in this chapter as I didn't feel it was necessary. I know he hates Muggles and I know the hunt was barbaric but it is also social in a twisted sort of way and it just didn't feel right to include him with the Death Eaters like 'friends' enjoying themselves because as we all know he is an anti social monster who only cares about his power.
XXXI. - Traitor

Chapter Summary

All shall be explained at the end of the chapter as there are a couple of surprises.
Same disclaimer applies
Warning: graphic material

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next fortnight spent at Rousseau’s palace was much the same as it had been; an endless parade of excessive dinners, balls, ‘petit soirées’ and three other ‘Muggle Hunts;’ each event more barbaric and debauched than the last. At last though, at last, they had finally reached their final night of their stay at Rousseau’s, so as custom dictated there was to be a lavish leaving banquet before their departure. All Astoria wanted to do was go home, she was tired of the constant feasting and watching Muggles getting torn to pieces.

“You look ravishing this evening my lady” Antonin murmured into her neck as his strong arms coiled around her waist. “I am glad you wore my stones.” He lightly brushed the elaborate diamond necklace spreading halfway over her chest, eyes gleaming.

“I thank you, husband” She lied sweetly.

He looked her up and down appreciatively, biting his lip. “Mmh, would that I could get you out of that gown right now and give you a good fucking.” Astoria inwardly grimaced, he had bedded her not two hours ago before she was meticulously trussed up in jewels and velvet. “But I suppose we needs must appease that fat fool, Rousseau. Now, give me a kiss.” Dutifully, Astoria complied.

Naturally everyone would be wearing their finest for their final evening, so she had chosen the gaudy necklace Antonin had gifted her a moon’s turn ago; doubtless some poor Muggle had been forced to dig up the stones in one of France’s many scorching Goblin mines. This night she was clad in a gown fashioned from crushed gold velvet trimmed with ivory lace and pearls which complimented her hair; predictably her husband had garbed himself in silver and green dress robes.

A great flurry of noise and the wafting scent of rich food greeted them as she and Antonin stepped into the glittering, cavernous banquet hall. Just as it had been at Hogwarts, the ceiling had been enchanted to look like the night sky. Thousands of bright stars that sparkled like diamonds lit the deep purple sky as shimmering comets danced between them and planets of every colour hovered lazily in the luminous panoply. A towering fountain intricately carved of green and white marble in
the centre of the room drew the eye as rivers of deep red wine splashed softly down its many tiers or else gushed from the mouths of gargoyles. Astoria saw two young witches seated on the bench of the fountain, helping themselves to the wine and giggling madly.

They toured the room greeting everyone until they were approached by Yaxley and Elizabeth as usual. “Wife, busy yourself with Madam Dolohov, I needs must speak with Antonin about things you could not possibly understand.” Yaxley said brusquely, “Go now, and be foolish with one another.”

Elizabeth’s jaw gave an irritated twitch, but she lightly kissed her husband’s cheek and swept over to Astoria to greet her. Their husbands moved off to the side a little while they both took in the banquet hall as richly dressed aristocrats came streaming into the room while Elizabeth prattled on about whom was being unfaithful to whom and commenting on ladies’ gowns.

Astoria did not care much for gossip, so she let Elizabeth’s words wash over her until she was snapped out of her reverie. “Look who it is.” Elizabeth murmured in her ear as she delicately nibbled at a pink macaroon.

Astoria looked to the double doors to behold one of the most beautiful witches she had ever seen on the arm of Lancelot Mulciber who was grinning like a fool. They were causing quite a stir and the heads of many wizards turned as they came further into the room. Alessandra Zabini may have been a witch of forty years, but she was as stunning as a witch of twenty. Tall, slender and full breasted with dark skin like polished teak, leaf green eyes and those proud Zabini cheekbones made Alessandra a veritable goddess. She was clad in a gown of purest white covered with diamonds that contrasted dramatically with her dark skin tone and masses of loose, raven black curls. Even Antonin – who liked his witches young, was goggling at her like a teenaged boy as she approached them with Lancelot walking beside her obediently like a puppy, smirking. *Fool, she has bagged you as neat as a hare in a snare* Astoria thought scornfully. Alessandra Zabini may be stunningly beautiful, but it was an open secret that she had done away with her seven husbands and now moved from lover to lover to sate her famously wild lusts. *Black Widow* people called her – though never to her face, lest they wish to be poisoned or have a curse put upon their families.

“Madam Dolohov.” The Zabini matriarch purred softly as they kissed one another’s cheeks; she smelled of sandalwood and jasmine. She gave a radiant white smile, but those green eyes were shrewd and calculating. “The last time I saw you, you had neither husband nor child, now you have both.” She smiled for Antonin whose mouth gave a pleasurable twist. “You could not do better; your two excellent bloodlines are sure to produce many more pure children for the Dark Order. We witches have the most important job of all when it comes to the purification of these rotten societies, remember that child.”

“Thank you for your sweet words and counsel my lady. It is an honour to further the cause for the Dark Order.” Astoria replied with a courtesy that made her jaw ache.
Alessandra smiled. “I needs must find a match for my boys, it is past time they were wed.” She gave a toss of her shiny black curls, “Well, there is no time like the present, I shall say good eve to you now.” Alessandra nodded, Lancelot inclined his head and they swept away to where Marcel de Sade was stood chatting animatedly to Walter Selwyn.

“How sweet would it be to fuck her?” Astoria heard Antonin murmur to Yaxley, whose eyes were still fixed on the retreating back of Alessandra Zabini.

Yaxley gave an amused grunt. “Indeed, young Mulciber is in for a wild night I imagine. I daresay I am rather enjoying having all these exotic creatures about the place.” His gaze fell upon the Ghanaian Veliane Ayim, another dark beauty who painted her lips scarlet and had a diamond pierced through her tongue.

With Philippe Rousseau’s gluttonous inclinations and his love of excess, Astoria could hardly be surprised at the seemingly never ending amount of food. Even so, Rousseau seemed determined to outdo himself for their final evening. A life sized sparkling ice sculpture in the likeness of a roaring dragon with its wings spread loomed over the golden platters of rich food. There were mountains of edible sugar flowers in delicate pinks and blues, great jellies in the form of palaces, tureens of white pearl caviar, honey roasted quail’s wings dusted with white truffles, a huge snarling snake glazed in syrup crafted entirely from fruit and so much more, from wall to wall. Most like most of it would go waste for they had not even had dinner yet.

As was the custom at these banquets, dinner then gave way to dancing and they all drifted to Rousseau’s ballroom. Like the rest of Rousseau’s palace, the ballroom was lavish. Hundreds of chandeliers sparkled from the towering ceiling which illuminated the gold and jade carved animals and cherubs mounted on the walls. There was a balcony spanning three sides of the room where some of the guests had ascended to take drinks and a golden robed orchestra had started to play sweet soft music as many couples made for the centre of the room. Astoria merely stood there on her husband’s arm, taking in the room and sipping champagne occasionally while he spoke with Travers.

“Monsieur Dolohov, may I steal your wife?” Rased a voice from behind them. Travers abruptly stopped talking and they all turned. Tall, emaciated and pale as snow, Dracula stood before them, flashing his fangs. Antonin arched a dark eyebrow coolly and Dracula added, “For the waltz?” He bowed low, his long fingernailed hand outstretched.

Antonin glanced at Astoria. “Very well, good Count but keep your hands where I can see them!” He replied with a lecherous wink and promptly turned back to Travers to continue their conversation.

Astoria took Dracula’s frozen hand as he led her to the centre of the ballroom. He placed his other
hand on her waist and she could still feel the chill from his touch over all the silk and velvet of her
gown. As the music commenced, she and Dracula twirled about the room in complicated steps, his
yellow eyes never leaving her.

“You look beautiful tonight Madame Dolohov, I am not being surprised that every man you pass
cannot help but turn his head after you.”

“That is most kind of you, Count.” Astoria replied stiffly, averting her eyes from Dracula’s.

They danced for a few minutes before Dracula spoke again. “So, ma jolie fleur.” He rasped over
the flutes and violins. “When are you going to be telling Monsieur Dolohov the wonderful news?”

“I beg your pardon?” Astoria replied, bemused. She did not like the way the Vampire was looking at
her.

“You… are with child.” Dracula whispered, baring his fangs in that terrible grin she despised so
much.

Astoria tensed, her heart gave a lurch, and she met Dracula’s yellow stare with one of mingled
defiance, fear and fury. “I am sure I do not know what you are talking about, Count.” She replied
coldly, though her insides burned with outrage. “And it is quite improper for you to state such a thing
to a married woman.”

Dracula laughed, his long fangs brought into greater prominence as he tightened his ice cold grip on
her hand. “Oh, I am thinking that you do my beauty, you are having that unmistakable scent about
you, so fresh and so pure.” He gave a deep sniff and leered, his yellow eyes full of malicious
pleasure, his nostrils quivering with excitement. “Do not forget Madame Dolohov, I am a Vampire. I
can smell out expectant mothers from many leagues away… and you are being so very close just
now.” As he twirled her around, he drew her to his chest briefly; no heart beat there but Astoria
could feel his ice cold breath on her neck which made her shudder, despite the heat of the ballroom.
“Deny it all you want Madame, but soon enough you shall be great with child and those luscious tits
will be ripe for milking.”

Astoria dug her nails hard into his cold, dead skin, knowing that it would have no effect whatsoever,
but she had to stop herself from shaking with fury. “Mind your place, Vampire.” She snarled under
her breath, wanting nothing more than to slap him across his vile, deathly white face.
Dracula merely sneered at her. “Your children by rights are belonging to your Lord husband, you ought to tell him you are growing another one of his heirs in your belly.” Astoria clenched her teeth, for she could not trust herself to speak just then and acted as though the twisted, lecherous old Vampire did not exist.

When the music ended, Astoria wrenched herself free from Dracula’s clutches and she heard his raspy chuckle as she strode from the room, doing her utmost not to draw attention to herself. She hurried down a corridor and around a corner before arriving at the powder room, jerking open the door before slamming it behind her. The powder room was adorned with fantastical birds of paradise painted on the walls as they fluttered serenely through exotic greenery. Astoria strode over to where the perfumes, powders and combs were laid out upon a silver gilded sideboard underneath a carved mirror. She stared at her reflection, breathing hard, her heart hammering. Could it be? Or was that Vampire merely playing a cruel jape? Since the last turn of the moon, Astoria had had her own suspicions that she may have fallen pregnant again, but she had brushed away the thought and put her episodes of dizziness down to not eating enough. After all, her moonblood had arrived soon after, but there again… it had been very light and scarcely lasted two days.

“He was lying.” Astoria said aloud, as if to make it true.

My moonblood has been like this before and I do not show any of the signs as before, Dracula was just toying with me… but what if? If she was indeed about to become a Mother again then Astoria would love the child as much as she loved Leo, but she feared she would go crazy with fear with another baby to worry about in this cruel world. She was constantly frightened for Leo, wondering if all this savagery would corrupt him as he grew older and she found that hard enough with just one child. Well, at least my husband will be satisfied at last, she thought wryly. To be sure Antonin had been determined to have more children; even when the war was at its peak. Astoria knew he loathed the idea of witches on the battlefield and keeping her pregnant and vulnerable was the easiest way to take her out of duty and keep her in his controlling clutches.

How many times had he said it after all? “A wife is there to pleasure her husband and birth his children.” Indeed, of late he would bed her even more frequently than usual and with far more intensity and vigour and would become irritated when her blood came each moon. He had even accused her of being barren – one of the many taunts he would hurl at her when he came home drunk.

The door gave a snap and Astoria whirled around, not wanting to look suspicious, but she gasped in shock when she saw who was stood in the doorway.

“Draco.” She breathed “I – you… what are you doing in here? You must leave now, my husband, he –”
Draco stared into her eyes for a moment and she wanted to weep; it had been so long since she had glimpsed that soft grey stare that would calm her during her darkest hours. How long ago that seemed now. “I saw you leave the ballroom with some haste – you…you looked upset. I glimpsed your husband as I left, he was drinking with Travers and drooling over that Ayim woman.”

Astoria did not give a fig who Antonin decided to prowl after tonight, her main concern just now was Draco and his safety as well as that of her own. She hardened her heart and replied, “I am fine. It would please me if you would leave now, this is quite improper.” She firmly turned her back on him and glared up at a pale blue flamingo as it soared around a fruit tree. Draco stepped over the threshold, however, his grey eyes searching her face. Astoria’s pulse quickened, what he was doing just now was nothing short of suicide. *I must force him to go.* She whirled around angrily and said, “If you do not leave now I shall scream and my Lord husband will burst in here and kill you on the spot – if you are lucky.”

“No, you won’t.” Draco said softly, who had made no move to go and was seemingly unperturbed by her harshness.

“Excuse me? Do not presume to –”

“This is not you, Tori.” Draco interrupted, taking another step toward her and gently taking her by the shoulders. She flinched and tried to pull away, averting her gaze from his face. “Your eyes, I can always see it in your eyes when you say something you do not mean. Look at me.”

Astoria looked up at Draco who gently touched her cheek. His touch sent a shiver down her spine and made her think of all the hours they had spent with one another at Malfoy Manor. He had never bedded her to be sure, that would have been far too dangerous, but oh how she had wished. Thinking about what could have been brought tears to her eyes and she buried her face into his shoulder to muffle her sobs, clutching at his back with a desperate strength.

“I have missed you so much.” She cried, still holding him as tight as she could as he stroked her hair soothingly. “I feel so alone sometimes.”

“I know Tori, I know how scared you are of him, I just wish I could protect you.” His words made her cry harder still but Draco, her rock, stood there and held her in his arms. It was the first time she had felt safe in a very long time.

When the tears had run their course, Draco cupped her face in his hands, kissing away the salt tracks of her cheeks. He smelled of mint and lemons as always; so fresh and clean. Then, in the blink of an eye, his mouth was on hers, their tongues wrapping around one another as Astoria grasped at his
neck to deepen their kiss. They kissed as though the world were about to go up in flames and it was
utter bliss, it was though nothing else existed but the two of them. Astoria had never been kissed like
this by anyone, and for the first time in what felt like an age, she felt herself becoming willingly
aroused as the sweet tingling between her legs intensified. Draco’s kisses were gentle yet passionate,
his touch firm without being aggressive as she was used to. She gave a little moan as his hand slid
down past her waist and she raked her hands through his white blonde hair as she stumbled
backward to the perfume table. He planted soft kisses from her cleavage up to her neck that made her
shudder before burying his face into her neck and breathing hard, his arousal obvious as he pressed
his body as hard as he could into hers.

“I love you so much.” He whispered between kisses and she grasped him even harder.

Draco put one of his hands on her breasts with a gentle caress which made her moan again while his
other fumbled at her skirts. He kissed her to muffle the sound, yet he moaned into her mouth when
she grasped him between the legs. When she drew him out his length was hot and throbbing with a
don drop of seed already quivering from the tip and Draco was biting down hard on his lip to keep from
crying out. Astoria grabbed him again and kissed him hard while his slender hands travelled gently
up her thighs and over her stockings. She had to stifle a scream when she felt his fingers rub her
through the lace of her wet kickers, it felt achingly good. The wetness between her thighs intensified
when his fingers found the pink beneath and he began to rub her delicate centre, gently at first but
then firmer and firmer, she arched her back and bit her lip; all she knew was that she wanted to lose
herself in his arms, his touch, all of it. Draco was breathing hard in her ear as he drew her closer, his
hips deliciously close to hers as the pulsating head of his member pressed against her womanly
entrance. Then she awoke. Leo. Her unborn child. They were what she thought of then, and the
dream vanished in an instant. How could she be so stupid? Her eyes flew open and she pushed
Draco away, trying to catch her breath, horror struck at her foolishness.

“I am sorry Tori, I’m sorry, did I hurt you?” He hastily tucked himself back in, flustered and red
faced. Draco made to touch her face, but she shied away shaking her head.

“I cannot do this Draco, I must go, I must get back. This – this was a mistake.”

“I understand you are frightened, Tori. Just let me explain.”

Astoria gave a bitter laugh, Understand? How could he? He has a gentle heart, but he is not a
Mother.

He paid her laugh no mind and pressed on. “Listen, I have been thinking that we could – we could
just run away. I know some Muggles and wizards managed to escape when we took Poland, they
were heading for America. Perhaps when the Dark Lord moves against Germany we could slip
away during battle or something, head for the coast and make for Greenland; there are a lot of people
hiding out there, I am told. I am willing to do anything to be with you… I love you Tori, please~”

But Astoria cut him off; Draco was scaring her now, even saying such things aloud were dangerous. “Stop talking nonsense, Draco!” She hissed. “Even if we were to succeed in escaping, how long do you think we would last? How would I be able to feed my son?” Draco tried to speak but Astoria talked over him and began to pace from stress, skirts swirling. “I have to go, I have to get back! Do you have any idea what Antonin will do to you if he even catches you talking to me alone!? Never mind what we just did!” The tears made themselves known again and she roughly wiped them away. “I love you too Draco, but it can never be, it can never be! Please do not risk your life like this; find a nice girl who you care about and forget me. I am not a rule unto myself, my husband dictates every aspect of my life and if I go for more than a fortnight without being slapped then that is considered a miracle… You do not understand how vicious he can be, I have children to think about!”

“Children?” Draco echoed, his brow furrowing. Astoria had spoken without thinking, but as soon as she said the words, she knew them to be true. She saw comprehension dawning over his face, his grey eyes full of hurt. “Oh - I see. I see, so you are…” He could not seem to finish the sentence.

Astoria took a deep breath, leaned against the wall and closed her eyes; the jumble of all these emotions were making her scared and confused, fogging her wits. “I am going to have another baby, Draco, and there is no one but me to defend it. I know it may seem queer to you, but I love my son more than anything in the world, I carried him inside me for close to a year; you cannot possibly know what that is like. He is sweet and innocent, he is the only light in my world of darkness and if it were not for him I would have flung myself from a tower long ago.” She gave Draco a sharp look. “Do not mistake my love for Leo as love for Antonin; the only way that drunken brute will ever have my heart is if he cuts it out.”

Draco winced at the harshness of her words but did not utter straight away. “I am sorry for all you have suffered, Tori.” Draco said quietly after a long pause, his eyes full of grief. “I do not care if you are pregnant with his child, all I want is you. Does – does he know?”

Astoria shook her head. “Nobody knows apart from you and Dracula… he claims he smelled me out.” She added in answer to Draco’s bewildered expression. “Now please Draco, please go, this is madness.”

Draco turned and made for the door, but as he placed his hand on the doorknob he paused and looked back. “I will never marry anyone else, not ever if I cannot be with you. I hope you have a healthy baby, Tori… I am sure you are a wonderful Mother; your children are lucky to have you. I shall say goodnight now…” He hesitated again, “I meant it when I said I love you. I just know that I will always love you, whatever happens to you, whatever happens to me, whether you love me or not, I know that I shall love you for all of my life.”
When the door thudded softly behind Draco and his footsteps began to recede, Astoria collapsed into the nearest loveseat and burst into tears.

It had been over a week since they had departed from Rousseau’s and Astoria was in a constant state of fear and anxiety now she was back home alone with Antonin. She still had not told him that she was pregnant, the thought scared her. *But he will know, and soon; this is not something that can be hidden for long.* She had not been able to bring herself to do it; Antonin spent all his days and nights drunk or either lost to sense after smoking too much cannabis. She was frightened of his reaction, no matter what he might have said to the contrary about having more children. Astoria felt as though the truth of her condition were scrawled across her face, felt as though everyone who looked at her too long somehow knew her secret, even though she knew that was impossible. Elizabeth knew that something was amiss, but Astoria daren’t confide in her; if it somehow became known that Elizabeth knew about the baby before her husband there would be hell to pay – for both of them. Dracula did not help matters by constantly leering at her and giving her his terrible, knowing grin whenever their paths crossed. She knew the Vampire would not dare utter the truth to Antonin unless he wanted a wooden stake stabbed though his black heart, so it amused him to silently taunt her instead. She had caught Draco looking at her once or twice, concern on his face, but he always looked away again when her gaze met his.

Just before dawn, Astoria was awoken by a terrible searing pain in her left arm and she heard Antonin twist and growl beside her. Her hand automatically flew to her belly, her growing baby was her first thought every time she opened her eyes now. *A summons. A summons at this hour could not possibly be anything good* she thought nervously as she pulled her Death Eater robes on over her head and hastily laced up her boots. She would be forced to confess her secret if they were to be sent out to fight; if she were to be hit by a curse then it could be very dangerous to the baby and she was unwilling to take the risk. *He will go berserk if he learns I have kept this from him.* Astoria shuddered and hurried over to join her husband who was standing by the fireplace.

“*Incendio*” Antonin hissed as he pointed his wand at the cold empty hearth which lit up at once with dancing orange flames. Wordless, he held out his hand and she took it as he seized a pinch of sparkling green Floo powder from the jewelled pot on the fireplace, promptly turning the flames to emerald green. The warm flames enveloped them both as they stepped into the fire. “The Dark Lord’s Fortress!” Antonin barked, and they went rushing through soot and flame before they stepped out into a dungeon, and the screams and shouts hit Astoria’s ears like a thunderclap.

“*Do not lie to Lord Voldemort you cringing piece of filth! He knows, he always knows! CRUCIO!*” Came the horribly familiar high, cold voice.

The wizard lying on the floor screamed again, his body twisting and writhing in agony. Astoria’s eyes swept the dungeon; the Dark Lord and Snape were standing over a wizard covered in grime, bruises and cuts as he twitched feebly on the floor. All the Pure Blood Death Eaters were there, standing by the walls. Rowle looked angry, Rabastan nervous and Avery seemed to be barely out of slumber; Snape was the only Half Blood here as usual. Astoria slid in beside Elizabeth to survey the scene.
“Treason, deceit and lies!” Screamed the Dark Lord, pacing feverishly about the dim, cavernous dungeon, his black robes swirling as he fingered his wand wildly while Nagini hissed in a dark corner. He stopped to stare around at the silent Death Eaters, chest rising and falling rapidly. “You have all been summoned here tonight to deal with a traitor. Snape! Tell my Death Eaters of this outrage!”

Snape stepped forward looking exhausted and ashen faced, pointing a yellow finger at the half conscious wizard upon the floor. “The vile cretin before you all presented himself at the French-German border claiming to be a wizard wanting the honour of serving under the Dark Lord. However, it soon became apparent through the intensive Legilimency we use against all new recruits that this creature was hiding something and our suspicions proved true when we uncovered the memories this fool tried so hard to conceal.” The Dark Lord gave a scream of fury but did not utter further so Snape pressed on, “This traitor was sent from Germany to try and infiltrate the Dark Order by turning the army against our Lord and Master. Not only that, but the fool was armed with a vial of Bloodroot poison which he has admitted under torture was to be used on the Dark Lord himself.” There were gasps of shock and outrage from the surrounding Death Eaters and many started to mutter among themselves.

“As if a creature such as this could poison Lord Voldemort!” The Dark Lord sneered. “Tell it all Snape and tell it now.”

Snape inclined his head. “It seems that there is another traitor in our very midst. This German informant has been secretly communicating with someone in the army who has been passing information to him in return for sanctuary in Germany. However, we are unable to retrieve any memory as to whom that may be, we have tried everything.” The muttering increased, the Death Eaters glanced around at one another and Astoria heard Antonin crack his knuckles. Who could it be? Are they in the room just now? She wondered, for she felt certain it was not her husband who was slavishly devoted to the Dark Order.

The Dark Lord’s lipless mouth twisted in fury as he continued to twirl his wand between his long white fingers, his rage at the betrayal plain to see. “So – so… we must resort to crude yet effective measures to root out this traitor. Snape, fetch me the Veritaserum at once!”

Snape’s eyes were two dead black pits as he stared up into his Master’s livid white face, his voice wary. “My Lord, all of the Veritaserum has been used to interrogate many of the true foreign recruits that have joined us thus far.”

The Dark Lord gave an inarticulate scream of rage and slashed his wand through the air. There was a loud smacking sound and Snape’s face snapped to the side and he fell to his knees, grunting in pain. “I will have your HEAD!” He screeched. “Get to making more or I swear Severus, I shall have you
torn to pieces and fed to Nagini!” Snape bowed and stumbled from the dungeon, the metal door banging behind him.

His Lordship then whirled around to face them, “I want everyone questioned! EVERYONE! He screamed at them all, looking more terrifying than ever, his scarlet slit pupil eyes rolling madly in their sockets. “Drag those Half Bloods from their hovels and make them sing! I do not care if you have to burn down all of Paris to do it! GO! GO NOW!” And there was a great flurry of movement as the Death Eaters hastened toward the dungeon door.

Soon enough, the Death Eaters came surging onto the decaying streets of the Half Blood slums; Antonin, Yaxley and Travers who had been put in charge were bellowing out orders as groups of them ran in all directions. Astoria pounded after a group headed by Antonin who were making for one of those tall, narrow buildings where the Half Bloods lived, their feet splashing and sucking in the mud and filth.

“EXPULSO!” Antonin roared as they reached the door which was promptly blasted off its hinges in a great spray of dust and splintered wood.

They were greeted by a revolting smell; a foul mix of sweat, faeces, vomit and rotting food. There were no windows in this pit of despair, the only light came from a single oil lamp which served to make their surroundings dingy and dark.

“Lumos” Murmured ten voices as one to reveal a dilapidated staircase and mouldering walls spattered with blood and sick.

“Right, we need to organise.” Came Antonin’s voice, “Search this dump from top to bottom and drag everyone outside to await his Lordship’s pleasure.”

Everyone scattered, and Astoria joined those who went crashing up the stairs; she could hear Silas’ excited panting right behind her as the staircase creaked and groaned. The foul smell intensified as they travelled further into the building until they came to a long, damp corridor, lined with doors. They burst into the first room and Astoria choked and retched as she surveyed the pitiful sight in front of her. Like the rest of the place the room was filthy and dark; there was a revolting pale of waste which was overflowing in the corner and wizards were crammed onto lice ridden straw pallets on the floor. One wizard was slumped against a wall puffing on a pipe and another was swigging strong drink right from the bottle; Astoria could smell the powerful fumes from here over all the filth.

“Up! Get up! All of you, now!” Antonin barked as many of the wizards below began to stir and the drunkard in the corner staggered to his feet. This apparently was not fast enough though, “I told you
to *GET UP!*” He roared, “*CRUCIO!*” Antonin directed his wand at the wizard with the pipe. The man screamed and fell to the floor which hastened some of the others to get sluggishly to their feet.

Theodore and Blaise seized a wizard from the nearest pallet and dragged him to his feet. “You heard Dolohov, get out of here!” Blaise snarled, shoving him toward the door.

The intoxicated and dazed Half Bloods were pushed, prodded and hexed through the corridors of the vile dwelling as they shuffled obediently down to the squalid streets below. They herded them out floor by floor; most went meekly enough, but as they were descending the third floor one wizard who was very drunk got tired of Antonin shoving him in the back. Enraged he whirled around and drew out his wand – a grievous error, for Antonin reacted with blinding speed before the other wizard could even utter.

“*Impedimenta!*” Antonin roared, bringing his wand upwards in a savage arc.

The wizard was blasted backwards down the stairs, his body hitting each step with a ‘thud’ as he grunted in pain. Then finally there was a sickening crunch and he was coughing and spluttering and when he rolled onto his back, gasping, Astoria could see why. The wizard’s neck had been broken but it had failed to kill him, he was coughing up rivers of blood and clutching at his throat where a jagged piece of bone was sticking out.

There was a terrible gurgling sound. “Leave him there.” Antonin commanded coldly as the wizard continued to choke on his own blood. Blaise let out a bark of laughter, but most swept past the dying wizard without comment.

They next forced their way into a brothel next door. The brothel keeper had hastened to let them in voluntarily, but Antonin had thrown him out into the street all the same and Dashiell Selwyn knocked out half of his teeth. As seen from the windows outside, the brothel was completely lit by red lanterns and bathed them all in the ominous scarlet glow. The place smelled like something between a fish market and a brewery; the moans of pleasure and the weeping of women were all that could be heard throughout the corridors. Silas kicked down a door to burst in on a Half Blood who was in the process of bedding the Muggle bed slave underneath him. The Muggle woman screamed but the wizard was so intent on his pleasure that Silas had to drag him off the bed and began kicking him on the floor. Silas evidently decided that the bed slave was his for the taking and he fell upon her to ‘finish the job’ as she wept and screamed. Blaise had commandeered a flagon of coca wine and was swigging it heartily as he smashed goblets and kicked holes in the walls.

“I only want the wizards! Antonin barked from somewhere around the corner. “You can use the Muggle whores if you wish but make it quick. No need to bring those slatterns along, there is a bond in place that keeps them from running.” His words were followed by coarse, unpleasant laughter.
Astoria grimaced and walked deeper into the brothel which was far quieter than at the front where only the best looking Muggle women were kept. She poked through rooms full of sad eyed women and girls who were chained to the walls, many were battered and bruised while others had been branded on the cheek to mark them as disobedient and unruly bed slaves. Doubtless these injuries would push their price right down for potential patrons; indeed, she had heard tell of ‘the cheapest girls being in the back.’ Astoria hardened her heart and looked the other way, knowing that there was nothing she could do to help them. When she approached the backroom, she heard grunts and gasps of pleasure and wearily resigned herself to the fact that she would have to break apart another coupling; the thought filled her with revulsion.

“Alohomora” She said in a tired voice with a wave of her wand.

When the door opened Astoria screamed, and a wizard swore. Her cry had been heard by the others and she heard footsteps pounding toward her, getting louder and louder. Elizabeth arrived first and let out a gasp while the wizards let out roars of outrage. Silas hissed with rage and whirled around to run back up the corridor, presumably to fetch Antonin. She had come upon two wizards copulating with one another; one had the other up against the wall and was plunging in and out of him as he moaned. Astoria knew that previously much of the wizarding world were largely accepting of same sex relations, but in Pure Blood Society this was strictly forbidden and rarely even spoken about. She had no qualms about who people chose to lie with, but the Dark Lord had taken things even further by decreeing that such relations were now banned – the punishment? Castration.

The wizards were hastily trying to cover themselves and were spluttering out explanations and excuses, but they were drowned out by Antonin’s furious roar; his hatred of such men was well known. “SODOMITES!? We shall see about this…”

Astoria flattened herself against the wall as Antonin came striding into the grimy room, incandescent with rage. One of the wizards dropped to his knees, hands clasped together as he trembled like a leaf. “Mercy Dolohov! Mercy!” His pleas earnt him one of Antonin’s vicious backhands.

“You – you unnatural, you vile, disgusting BEASTS!” Antonin screamed down at the wizards who cowered before him. Antonin gave them a cold look full of promise, “Do you know what the penalty is for sodomy, you filthy Half Blood?” He did not wait for an answer for he turned around and snapped, “Zabini! Norton! Get these creatures out of my sight!”

The next week was naught but brutal interrogations of Half Bloods and Pure Bloods alike; no one was exempt from the Dark Lord’s relentless pursuit of the traitor. Indeed, Astoria herself had been forced to endure fifteen unpleasant, dizzying minutes in the company of Bellatrix Lestrange who was perhaps the most accomplished Legilimens after the Dark Lord. Because Astoria communicated with no one and her every move was controlled by Antonin, Bellatrix was satisfied fairly quickly that she
was not the traitor. Naturally the Half Blood Death Eaters had it worse, not only were they subject to intense bouts of Legilimency, but they were barbarously tortured by Dracula and Cruciated to within an inch of their lives by their Pure Blood counterparts. But now the Dark Lord had discovered the identity of the traitor and they had all been summoned to the square outside his Fortress to see them judged.

The Dark Lord was pacing on a raised stone plinth while the German informant, bloody and bruised was chained by the neck and held secure by a leering Troll. The Pure Blood Death Eaters were closest to the plinth whereas the Half Bloods were further backward. The Dark Lord had decreed that all the Half Bloods were to be given free ale today to get them all riled up and drunk, and so they were, for the square was a great torrent of noise and shoving bodies. Astoria was of course stood next to Antonin who was smiling in a way that told her someone was going to suffer.

“Death Eaters!” Came the high, cold voice and silence fell at once. “Here before you is a spy and a traitor. Lord Voldemort has judged him guilty of treason, and the penalty for treason is death. However, this creature should not die alone, for there is someone else whom he has been communicating with in my realm as they have decided they do not wish to live in my New World any longer. I can grant that wish. Rowle! Dolohov! Bring me the traitor!”

Astoria was not the only one who cried out in shock when she saw who Antonin and Rowle seized. Some of the Death Eaters spat while others hurled out insults, for between large figures of Antonin and Rowle was Jasper Crabbe. Jasper Crabbe, one of the Dark Lord’s longest serving Death Eaters who had joined straight out of Hogwarts. She could not believe it, the fool should have known better, but there again the Crabbe’s were not exactly known for their wit.

“How could you Jasper!? How could you!?” Screamed his wife, Freya as the rest of the Crabbe family were clapped in irons by Marcus Flint and dragged up onto the plinth after their doomed patriarch. There were half a dozen of them in all, five dumpy old witches and an old wizard cousin who was a simpleton and usually kept locked away. All of them were sobbing – they knew what having a traitor in the family meant for the rest of them.

"I was trying to protect us!" He roared at her over the tumult, "Our Vincent is dead, he -" But his words were drowned out by the bellowing of the crowd - and his Lordship himself.

“See what befalls those who dare challenge Lord Voldemort, Death Eaters. Anyone guilty of treason will be slaughtered, as well as each and every member of their family.” The lipless mouth twisted in a smile as the Dark Lord turned to Jasper. “Your lands and estates will be forfeit to the Dark Order, your family name will be wiped from the texts of history; it will be as though you and your House never existed, you miserable fat fool.”

“Just so!” Yaxley roared, staring at the wizard he had once served alongside for years with the
utmost hatred and contempt.

“My son died for you!” Shouted Jasper Crabbe over the torrent of abuse. “My only son! When he died I had had enough of this, you —”

But Jasper never got the chance to finish “Crucio!” Shrieked the Dark Lord. Crabbe fell to the floor and screamed, his pudgy flesh jiggling as he writhed about upon the plinth while the crowd hurled out insults and laughed. “Get him up!” He screeched. “Get him up!” Antonin and Rowle dragged Jasper roughly to his feet as the man choked and spluttered. “Now, you will watch this!” the Dark Lord snarled at him.

The Dark Lord pointed his wand at the dark stone floor, and slowly but surely a circular pit began to emerge upon the surface, growing wider and deeper in equal measures. Then Astoria heard the hissing, she took a step forward to look and was greeted with a most sinister sight. At least fifty black and orange rattlesnakes were slithering over one another, their tongues tasting the air as they lashed their tails threateningly. There were great roars of delight and the wizard began to struggle, kicking and shouting in German before the Dark Lord silenced him with a vicious hex to his chest.

“Egyptian rattlesnakes.” The Dark Lord announced, his serpentine features twisted with malicious pleasure as he surveyed his victim who trembled. “This will not be over quickly; you and the blood traitors will die slowly and in exquisite pain; worthy deaths indeed for filthy scum like you.” He turned back to the watching Death Eaters. “This should serve as a reminder to ALL that attempting to overthrow the Dark Order will not be tolerated!” Screeched the Dark Lord. He turned his red eyes upon Antonin and Rowle and gave them a stiff nod.

Grinning unpleasantly, Antonin and Rowle promptly heaved the shrieking wizard into the snake pit as the surrounding crowd cheered with many shouting “TRAITOR!”

The man hit the pile of coiling bodies below with an awful scream as the snakes enveloped him. His screams increased in pitch as the snakes struck one - two - three - four times until there were too many bites and stings to count as the wizard continued to howl at the top of his lungs. The witches from the Crabbe family clutched at each other and wept harder than ever as they saw what awaited them. The Dark Lord had not been far wrong, for the wizard screamed for close to an hour before he fell silent. When Rowle levitated his body out of the pit it was blue and swollen from all the venom and his eyeballs had run down his face.

“Rowle!” The Dark Lord called over all the din, “Seal the traitor in a box and send it to that whore Minister Geissler with the promise that we will butcher every last citizen of her precious country when we invade! She will rue the day she sent a pathetic spy to poison Lord Voldemort, oh how she will REGRET IT!” The Dark Lord turned to Jasper Crabbe and hissed “And as for you, traitor, you and your blood traitor family can join that witless spy in the pit! Kill them! Kill them now!”
There was an eruption of jeers and shouting as the Crabbe family were dragged screaming and begging from the plinth. Tankards and bottles filled with urine came soaring from the howling crowd to spatter them as the surrounding wizards ridiculed, spat and hooted at the family, delighting in their shame and fall from grace.

“Into the pit with them all!” Roared a tall, drunken wizard in the crowd of Half Bloods.

“Traitor! Traitor! Traitor!” Others chanted as the Crabbes’ were forced through the crowd and Astoria could almost feel the venomous hatred in the air.

For the crime of betraying the Dark Order, Jasper Crabbe was forced to watch as his family were tossed into the snake pit one after another, still shrieking for mercy. And just for good measure, Antonin conjured up a slave brand and seared Jasper’s face, his screams mingling with his family’s as the snakes hissed madly and sucked the blood from their bodies. Astoria longed to look away as Crabbe’s wife struggled to clamber out of the pit while the rattlesnakes coiled around her neck and arms, dragging her back down to the mess of arms, legs, scales and screaming faces as the rest of the family was devoured.

Only when the screaming had stopped, the Dark Lord spoke again. “Troll!” He screeched. “Impale their traitorous bodies upon spikes and let them rot in the sun for all of Paris to see!” The troll gave a stupid grin as it drew out a great metal spike from the basket and proceeded to hammer it into the ground.

It was almost midnight and Astoria was pacing about her bedchamber, pondering on what might be a good time to tell Antonin she was expecting again. Tonight, Marcel de Sade had thrown a party to celebrate the Crabbes’ deaths and she had avoided drinking the wine as subtly as she could, terrified that someone may notice. It did not help that Ediva de Sade was pregnant and the talk was all of babies and children amongst the witches. She did not know if it was her imagination, but her dress seemed just a little tighter than usual and it would not be long before she started to ‘show.’ Then there would be nowhere to hide, and she would be sorely punished if it was known that she deliberately withheld the knowledge, for the baby she was carrying was rightfully Antonin’s property by law. Astoria jumped as the door gave a great bang and she whirled around to behold her husband standing in the doorway and her stomach twisted with fear. She knew the look in her husband’s eye all too well; a mixture of malice, greed and lust along with whatever toxic substance he had snorted, smoked or drank that night. Most nights all she had to do to keep him happy was purr and mewl adoringly as he invaded her body but some nights he would come in, rip her clothes off and be thrice as rough as usual. This was one of those nights it seemed. He would ride her raw tonight, she knew, those cold blue eyes were telling her so. Normally she would not be as scared of Antonin when he came up to their chambers in this state, but the fresh discovery of her pregnancy made her feel sensitive and scared with a constant need to protect herself. And all of a sudden, she was seventeen again in the Malfoys dining hall as her husband came at her hungrily, shoving her down onto the bed and wedging a hand down the front of her bodice roughly.
“Antonin, Antonin please stop.” She begged, her voice barely above a whisper, but he gave a
derisive snort and continued to savagely rip at her skirts, panting excitedly as he ran his hands up her
thighs and clumsily fumbling with her lingerie in his haste to rip it off.

Astoria pushed against his hard chest fruitlessly, the tears now beginning to well in her eyes, but
Antonin merely ground into her harder and snarled in her ear, “Feeling feisty tonight are we my
lady? Well, as you wish.”

“Antonin – please… please stop it!” Her pleading had turned into sobs as he ripped through the
velvet of the gown and dragged her toward him. She was crying openly now as he shoved apart her
legs and attempted to wrench her corset off. Astoria’s weeping only seemed to arouse her husband as
he shoved his hand down his breeches and drew out his veined member – she had not cried like this
when he bedded her since the early days of their marriage. He gave her the back of his hand before
shoving his tongue down her throat – a brutal comparison to the tender kisses she had shared with
Draco all those days ago. She felt a surge of terror and began to sob in earnest as Antonin put his
hands around her throat. Her hands flew upward to pry off his cruel fingers, but he squeezed even
tighter, cutting off her airway. Her head felt foggy, but she knew of only one thing that might make
him stop. “Antonin please!” She choked, “Antonin, I’m pregnant!”

The vice like grip around her throat was relinquished at once. Her eyes were closed but she could
feel Antonin’s eyes on her as she coughed and spluttered, massaging her throat. A moment later she
felt a strong hand grab her by the jaw and when she opened her eyes she was looking straight up into
his enraged face.

“How long have you known this?” He snarled, shaking her roughly. “Answer me now!”

“I – I mean to say… I suspect as my blood is late.” She lied, gasping as tears coursed down her face.

Antonin released her and stood, and his eyes seemed to burn from drink and rage. “Very well then, if
you are telling the truth then you have naught to fear, but if this is a trick, if this is a lie, you will
NEVER see that boy again! Do I make myself plain?” Astoria nodded mutely as she trembled upon
the bed like a doe, burying her face in the silken sheets. “Rathburne! Get in here! Get in here NOW!”

Chapter End Notes

I was so glad to finally write a proper Drastoria scene and to show sex in a more
positive light in this story. I know Astoria hates Antonin’s guts but he is always
disrespecting her by sleeping with/eyeing up other women all the time so it was
satisfying for her to get her own back, (sort of) especially with the man she loves. I
know it was super risky what they did but at the same time Astoria is human with her
own needs/urges, and the same goes for Draco. I did feel kinda bad for not letting Draco
finish ;-) but in a way it sort of represents their relationship at present: frustration and
longing which is being cruelly denied.

As for Astoria being pregnant again, to me it just seemed pretty natural due to the fact
that she’s not under the same amount of stress with fighting for her life every day, she
has no access to contraception and she’s a fertile young woman with a husband who
sleeps with her every single day.

I know the Crabbe's haven’t really been mentioned so far but the identities of those
being executed isn't important, their deaths are more symbolic, basically in a nutshell:
Pure Blood won't always save you.

The Pure Blood Death Eaters rampaging through the slums was inspired by accounts
(from my own father) of life in a country under military rule; soldiers were perfectly
entitled to kick down the doors of citizens/lower ranking soldiers and drag them from
their homes to rape/kill/rob or whatever.
XXXII. - Only the Pure

Chapter Summary

This chapter is a little different to the ones that I've been posting so far, its not violent but I found it to be disturbing as my main influence was Nazi Germany/Hitler and the things they were willing to do to implement their crazy ideas. The main focus is Astoria's new role within the Death Eaters seeing as she's not in fighting condition anymore. There's also a new relationship which I've been wanting to put in for a while.

Same disclaimer applies
Warning: disturbing material

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Astoria woke on a bleak December morn it was as though her bedchamber had become a greenhouse, for it was filled with hundreds of flowers, cards and gifts from her so called well wishers. Antonin has finally made the announcement then, she thought wearily as she skimmed over a congratulatory note from some Rosier witch who she barely knew. The Dark Lord had been informed at once of course – that was the law, but it was left up to her husband to make the ‘official’ announcement which he had neglected to do until now. Astoria was relieved as gossip had been rife as to whether she was pregnant or not; other witches tittered and whispered as she walked past while wizards leered at her with Marcel de Sade being the worst offender.

Well, they are not completely stupid I suppose. After all, the other members of the aristocracy could not fail to notice that she had dispensed with the tightly laced gowns in favour of the Empire line ones that fit under the breasts, she no longer sat on Dark Lord’s War Council and had been spending ‘a lot more time at home.’ Astoria felt a little less on edge now it was all out in the open; it was close to a moon’s turn since Rathburne had confirmed the baby, but it may as well have been six, for the time had dragged by and she was fed up of having to conceal her growing stomach and rebuff the suggestive and salacious remarks. Indeed, she had started to ‘show’ far sooner than she had done the first time and it was nigh on impossible to conceal now. When she had been pregnant with Leo, even after she decided she wanted him, she had been absolutely terrified every hour of the day and night. This time she was a little calmer, but still very nervous at doing it all again and at the prospect of caring for two babies, hoping that she could do it right.

The door to the bedchamber flew open and Antonin came striding to the room, surveying all the congratulatory gifts with a satisfied smirk. Ever since he learned he was to be a Father again he had been strutting about like a peacock. The cold blue eyes flicked upwards to stare at her, the smirk broadening.

“Ah, you are awake. Get up, Madam Zabini has requested your presence at the Purification Institute today.”
Astoria’s stomach gave a twist, the Purification Institute? She had never set foot in the diabolical Institute and had no wish to, and Alessandra Zabini? What does she want with me?

“Why?” She blurted stupidly.

Antonin’s jaw clenched, and his mouth twisted in fury the way it always did when she dared to question him. “Because she is your elder and I have given my leave for you to go, now get up.” Astoria could feel his temper rising and did not dare push this any further, so she hastily got out of bed.

Two hours later they were rolling through the spotless Pure Blood sections of the city. She saw a Muggle slave dressed in stable livery wrangling with two haughty unicorns outside the Zabini Manor as they pawed the ground and tossed their heads. Two witches walked arm in arm down a green street while another slave hurried behind them clutching an enormous parasol. At the end of the road there were a whole host of slaves meticulously scrubbing the wrought iron gates of the home of Marcel de Sade. Astoria shuddered when they went past the square outside the Fortress; what was left of the Crabbe family was half falling off the metal pikes they had been impaled on. They were little more than bones with only a few pieces of green flesh clinging to them, even the crows had long abandoned their pecking of the corpses. After a few minutes they drew up to a colossal building all of charcoal stone lined by pillars at least forty feet thick. Cold steeled over her as Antonin led her up the stone steps to the huge double doors where two Dementors stood sentry to add to gloomy and oppressive air of the place. Astoria looked up and sure enough, looming above all else at the top of the building was a massive stone carving of the Dark Mark with the words “ONLY THE PURE” inscribed underneath.

There was total silence once they were inside the Institute, the only noises that could be heard were the clicking of their footsteps on the spotless marble. Astoria felt her flesh prickle; she knew that beneath this building, Half Blood witches were kept imprisoned and forcibly impregnated as part of the Dark Lord’s twisted plans for the ‘New World’ he obsessed over. Doors lined the hallway, but they were closed, and the place was so cavernous that the ceiling was lost in shadow. There was a large sweeping staircase at the end of the hall where Antonin led her. Astoria chanced a glance at him, trying to figure out why she was here but Antonin’s smoothly arrogant expression was unreadable. He led her up the stairs, down a corridor and up another smaller staircase to be faced with another with a set of large, double doors at the end. When they drew closer, Astoria heard the low murmur of voices which sounded almost queer in this unending silence.

Antonin stepped forward, rapped on the great oaken door three times and the voices on the other side fell silent. The doors slowly opened to reveal a handsomely decorated study in all of green and silver – naturally. Two huge flags of both the Slytherin banner and the Dark Mark framed the desk which was placed before a colossal bay window that stretched almost to the ceiling. Astoria felt a ripple of fear when she saw who was waiting for her, for there, talking quietly with Alessandra Zabini was the Dark Lord himself, looking as terrible as ever with his chalk white skin and shockingly red eyes. Those eyes were fixed on her now as she curtsied for him, making sure to keep her head bowed and her mouth shut until his Lordship spoke first.
“You may rise.” Came the high, cold voice after a few moments. Astoria straightened, but kept her eyes averted, not daring to look him directly in the face. She did not think she would ever get used to his Lordship’s serpentine features, looking at him full in the face was always such a shock, but then – “Look at me child.” Astoria forced herself to look into the face of evil and the cruellest eyes on the Earth stared back at her, filling her with terror. The Dark Lord must have sensed her fear, for his lipless mouth curved into a taught leer as he studied her. His eyes were completely blank, there was absolutely nothing there, but his gaze was scorched as those two red pits bored into her. She felt as though she had no clothes on as he continued to stare at her unblinkingly, his snake’s smile frozen on his face. Astoria had never been in the Dark Lord’s presence with so few others and had scarcely even spoken directly with him before; it was very unnerving. Then, he finally broke the silence. “It pleases me that you have fulfilled your duty to the Dark Order, for it is essential that all my subjects breed as much as possible if we are to achieve a pure, New World where only those of the true blood can prosper and rule.” He talks of us as if we are cattle, to be bred and refined she thought fleetingly with disgust. The Dark Lord began to circle her, and Astoria knew that his eyes were still upon her even when he walked out of her line of vision. He was close, far too close as he looked her up and down, almost appraisingly and she could feel something malevolent and unnatural emanating from his Lordship, something… not quite human. Astoria longed to whirl around and bolt from him; he was not screaming at the top of his lungs or recklessly firing out curses, but this was a thousand times more threatening and frightening than that. The red eyes met the lilac once again as the Dark Lord paused his prowling. “I hear you have talent and bravery, Travers told me of that business with the Flesh Worm down in the dungeons when we broke out de Sade. That was impressive, very impressive.” Astoria nodded almost imperceptibly, knowing better than to speak without his leave and his Lordship continued, “I need a Death Eater in this Institute, a Death Eater with brains, a talented Death Eater who has bled for the cause unlike the foolish flock of hens I have at present.” He gave an irritable jerk of his hairless head. Astoria knew he was referring to the Death Eater wives who currently served in the Institute. Yes, they had wed into the movement, but they had never been branded with the Dark Mark like her. “So, child you are to assist Madam Zabini in all things related to the purification of the wizarding world, do you consent to serve?”

Knowing she had no choice, Astoria fell to her knees on the plush green carpet, her head bowed to avoid direct eye contact. “I am honoured that my Lord and ruler has chosen me for this most noble task, there can be no higher privilege.” The words tasted like bile in her mouth as Antonin pulled her to her feet.

“One more thing, child. Should you see or hear anything of… interest in this Institute, you are to report straight to Madam Zabini and tell it all, even if it seems of little importance.” The Dark Lord’s catlike eyes narrowed then. “I hardly need to remind you that lying to the Dark Order is akin to lying to me and lying to me is treason.”

Astoria’s blood ran cold when his Lordship hissed the last word. She knew perfectly well what she was being asked to do; he wants me to be his spy. The notion made her feel soiled, unclean, but what she said was, “My Lord knows that I am at his eternal service.”

The lipless smile appeared again before the Dark Lord turned to Antonin. “Dolohov, it is time we
took our leave. You shall accompany me to the Fortress forthwith, we have much to discuss.”
Antonin smirked and kissed Astoria on the cheek before hastening to his Master. The Dark Lord
gave a curt nod, his face expressionless and Antonin gave Alessandra a lewd smile and a wink
before they spun around and strode from the study, black robes swirling.

After they had gone, Astoria was ‘treated’ to a full tour of the Purification Institute. Alessandra first
took her to a classroom where Euphemia Rowle – a frightful great aunt to Thorefinn Rowle, was
lecturing a room full of stiff backed, spotlessly clean teenaged wizards. There were no witches in
sight and all of the wizards wore black robes with the Dark Mark emblazoned over their hearts.
Euphemia was gesticulating forcefully at what seemed to be a human skull.

“See the inferiority complex lies here in Muggles.” Euphemia declared loudly in a cold, clear voice
as she pointed to what would be the base of the neck on the skull. “This is what makes Muggles less
than we are; they are unable to think properly for themselves and it is our duty to guide these stupid,
dirty creatures as best we can by putting them to work. You will be doing a kindness having
ownership over a Muggle, which is of course a mercy for them, seeing as it was the Muggles who
drove the wizards into hiding in the first place and caused us to suffer.” There were murmurs of
assent and Euphemia looked coldly satisfied. “Now, I want two rolls of parchment detailing the
inferiority of Muggles, their main faults and a sketch of a Muggle skull describing the deficiencies we
have covered today and how best to remedy them through ownership and hard work.” Euphemia
looked up at Astoria and Alessandra and smiled. “Well met my ladies, I hope you found my
teachings acceptable.”

“Most acceptable, Madam Rowle, your zeal to our cause does you great credit, please continue.”
Alessandra replied sweetly as she bustled Astoria out of the room.

Astoria was then led through rooms of sleeping babies and infants before being taken down to the
‘birthing corridor’ – she had been dreading this the most. Naked, Half Blood witches were chained
to their beds and kept behind bars like prisoners in long corridors. Most were in differing stages of
pregnancy and all of them were filthy and half starved. Worse still, they were attended by Half Blood
girls as young as six who would fetch water, meals and assist with the cleaning and births; something
no child should ever have to experience.

“The Dark Lord has deemed it unwise for Half Blood witches to be educated with their male
counterparts above, they may get dangerous ideas” Alessandra declared. “As soon as they have bled
they are moved into cells and put to work for the Dark Order’s noblest of tasks.”

“A most brilliant use for them my lady.” Astoria lied.

Finally, an hour later, the monstrous tour was over, and Astoria felt ashamed beyond words. “Shall
we have some tea?” Alessandra purred softly and she lightly brushed Astoria’s arm with her slender
fingers. “It does not serve for you to be on your feet for too long after all, come.” One wave of Alessandra’s wand and an assortment of teas and small cakes were spread on silver platters in front of them. Alessandra studied her with those leaf green eyes, lovely even in their shrewdness as she sipped camomile tea. “How far along are you, child?”

“Healer Rathburne says the babe is approximately twelve weeks now.” Astoria replied.

Alessandra looked surprised. “I see, you look as though you are more than that, I would have guessed you were closer to twenty.” Alessandra sighed and set her teacup aside before fixing upon Astoria intently. “There is, shall we say, the seed of a plan in relation to marriage which will be implemented in all occupied territory in due course. I have been corresponding with my counterpart, Victoria Avery, in Britain and we both agree that the birth rate for Pure Bloods is not high enough.” Her eyes flitted toward Astoria’s belly for a moment, “Doubtless that is why his Lordship has selected you to assist us in this noble cause, be glad that you have proven fertile thus far child.”

Astoria was starting to get annoyed at being called a ‘child,’ she was a grown woman of nineteen years, she had carried and birthed a child and had another one on the way, she had fought in countless campaigns and shed her own blood as well as the blood of countless others, not to mention she had to steer precariously through the battlefield that was her marriage every single day; she was not a child.

“What would you have of me, my lady?” She forced herself to ask.

Alessandra’s lips curved up in what she evidently thought was a gracious smile, but it made the hairs on the back of Astoria’s neck stand up. “Slave, bring in my guests for today.” She called over to a Muggle slave standing by the wall near the door; he was clad in grey robes and he had his slave number embroidered over his heart. Alessandra’s voice was calm and serene, but the Muggle she addressed flinched as though she had shouted.

The Muggle scurried away and returned almost immediately, holding the door open to make way for a parade of young witches dressed in silk and velvet. Adelaide Yaxley was prominent among them, looking stunning in a long flowing gown of palest blue. Marcel de Sade’s daughters were there as well as Drisella Selwyn and Hestia Carrow; the latter looking most displeased. Astoria had a very ominous feeling with the realisation that every witch in the group was unwed. Some looked excited as they whispered among themselves, some were nervous, but others looked absolutely terrified.

“Right ladies, I shall have silence.” Alessandra cut in through the babble and silence fell at once. “You may be seated.” There was a great flurry of lace and silk skirts as the witches hurried to sit themselves down while Alessandra paced before them. “You all know why you are here, you are all unwed and in need of husbands. It is the Dark Lord’s wish that you are all to be matched and hopefully after that you will contribute to the purification of our New World by producing lots of
children.” Astoria saw Hestia’s mouth twist in distaste, but Adelaide looked on with rapt attention; she knew how much the other witch wanted to get married and have a baby; not to mention her burning desire for the handsome Josiah Zabini. “I am joined here today by the Madam Dolohov.” Alessandra waved a slender hand in Astoria’s direction and she had to force her face into a smile as the young witches looked curiously on. “It is her example you should follow. She is almost in the third year of her marriage and is set to give her husband a second child already. I cannot stress how important this is if we are to achieve the Dark Lord’s aims and achieve the purification we all desire.” There were impressed murmurs and Adelaide winked over at Astoria, smiling. Alessandra gave a wave of her wand and a handsome book done in green velvet with curly silver writing appeared in front of everyone. The cover read: Nature’s Nobility, a Wizarding Genealogy: Bridal Edition – A comprehensive guide to all eligible Pure Blood witches throughout Europe. “You shall all have the honour of being displayed in this bridal book so that you might be selected by potential bachelors. You will all be given bride prices which will be determined by me based on your beauty, your age, your bloodlines and your potential fertility once you have been examined by one of our Healers below.”

Astoria was filled with a strong desire to throw the book from her and into the fire, such was her disgust. She had not even looked through the book yet, but she had a fair idea of what it was for; this was poisonous, vile, disgusting. Bad enough that we are practically dragged down the aisle, must we be traded like sacks of grain too? Tentatively she flipped through the pages and got a shock when a face leapt out at her. Pansy Parkinson was smiling up at her, a very superior expression upon her hard face. Her photograph was to the right of the page and to the left there was all sorts of information about Pansy and her lineage. Most of the pages were blank, but Astoria had a grim idea of who would be filling them.

“...It is quite simple really, wizards shall bid for your hands and the highest bidder automatically has claim over you under the practice of matrimonium coactus. The gold shall be used to further the Dark Order and compensate your Father’s as loss of your ownership. Does anyone wish to ask anything?” When nobody did, Alessandra clapped her hands together, her eyes gleaming. “So. Let us begin.” She waved her wand and a wooden box camera appeared on a tall stand which lined up perfectly with a handsome chair. “Madam Dolohov, you are to write down all her answers when I pose a question.”

“At once, my lady.” Astoria slipped her hand into the long, thin concealed pocket in her gown to draw out her wand. A moment later there were rolls of parchment, a parrot feathered quill and a pot of green ink, poised and ready. Another wave of her wand and the quill dipped itself into the green ink and was hovering above the parchment.

Alessandra meanwhile was studying the witches intently. “I think we shall start, with you.” She said, pointing at a young, pretty witch with dark hair and clad in rose silk, her blue eyes filled with fear. The witch hastened to her feet at once and stood before the cruel matriarch, not attempting to disguise how scared she was. “Tell us your name.” Alessandra said silkily. She smiled at the trembling girl like a wolf contemplating a lost lamb.
“Nadya, my lady. Nadya Wierska.” She whispered in a soft Polish accent, looking as though she were about to cry. “My – my brothers were all killed serving the Dark Lord when he liberated Poland, so my parents sent me here under the ward of the Selwyn family to be matched with a suitable husband. I – I am so happy.”

*Then why do you look so sad?* Astoria thought miserably as her parrot feather quill began skimming across the parchment

“Indeed, and how old are you Mistress Wierska?”

“Fifteen, my lady.”

“And have you bled?” The girl flushed and nodded. Alessandra grasped Nadya beneath the chin and turned her head from side to side. “Pretty, very pretty.” She murmured before turning around to face Astoria. “Madam Dolohov, I think we will set the bride price for this one at eight hundred thousand Galleons; she is young, pretty and an heiress.” She gestured for Nadya to sit on the chair and conjured up a white rose which she slid through the girl’s dark hair. “There, you are as sweet as strawberries my dear. Now, *smile.*” Alessandra glided over to the camera and tapped it with her wand. There was a loud ‘click,’ after which was followed by a great cloud of purple smoke as the picture was taken, “I think we shall try for a few more. Nadya, child, lift your chin a little… ah, perfect.”

So, as it was for most of the day, Alessandra preened and powdered young witches to make them as beautiful as possible for their photographs while Astoria noted down all their details and replicated them in the *Nature’s Nobility* book. Getting Hestia to smile was like pulling teeth but other than that, their twisted operation went smoothly. It was with a heavy heart when she filled out the page for Adelaide. Adelaide was vain and arrogant, but she did not deserve to be bought and sold like a horse like this. She sadly attached Adelaide’s photograph to the page with a jab of her wand, wondering what monster she would be auctioned off to as Adelaide laughed up at her from the picture, tossing her hair and smiling. Astoria had to will herself not to tear the parchment to shreds as she murmured instructions to her quill for the umpteenth time. Once again, the quill promptly dipped itself in the green ink and began to write:

*Mistress Adelaide Helen Yaxley*

*Bride Price: Bids no lower than six hundred thousand Galleons*

*Nationality: British*

*Location: France*

*Age: Twenty One*
Body conformation: Excellent

Dark Mark: Yes

Fertility: Good

Height: Tall

Bloodlines: Excellent

Here we have a charming young witch from the House of Yaxley which belongs to the prestigious Sacred Twenty Eight of Great Britain. Mistress Adelaide enjoys riding, needlework and picking flowers. She is accomplished in charms, the high harp and has an exceptional taste for fine art. Having been examined by a fully qualified Healer, Mistress Adelaide has proven fertile and is sure to produce many children. With her stunning looks and sweet nature, Mistress Adelaide is sure to please any wizard claimant.

*Please see below for family tree and lineage*

Astoria grimaced inwardly as she waved her wand and Adelaide’s information vanished to be replaced with the next witch who was to be put in the book: Mistress Fadila Iman Shafiq – she was only fourteen years old.

Astoria had been left exhausted in both her mind and body after her first day at the Institute and was grateful when she finally got home and was even more pleased to find the manor devoid of Antonin. Doubtless he was closeted away with the Dark Lord making cruel plans to seize Germany which is where he spent most of his days now. When she reached her bedchamber, Granger was waiting there for her as usual and sporting her eye patch. Astoria had tricked Antonin into giving it to her by telling him that she found Granger’s scarred face and eyeless eye socket “Most displeasing to the eye.”

There was little and less she could do for her former classmate against Antonin’s cruelty, but at least this gave her a small ounce of dignity. Indeed, it amused her husband to taunt and humiliate Granger as much as he possibly could, even for his low standards. He would hit her without warning and play cruel tricks on her. Only a fortnight past he, Avery, Silas and Yaxley had crept down to the windowless cell under the manor where she slept and released ten giant rats into the room before locking the door. She recalled with revulsion how Granger had screamed and begged while sadistic tears of laughter streamed down the disfigured face of Silas Norton. Other than the fact that Granger was a Mudblood, Antonin seemed to have a vicious desire for revenge against the once brilliant student. Astoria was not foolish enough to ask what grievance he had against her, but from the small pieces of information she had picked up on over time, it had something to do with what happened during the furore at the Department of Mysteries in London some years ago.

As Granger helped Astoria out of her clothes, she was uncomfortably aware that Granger’s good eye kept flicking to the soft swell of her belly a little too often. She was wearing a loose silk shift but asked for a bed robe to cover her stomach, still feeling uneasy.
“Thankyou, you may go.” Astoria said softly as Granger stared blankly at the floor.

Astoria settled herself before the hearth and picked up a health tonic that Rathburne had instructed her to drink for the baby. As she took the first sip, she heard a great sniff from behind her, she looked around and saw that Granger was crying, actually crying. Since she was thrown at the feet of Marcel de Sade, Astoria had not seen Granger shed a tear, not to mention that she always worked in silence and never looked at Astoria directly, so this was a huge shock. She did not know what to do as the other witch stood there with her hand pressed hard to her mouth to stop herself from sobbing in earnest. The sight of her standing there silently weeping, her small shoulders shuddering struck Astoria as an oddly powerful, raw image as her emotion was almost palpable. She got to her feet and approached Granger, tentatively reaching out to touch Granger’s stick thin arm. The other witch flinched but did not pull away and Astoria did it instinctively; she hugged her. To her surprise, Granger’s arms jerked upward to return the hug and she buried her face in Astoria’s shoulder to muffle her sobs as the tears continued to fall thick and fast. Strange, she was embracing this girl like a sister and she had scarcely spoken three words to in her life. As to what Granger was thinking Astoria could not say, she had been raped, beaten, enslaved and every day for her was misery and drudgery yet she still craved a human touch, even if it was from the wife of her main tormentor. When Granger had finally calmed down a little, Astoria gestured for her to sit on one of the sofas near the fireplace. Granger hesitated, and with good reason; Antonin had decreed that she would be horse whipped if she sat down in the presence of a Pure Blood. She eventually sat stiffly while Astoria swept over to Antonin’s drink cabinet, poured her a goblet of wine and summoned a crystal jar filled with shortbread from her dining chamber next door. Antonin would not be home for hours; after his business with the Dark Lord was concluded he would head straight to the brothel with his group of drunken fools before returning home for dinner – if indeed he returned for dinner at all.

“Drink this…ah, Hermione.” She said, handing her the goblet. At her words, Granger’s head jerked upwards; Astoria had never called her by her first name before, ever.

Still feeling awkward at the bizarreness of the situation, Astoria sat down next to her, waiting. Hermione timidly took a swallow of wine, her eye slid shut and she exhaled deeply as though the wine was the sweetest and most delicious thing she had ever tasted. She knew that Hermione and the other three Muggle slaves were left to pick at the scraps from cold dinner leftovers and their water came from a dirty tap at the back of the manor outside the kitchens. Antonin would occasionally give them a loaf of stale bread, so they were not rendered incapable of doing their work around the manor, but other than that they had nothing else. Hermione nibbled the biscuits with small delicate bites, savouring each tiny piece as though she would never get another chance to taste such wonders ever again.

Then, at last she spoke, staring down into her wine goblet. “That night at Marcel de Sade’s chateau, I thought that you were perhaps playing a cruel trick on me when you saved me from… him.” Her voice shook as she said the last word before she swallowed hard and continued. “I did not trust you as you can imagine… in fact I hated you, I thought you were a pampered Pure Blood, Death Eater brat who despised those of my birth. I – I had gone through months hell before I was brought to his home and I was still so confused and afraid. But now, I see the way D – Dolohov treats you and
how you are not cruel like he is… or the others. Being a slave allows me to read people seeing as I am largely ignored.” She looked up at Astoria full in the face. “They forced you to marry him, didn’t they? I saw how you would flinch when he spoke to you, the bruises on your body, the shouting late at night… as unbelievable as it sounds, I actually began to pity you.”

Astoria wanted to break down and weep. This girl who had suffered terribly, this girl who was against the Dark Order and all it stood for, this girl felt sorry for her? She was completely astounded that anyone could have so much grace and humility in them, especially after such an appalling, cruel journey. Astoria had a whole new respect for Hermione’s bravery and kindness; a true Gryffindor indeed.

“Yes, Antonin requested the Dark Lord for my hand and he was granted it at once; it was only my dignity that prevented me from being dragged up the aisle kicking and screaming. Even so, you may not feel so inclined to pity me if you knew the things I have done, Hermione. I freely joined the movement, I chose the Dark side.” She felt her eyes beginning to moisten. “All I want in this world is to keep my babies safe; Pure Blood, Half Blood, Muggleborn or Muggle, I do not care any longer, I just want this to end.” Hermione started to cry again, and she sounded more hysterical than ever. “I am sorry.” Astoria muttered “I -”

But Hermione shook her head and wiped her leaking eye. “Don’t be sorry, its just –” but she began to sob again, and Astoria hastily conjured up a silk handkerchief to hand to her. She did not know how long Hermione cried for, but she sat there patiently until the tears slowed and she said thickly, “All this talk of babies and children upsets me so much, brings back memories… You see, I have a daughter.” Astoria was stunned, she felt as though she had been run over by a stampeding Hippogriff… a daughter? Hermione Granger has a daughter? She stared at the other witch, at a loss for words.

“How…ah, when was she…?” Astoria stumbled over her words such was her shock.

“Her name, is Rose.” Hermione said the name with such tenderness and love that Astoria felt her heart flutter. “She came as a complete shock as I had been drinking Tansy Tea at the time… R-Ron and I were always so careful, but it happened all the same. I was thrilled but terrified; she was conceived just as the war broke out in Britain and Ron, Harry and I went on the run.” She paused and took a deep breath and Astoria could almost feel the pain and heartache coming off of her as she remembered her murdered best friends and lover; she probably has not even spoken their names since they died. Hermione dabbed at her eye again and went on, “She was born in a remote forest in a tent, and for a few weeks I was the happiest woman on the Earth. With war raging all around us, it was easy to stay hidden in the beginning and I would spend my days just holding her while Ronald and Harry went out to look for food.” She then gave a long, weary sigh which sounded as though it carried all the weight of the world in it. “But then it got harder and harder to hide; we had so many near misses when Voldemort was completely taking over.” Astoria flinched violently at the sound of the name, but Hermione pressed on – it seemed as though she had wanted to say all this for years. “Ron and I agreed, we had to send our Rose away. She – she went with Ronald’s parents, they said they were going to try for somewhere in Europe but I’m really not sure where. There’s been almost
no contact, and with the war spreading to Europe... I have no idea where they are and my Rose, my
Rose. I do not know where she is, whether she is cold or hungry—" She gave a choked sob, "Whether
she is dead or alive!" and Hermione flung her head in her hands and began to weep so hard that her
whole body shook; these were the cries of a heartbroken Mother. Astoria could only grasp her by the
shoulder in an attempt to comfort her, because no words could ease the pain of what she was going
through.

A goblet of wine later and Hermione had more or less stopped crying and the sky outside was
beginning to darken. "I think it may be time to go back downstairs." Astoria said, shooting a nervous
glance at the door. "He might be back soon." She saw the crushing despair in Hermione’s brown
eye, but also resignation; she knew she couldn’t stay up here unless she wanted to be lashed to
within an inch of her life and Astoria would suffer for it too.

They both stood, and Hermione looked as though she were steeling herself for something and then –
"Can I lie on the bed? Just for a moment? It has been years since I slept in a proper bed and I’d love
to feel softness beneath me once again." She looked slightly worried, as though she were afraid
pushing things too far.

"Of – of course." Astoria replied, both taken aback and deeply saddened to think how badly she
must have been treated to take such pleasure in something so small.

When it was time for Hermione to leave, she hesitated at the door. "Thank you for everything, for
being kind to me... I’m now quite amazed you ever became a Death Eater at all." She did not smile,
but she gave Astoria a searching, almost approving look before departing the bedchamber.

In the following weeks of her almost daily visits to the Institute, Astoria came to realise where the
Zabini brothers had gotten their remorseless cruelty from, for Alessandra was nothing short of pure
evil. All the Muggle slaves lived in terror of her; she would curse them randomly and without
warning and would ruthlessly order for children to be sent to ‘the box’ – a tiny room where
misbehaving children were locked in the dark and starved to within an inch of their lives. Worse still
was the calm, quiet way she went about her cruel acts; Alessandra was the type of witch who did not
need to shout but that did not make her any less malevolent and threatening.

The rain lashed the colossal window panes of Alessandra’s study and Astoria moved restlessly in her
seat as the rolls of parchment shuffled themselves on a tea table. She was already starting to get
uncomfortably big even though she was not yet halfway through her pregnancy, but Rathburne said
this was normal with a second child. Her shifting had drawn Alessandra’s attention.

“What is it, child?” She asked sharply.
“It is nothing, I just struggle to get comfortable now.”

Alessandra nodded, “Indeed, I believe soon you shall retire to your home in a moon’s turn or two as it would be inappropriate for you to continue in such an… advanced condition.”

*Good, I hate it here,* Astoria thought vengefully, but what she said was, “As you say, my lady.”

Then came the usual three raps on the door to put an end to their exchange. “Enter,” Alessandra called serenely without looking up from her papers. An elderly Muggle woman clad in the grey linen robes of a slave came edging into the room holding a baby basket. Astoria could just make out a small hand protruding from all the blankets. The woman crept subserviently to the desk, her head bowed as Alessandra’s eyes fixed on her unblinkingly. “Ah, slave, what do we have here?” Astoria pushed herself to her feet heavily and walked over to the desk, her hand on her belly.

The woman set the babe down and gave Alessandra a creaky curtsy, “My lady, this is the babe that was born yestermorn that you requested to see.” Croaked the elderly Muggle.

The babe was sleeping blissfully, and Astoria could not understand why the little one had been brought all the way up here. She soon learned though when the Muggle woman flicked back a portion of the blanket to reveal what was underneath. The poor little baby had been born with only part of his left arm which stopped at the elbow joint. Astoria could tell he was a newborn; apart from his tiny size, he had that unmistakable scent about him as he stirred feebly and snuffled a little while they all peered down at him. Other than his deformity, the baby boy looked perfect; he had lots of soft brown hair and his skin had a healthy pink glow.

Alessandra however, tutted. “Defective. Such a shame.” She mused. Astoria’s stomach twisted as Alessandra conjured up a roll of parchment that was the child’s record and rolled it out onto her desk, her deep green eyes moving from left to right. “Well Madam Dolohov, in this Institute we do not allow the defective to live lest they pass on their bad blood to future generations. This is the first case I have had thus far, but I am sure you have already deduced that we cannot allow such a creature to live among us. Remember child, Only the Pure.”

Astoria gave a stiff nod, unable to speak such was her horror. The corners of her eyes prickled, threatening tears but she forced herself to be blank and expressionless. She had tried to prepare herself for this eventuality and thought that it would be a while before she faced this particular atrocity, but she felt as though she might faint, and her heart was banging so hard against her ribs she was surprised Alessandra’s sharp ears could not hear it. She was snapped out of her blind dread by that hated, silkily malevolent voice.
“Dispose of this defective creature, slave. It has no place in our world.” Alessandra said in the same fashion as though she were commenting on the weather, whereas Astoria tasted bile in her mouth and swallowed furiously. Alessandra rummaged in a drawer and drew out a huge stamp which she brought down hard onto the record. When she set the stamp aside Astoria saw that huge block letters in red sprawled across the neat notes reading: DEFECTIVE. It was as though someone had slid a shard of ice down the back of Astoria’s gown even though her hands were sweating. She longed to grab the poor baby and hold him safe from this monstrous witch, but she knew in her heart that such an action would see her and Leo executed before the sun went down. Astoria felt that being pregnant made this a thousand times worse, especially as her own baby was not too far away and had recently started to move. It was nothing short of having her heart ripped from her breast.

“How would you prefer me to ah… dispose of the babe my lady?” Asked the Muggle, her eyes deadened by despair.

“Snap its neck or drown it in the bucket downstairs, I do not care which.” Alessandra replied calmly as she gave a toss of her luscious hair. “As long as it is dead then that is all that matters. You have my leave to go now.” Just for good measure, Alessandra gave a flick of her wand and a deep slash appeared on the Muggle’s shoulder, blood blossoming over the grey fabric. The woman flinched and stifled a scream, “You shall scrub that clean tonight.” She said lazily, her mouth twisting with sadistic pleasure.

As the Muggle woman picked up the basket with trembling hands and made to leave, Astoria thought that she might be physically sick, knowing that the poor babe was minutes away from being murdered for the crime of being ‘defective.’ She did not know how anyone, let alone a Mother could be so ruthless when it came to the slaughter of innocent little babies. In her own way, Alessandra Zabini was as evil and cold as the Dark Lord; nothing phased her, no matter how brutal and it was crystal clear why his Lordship had chosen her for the barbaric task that was ‘purification.’

“I – I need to lie down. I feel faint.” Astoria said abruptly. It was only half a lie, but she could not take any more of this brutal savagery just now. This was worse than being on the battlefield. This sick, twisted, vile Institute that treated witches like cattle and sent babies to the slaughterhouse was infinitely worse than duelling some unknown foe. She wanted to go home and weep for that poor baby, for no one else in this foul city would.

“Yes, you are looking rather pale.” Alessandra replied, studying her shrewdly. “It is best not take any chances, I shall call a carriage for you at once. Go home and rest child.” Astoria sat and ran her hand over her stomach as she was wont to do, hoping and praying more than ever that her baby would be born healthy.

That evenfall Astoria was forced to spend the night at the home of Corban Yaxley as he had invited Antonin to dinner. Elizabeth was present, but she was even more miserable of late and was still misusing coca powder to the point where her nose would start to bleed spontaneously. She had
confessed to Astoria that Yaxley had been treating her worse than ever and had been demanding another child ever since Astoria’s pregnancy had been announced. It made her feel absurdly guilty. Thus, for much of the night Astoria let Antonin and Yaxley’s words wash over her as they were served a sickly pumpkin stew, roast goose and poached brill. The main point of talk between them was the war of course; Astoria knew that the tentacles of the Dark Order had taken hold of the German region of Rhineland and the Spanish region of Catalonia. Spain was at breaking point and Antonin gleefully outlined that the situation had gotten so bad with the plague and the civil war that the citizens of Spain were now reduced to eating their own dead. Germany was suffering too with most people fleeing the East as the forces in Eastern Europe had all but taken the border. Escape was also cut off from the South as Switzerland and Austria were now ‘occupied.’ Now with the Death Eaters inching in from the West, the country would soon be all but strangled in the Dark Lord’s cruel grasp and he would control all of Europe. It was a terrifying prospect.

After the tedium of dinner was done with, they all made to sit on velvet sofas in front of the hearth. Yaxley was staring into the fire, seemly musing as he toyed with his wine goblet. “You know old friend, I had a thought.”

“Indeed?” Antonin replied, looking mildly interested.

“I think of you as my brother, so perhaps it is time that our Houses be joined by blood as well as brotherhood I –”

He was cut off by Antonin’s harsh laughter. “You hate all your brothers!”

Yaxley smirked, “That is so, but let us be serious for a moment. How about matching your Leonidas with my Guinevere when they are old enough to wed? Why not? I can rid myself of a daughter and your son gets a pretty Pure Blood wife.” He then gave Elizabeth a very nasty look, “Until such time my wife gives me a son I have to make do with what I have at present.”

Antonin laughed again. “Just so, an excellent notion my friend. Guinevere Dolohov has a nice ring to it.” He leaned forward and they both chinked their goblets together. “I shall have the papers drawn up tomorrow.”

Yaxley looked satisfied but Astoria had to do her best to stop her mouth from twisting in distaste; Guinevere and Leo were still only babies. **Bad enough that Antonin had named Yaxley godfather to Leo, must she and her son be bound to that beast of a man by blood as well?**

“Speaking of marriage.” Yaxley said with a sly look at Adelaide, whose head jerked up immediately to stare intently at her half brother. “You shall be pleased to know that I have found you a match,
Ada.” Elizabeth looked up from her dead pan stare into the roaring fire, her expression coldly curious.

“Who is it!?” Adelaide whispered breathlessly, her pale green eyes full of excited anticipation. “Oh brother, please tell!” Antonin meanwhile was smirking, and it was evident that he already knew the future bridegroom’s identity.

“I have received a very generous offer from a long time friend and comrade of mine and today, I accepted. You are to be the wife of Edward Travers.”

Adelaide’s face fell. “Travers?” She said blankly. “He is past fifty!” Adelaide got angrily to her feet to glare at her brother, though Astoria could tell that she was fighting the urge not to burst into tears. Her dream of a handsome young husband had shattered in an instant. “I will not marry him, you cannot make me!” Astoria vividly remembered screaming the exact same thing in defiance, yet here she was. Antonin gave a nasty chuckle as he watched Adelaide’s mounting distress with malicious pleasure. Astoria was then seized with a desire to scratch those cold blue eyes right out of his head.

Yaxley’s brutal face darkened with anger and he pushed himself to his feet as well, swaying slightly. “Father was never hard enough on you!” He snarled. “I am the head of the family Ada, not you, and I say you will marry Travers and be grateful for such a wealthy and pure match! Do not mistake me for Father, I will not give you what you want because you wail and stamp your feet! My interest is not in indulging your childish vanities, my interest is the survival and prosperity of our House and the purification of the wizarding race.” Adelaide tried to reply angrily but something in her brother’s eyes made her fall silent and Yaxley gave her a nasty sneer. “Who knows? In time if you are obedient and sweet as a wife should be, you may even learn to like him. I have never exercised my right to chastise you Ada, but if you dare question me again you will force my hand.”

Adelaide opened her mouth, closed it again, then flung herself down on a chaise. “Wine!” She spat at a Muggle slave who jumped and hastened to obey.

The following weeks seemed to snail by since Adelaide had learned who had decided to claim her; every time Astoria saw her she looked simultaneously angry and sad. Astoria felt much of the same of late, being shut up in the Institute all day with Alessandra Zabini and having to constantly put on a façade was emotionally exhausting for her. When it all got too much, she focussed her attention on Leo and her rapidly growing baby, thus she was not sorry when Alessandra informed her that it was now her duty to ‘stay at home and serve her husband.’

Upon her return home, Astoria found the manor in a state of chaos. Half Blood guards were at the door and Marcus Flint was outside the gates bellowing out orders while Muggle slaves scurried about everywhere. When she reached her bedchamber, she found Antonin clad in full Death Eater robes and fiddling with his watch, an irritable expression upon his pale face. Knowing better than to
interrupt or speak without invitation, Astoria slipped further into the room.

Antonin looked up and grunted. “Oh, it’s you. Go and wake the boy, we are leaving. I have been summoned to the Rhineland in Germany to oversee the Muggle slave problem, we are completely overrun as all these pathetic countries continue to fall.” The cold blue eyes flickered to her overlarge stomach. “The place is comfortable I am told, we shall be well taken care of and Rathburne will accompany us as it is likely that you will have the child there.”

Astoria’s head was spinning trying to take everything in. She was confused and frightened at the prospect of uprooting Leo and she did not want to have her baby in some strange and unknown place. The manor she shared with Antonin was not exactly what she would call ‘home’ but at least it was familiar.

“As you – as you say, husband.” She replied numbly before turning to leave.

Scarcely an hour later Leo was swaddled in furs – Antonin said it would be cold, and many trunks containing clothes and necessities were packed up in front of the manor while Hermione, the Muggle slaves and various Half Bloods dashed about the place trying to get everything ready. Antonin was standing in the doorway and staring out into the distance, but at the sound of her footsteps, he turned around and gave her a wolfish smile.

“Ah, there she is. Come my sweet or we shall not reach Germany until the evening.” He said, holding out his hand, an unpleasant smile playing about his cruel mouth. With the briefest hesitation, Astoria took Antonin’s outstretched hand and stepped forward, not for the first time, into unknown and dangerous waters.

Chapter End Notes

It broke my heart to write the scene with the baby in the Institute, but as previously mentioned the Nazi's would execute hundreds of children who were disabled and/or 'racially impure' every single day when they took over. I've wanted to involve Hermione more in the story for a while and this chapter was the perfect opportunity.
XXXIII. - Run

Chapter Summary

Now we are in Germany and this chapter mainly focuses on how the Death Eaters are dealing with the 'Muggle problem' in Europe and a feel good moment that I really enjoyed writing.

Same disclaimer applies.

Warning: graphic/distressing/disturbing material

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Rhineland came as a surprise to Astoria when she stepped out her carriage to yet another new home. She studied her surroundings as the Muggle slaves fussed with trunks and tucked a sleeping Leo tighter in his pram while Half Blood guards who had followed on brooms, landed with 'thuds' on the gravel all around her. She had been expecting some cold, bleak place but the Rhineland was surrounded by low hills and vast forests, though many trees had been felled for railway tracks. There must have been some sort of bonfire burning too because Astoria could see clouds of black smoke churning out from behind some trees to the East. A great country castle was what really drew the eye, it was done in all of pale stone and had a dozen slim, elegant towers that pierced the sky. The large double doors crafted of rosewood had a great gold placard that was fixed onto them which read: ‘COMMANDER’S RESIDENCE’ – the knocker was fashioned in the likeness of the Dark Mark.

“Come my love.” Antonin murmured into her ear, he slid a hand around her waist – or lack of now, and drew her close to him, his hand on her belly. Repressing a shudder, Astoria dutifully took his hand and stepped inside.

The great hall was lavish, but cold. Fire erupted from the mouths of silver snake sconces to illuminate tapestries depicting wizard supremacy and grisly Dark artefacts in jars and vials which rested on plinths. There was a huge staircase at the back of the hall; towering and imperious, the landing beyond lost in shadow. The marble on the floor was white veined with black and a colossal moving image of the Dark Mark was in the centre, coiling malevolently and Astoria could have sworn that she felt her own Mark prickle. There was a wizard present, he was studying the portrait depicting the Basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets, so he had his back to them but at the sound of their footsteps he turned. Astoria had to repress a sharp intake of breath, she had not seen this wizard since she had been at school.

“Masakh Shafiq, back from Syria, are we?” Antonin asked smoothly as they glided toward the young wizard.
Masakh smirked stupidly, but he was extremely handsome for all that. He was tall and muscled, his flawless skin was a deep olive and he had a strong chiselled jaw and a straight nose. What was most noticeable about Masakh Shafiq’s features were his eyes… his eyes were like melted gold, a relic of his Arabian ancestry. Astoria had to admit that they were almost hypnotic as he gazed at them approaching him. Masakh Shafiq; like the Zabini brothers, was the sort of wizard witches threw themselves at due to his god like looks. He had been in his fourth year when Astoria joined Hogwarts and it was common knowledge that he had bedded half of the witches in his own year as well as those above him.

“I am back for now, Dolohov. How are you faring old friend?”

“Better every day.” Antonin replied, before glancing at Astoria, “I believe you are acquainted with my wife?”

Masakh’s golden orbs rested on her, “That is quite right, I have not seen your lovely wife since I left Hogwarts, you are looking well, my lady and congratulations on the babe.” He gave her a glittering white smile to show perfect teeth.

“You are most kind Master Shafiq.” Astoria replied softly as he kissed her hand.

Masakh turned back to Antonin. “I daresay you shall find the place comfortable enough, the Half Bloods are stationed outside in tents and there are other residences spread about the… land.” There was a knowing smile playing about his lips which her husband returned. He glanced down at his watch, “How long will it take for the rest to arrive? Norton and Rookwood arrived yesterday and are at their duties, I must say Norton has taken to my stratagem with great zeal.”

“No more than an hour.” Antonin replied. He gave a half smile, “Silas is a good boy, he does as he is told, and his magic is excellent.”

Masakh’s face split into an evil grin. “Wonderful. We shall all meet back in this hall one hour hence if that is your pleasure. Then I can finally show you the methods I have been employing in Syria to deal with this Muggle overcrowding problem here in Europe. The Dark Lord is most impressed and is keen for this to take place in all conquered land.”

“We eagerly await your demonstration young Shafiq.” Antonin smirked as he led her toward the staircase.
Just over an hour later Astoria had been trussed up in a cloak of mink trimmed with chinchilla. It was hot and stuffy in the back of the unicorn drawn carriage that was rolling them to their destination which remained a mystery. She, Antonin, and the Zabini brothers were crammed on one side and Yaxley, Elizabeth, Adelaide and Travers on the other so there was not much room. The curtains were drawn as Masakh wanted to ‘surprise them’ and it came as a great relief when the carriage came to a jerking halt; the journey had been very short but uncomfortable. When Astoria was helped out of the carriage by Antonin she looked about, an ominous feeling in her chest. They were stood in a courtyard fashioned from dark stone with huge dark buildings towering above them while Half Blood guards skulked about the place furtively. Only a few windows at the top of these buildings had glass panes, the rest had bars which allowed anyone outside to hear the moans of despair and shrieks of pain while the other carriages rolled in through the forbidding iron entrance gates.

“Muggle camps!” Masakh roared when everyone was assembled; Astoria guessed that their party numbered no more than thirty including Rowle, the de Sade's, Jugson and the cruel Prince Gyasi; Astoria was briefly surprised that Antonin had picked the latter to serve here. The Death Eaters exchanged murmurs while Masakh looked indecently pleased with himself. “Come Death Eaters, please allow me to show you what I have devised and continue to perfect.” He began to stride toward one of the large buildings, the Death Eaters drifting in his wake.

They were led inside a long cavernous hall which was brightly lit by fire sconces to reveal the long benches that lined it. It was hot and musky due to the intense flurry of activity taking place within. Sitting on the benches were hundreds of elderly Muggle women and young boys; Astoria saw one Muggle painstakingly sewing jewels onto a handsome slipper for a lady, another was filling bottles with a purple smoking liquid before corking them firmly while two old women measured out some fine brocade fabric as they studied it closely. The young boys were mainly there to dash to the back of the hall with the finished objects that the women were working on and place them in various crates.

Masakh Shafiq surveyed the scene with the utmost satisfaction before addressing the Death Eaters. “When I was in Syria and my sister Fadila would write to me, she would complain about the lack of craftsmen in Britain for dresses, shoes and furniture and so on. So, I thought, why kill all the Muggles when you can put some of them to work!?" He gestured extravagantly to the room at large and there was some polite applause and impressed murmurs. “We have several of these workhouses on site already and the Dark Lord has given his leave for us to build more.”

Despite the increase in noise, not one of the Muggles looked up from their slave labour which confirmed Astoria’s suspicions that they were Imperioused. She shifted guiltily in her own, magnificent slippers; they were crafted from black mink and encrusted with rubies – a gift from Antonin… is this where they came from? She thought, mortified.

After the workhouse came the building which served as a prison for the Dark Lord’s political enemies; the prisoners were a mixture of Muggle government and Ministry of Magic officials that had been captured from all over Europe. The first floor consisted of cells where prisoners would languish in their own filth, some half delirious due to a lack of food and excessive use of the
**Cruciatus** curse. Upstairs was naught but long corridors lined with thick metal doors and Astoria could hear faint screams coming from within. There was no possibility of release of course; the main purpose for their detention was to extract potentially valuable information — perhaps even state secrets to aid the Dark Order in its savage course. The prisoners were tortured and subject to extreme bouts of Legilimency until they gave up everything in their heads, after which they were killed.

Astoria was initially glad to get out of the oppressive, miserable building and into the fresh air. That was until Masakh led them out of the courtyard to what he called ‘the main camp.’ After marching them through yet another set of gates, Astoria and the accompanying Death Eaters were faced with a grim sight though many of her companions gasped in awe. Sprawling over acres and acres of land were hundreds of low buildings that looked like barns. Everything was methodically set out, each cluster of barns were sectioned into giant, square pens and walled in by metal fences topped with razor sharp spikes that glowed red while security trolls lumbered around the perimeter, clutching clubs. A steam train puffed and screeched in the distance and it looked as though it were transporting enormous crates all linked to one another on the tracks; Astoria had a shrewd idea of what was within and shuddered.

“Is it not magnificent?” Masakh breathed, his golden eyes gleaming like Galleons. Without waiting for an answer, he led them past the first cluster of barns.

As the Death Eaters peered in through the fence, figures began to appear from the barns – it was like something out of a nightmare. Muggles, chiefly women and children were staggering toward them across the foul sucking mud where grass had once been. They were filthy, emaciated and dressed in mere scraps of clothing and some wore nothing at all. The few men among them sported disfigurations or disabilities such as missing limbs; Astoria saw a man with no legs dragging himself tortuously across the mud toward them, gibbering. Many showed signs of the plague in differing stages and Astoria could not help but take a step backward, frightened as they came up very close to the fence. She pitied the poor Muggles, but she was obviously feeling very protective of herself and it was scary as they moaned and wailed at her in languages she could not understand while blood leaked from their mouths eyes and noses. Those who had not succumbed to the final devastating mental effects of the plague were coherent enough to use sign language. A pregnant woman who was speaking in Italian was appealing to Astoria, having noticed she was pregnant too. She could not understand her words, but the woman pointed to a small boy who held her hand, then she pointed at her belly and then at her mouth. Astoria read the message loud and clear: *My children are starving can’t you help me? Surely as a Mother you can understand?* It was very hard not to cry.

Masakh seemed to read her expression of horror as one of disgust and he said soothingly, “Have no fear my lady you are quite safe from these vermin, *watch*” He pointed his wand at the small boy who was holding the pregnant woman’s hand and hissed, *Imperio.* Before his Mother could do so much as blink, the boy ran right up to the fence so that he crashed into it, face first. At once there was a blinding flash of red light and the little boy was thrown twenty feet backwards to splatter in the mud as his Mother shrieked in terror and hobbled toward him; so weakened that she was incapable of running in earnest toward her own child. Astoria swallowed down the bile that had found its way into her mouth. The little boy looked nothing like her son, but all Astoria could see was Leo as the boy twitched and jerked upon the floor, muttering nonsense and foaming at the mouth while his eyes
rolled in all directions. Many of the Death Eaters laughed and Masakh looked smug; “All of these in here are marked for death.” He announced over the noise, “The Mudbloods, the diseased, the infirm, the defective, they have no place in his Lordship’s New World.”

The deeper the Death Eaters were led into the camp, the worse it got. Some of the holding pens were in horrific conditions; many had corpses scattered everywhere that were openly rotting. When Elizabeth complained of the smell, Masakh cast a refreshing charm so the Death Eaters’ precious noses were spared the stench of putrefying flesh. Once or twice, Astoria saw Trolls with great sacks made of thick rope slung over their backs; they were carelessly grabbing the dead bodies and stuffing them in the sacks so that arms, legs and heads stuck out horribly from between the interwoven ropes; their sightless eyes staring up at the sky.

They eventually came to open space covered in holes and gravel where stronger looking Muggle men were chained together, toiling away while they heaved picks to dig deep into the ground. James Clearwater was prowling around them on a unicorn mount, his wand in one hand poised to strike at anyone who dared to stop working while he held a drinking flask in the other, taking occasional swigs. Silas was overseeing the whole operation of course; he was towering over a Muggle man who had appeared to have collapsed from exhaustion face down in the mud. He was flanked by Jeremy Bulstrode and Marcus Flint who were trying to restrain two vicious wolves with heavy chains; the beasts were straining to get at the Muggle upon the ground, baying and snarling as slaver dripped from their jaws.

Silas was screeching with fury, his reedy voice carrying across the air. “I told you to get up, Muggle! Get up now and continue with your work or I shall unleash the wolves! CRUCIO!” The man on the ground writhed and screamed as the wolves in turn howled ever louder. “Some more? Or would you prefer the bread and meat you will get if you... Do. The. Fucking. Work!” He screamed, he punctuated his last four words with hexes, causing the Muggle to howl in agony worse than ever.

“Well met, Norton!” Masakh bellowed.

Silas spun around on the spot, but when he saw who was watching him, his disfigured face split into a sadistic grin and he gave them a wave. “Forgive me Shafiq, I was just chastising one of these lazy Muggle miners!” He shrilled back. Astoria heard Antonin give a grunt of amusement while the surrounding Death Eaters tittered.

Masakh turned back to face them all, “The Rhineland is rich in gemstones and precious metals as I am sure many of you are aware. So, we use only the strongest Muggle slaves brought to us for this task rather than those vile little Goblins who hoard everything for themselves,” He said with the utmost disdain.

Travers gave a harsh laugh, “Just so! A most prudent measure.” Adelaide who was on his arm, did
not even look up when her husband to be spoke, her pale green eyes full of misery.

Blaise opened his mouth to speak but he was cut off by Silas’ screaming, “I grow tired of your idleness!” He made a whistling sound through his teeth and the wolves were released from their chains at once. They fell upon the man with such ferocity that one of his arms was immediately torn free of its socket in a great gush of blood as he struggled and shrieked upon the ground. Masakh smiled at the sight of the wizard being torn to pieces but he promptly spun on his heel and strode ahead of the group once again, the Death Eaters in his wake as the man’s screams grew fainter and fainter.

Masakh gleefully led them through newly built Muggle quarters that had not yet been filled. The long, low barns had fresh straw scattered all over their floors and tiered ‘beds’ that reached up to the ceiling – these ‘beds’ were little more than planks of wood. Astoria could just imagine how awful the conditions would be in there when it was crammed with sickly, starving Muggles; there was no light and creatures such as rats and lice would thrive in there. Astoria soon found out where all the black smoke she had seen near the Commander’s Residence earlier came from when Masakh took them to a section of the camp called ‘the furnace buildings.’ Inside, there were at least twenty scorching hot furnaces which had been bewitched with Gubraithian fire by the Dark Lord himself to dispose of all the Muggles’ corpses. A Troll had been heaving great piles of clothes, shoes and other personal effects into a furnace which swallowed all the items greedily; eradicating the existence of the hundreds of nameless Muggles that had perished thus far within the camp. The heat of the furnaces and the purpose they were being used for made Astoria feel unwell and she was not sorry to leave that awful place. She was however feeling very tired and wanted nothing more than to lie down; it felt as though someone were twisting a dagger in her spine.

They finally came to the end of the horrific camp that the twisted Masakh Shafiq had implemented to harvest Muggle slaves and exterminate those who were not deemed useful. “This, is the Commander’s Post.” Masakh announced with a significant look at Antonin as he gestured at a building to his right. “This is where we conduct the day to day operations of the camp, recording slave numbers and the like.”

It was a lavish building of middling size which stood out oddly compared with all the cruel metal, coarse gravel and dark wood that dominated the camp. It was all of pale red stone and the upper floor was surrounded by a large balcony which overlooked the train tracks and the perimeter where the camp ended. The Commander’s Post looked like a small manor, but within it was filled with rooms of Half Blood wizards poring over rolls of parchment and filling in legers. Only the top floor had the characteristics of a home. There was a dining room and drawing room where the Commander – now Antonin – could relax on site or host his fellow Death Eaters if he so chose, as well as a small bedroom. It was these rooms that were encircled the great balcony, so Antonin might look down upon the barbarity and evil below; Astoria could just picture him standing up there, a satisfied smirk on his pale face.

They all took tea in the drawing room, with many Death Eaters talking excitedly about all they had seen as they nibbled on cakes and sweetmeats while feet away, Muggles were starving to death.
Astoria felt sick and declined each canapé that was presented to her, only managing to sip at a little tea; she knew she had to eat for the baby, but just now she could not trust to keep anything down after all she had seen and heard that day. Every time she looked into the golden eyes of Masakh Shafiq now she no longer saw a handsome young wizard – she saw a monster, for only a monster could treat human beings like this. The doors that led out onto the balcony suddenly flew open and a great brown and white Arabian Falcon came soaring into the room to land on Masakh’s shoulder. He took the parchment that was clutched in its dangerous looking talons and smirked when he read it.

“Rookwood shall be arriving soon; what say you, Death Eaters? Shall we go without to welcome him?”

There was laughter and murmurs of assent as the Death Eaters streamed out onto the balcony, waiting. Astoria knew that Rookwood must have been close, for she heard the screeching and puffing of a steam train as soon as she stepped outside. Then came the cold. She knew that cold, for there was only one creature that invoked such bone chilling feelings of doom. Sure enough, a dozen Dementors came gliding up the tracks, their black robes swirling like smoke. Quick as lightening, a vivid picture of her Father Hadies Greengrass, flashed across her mind. He was dying in bed, wasting away, calling for his long dead wife and touching Astoria’s face; it had been the worst day of her life…. She savagely shoved away the bad memory and forced her mind to focus as the cold continued to spread all over her. One by one the Dementors lined up by the tracks hovering sentry, waiting. A black steam train soon came chugging slowly in to view to a halt at the end of the tracks, its funnel hissing. Rookwood jumped down from the front carriage – the only one to have windows, for the train was pulling those great wooden boxes Astoria had seen beforehand. She shivered. Rookwood hailed them all from below and barked out orders to some Half Blood guards who raised their wands. The doors to the cart swung open and a great tide of Muggles came pouring out; many were gasping and spluttering as they gulped in air – but many also fell lifelessly to the ground, dead. It was small wonder that more of them had not died; Masakh said that some of them had been in there for months as they were rounded up all over Europe.

“I want the healthiest males on the right and the best females on the left! The rest you can leave until my say so!” Rookwood roared at the Dementors over the noises of weeping and confused wailing in half a dozen tongues.

The Dementors glided over the Muggles; Astoria could hear their terrible rattling breath which seemed to have quickened – it seemed to her that they were excited at the prospect of all these suffering souls to feed off. Though the Muggles could not see the Dementors, some were desperately trying to crawl away from their malevolent aura but the oppressive power of the Dementors soon overcame them and many ended up curled up on the floor, moaning and crying with despair. Astoria saw a group of Muggles who were huddled together, trying to shield a group of children. But a Dementor drew out a scabbed, rotting hand and reached through the group to drag a tall Muggle man away by his arms while his family wept and screamed, not understanding who or what was dragging away their loved one. It was awful to watch. Over the course of half an hour Astoria watched as the Dementors ripped families apart into groups; the Muggles screamed red murder, but they were bound to the spot by enchantments as twenty guards looked on remorselessly, wands raised. One woman was fighting tooth and nail when Rookwood had commanded his minions to take the tiny baby she
was holding; he soon lost patience though and ripped the child from her arms before murdering it in front of her, dashing the baby’s head against a wall. Afterward she would not stop screaming, so Rookwood ordered a Troll to strike her head off with a machete; naturally the slow witted beast had obeyed at once.

Finally, the Muggles had been split into three groups; young women ranging from their teens to their thirties, all the strongest men and lastly: the sick, the very young and the very old.

“You may choose six females to take into the barracks for your personal use on the campsite.” Said Rookwood in a bored voice; gesturing at the group of frightened Muggle women. He was leaning against the wall smoking a pipe, utterly at ease – the sweet smell of burning cannabis leaves could be scented even from up here. “The others are to go to brothels throughout Europe, I want them all split up.”

The women wailed and screamed as the guards dragged six of them away from the group and the Dementors forced the others back on to the train to be chugged away to some squalid brothel in a European slum. Astoria set her mouth grimly and looked on as the train started to back out the camp, hissing and puffing with its Dementor escorts soaring in its wake. The men went meekly enough, all of them clapped in chains; Astoria wondered if they would go quite so meekly if they knew they were minutes away from being drenched with freezing cold water and forcibly castrated.

“Take those straight to the furnaces,” Rookwood said contemptuously, pointing at the group of elderly Muggles and very small infants, “None will serve for the Dark Lord’s experimentations and I have nowhere to put them; we are expecting more workers in from Austria tomorrow.”

“As you say, Rookwood.” A tall, thick set guard replied; he looked as though he may be a Bulstrode or closely related to one.

A Troll came lumbering up behind the guard, fingerling its club threateningly while the frightened Muggles stumbled as more guards prodded and poked them Eastwards toward where the furnace buildings were. There was suddenly a flurry of movement; a small girl of about seven darted free from the group and looked about wildly, desperately looking where to run. The Troll made to grab her, but she nimbly dodged the thick grey fingers and tore away as if to run further into the camp; perhaps thinking she could find another escape route. Astoria could tell she had been infected with the plague; her eyes were reddened and feverish, she had dried blood under her nose and the skin of her wasted left arm was beginning to darken. The balcony seemed to shake from the great gale of laughter that erupted from the Death Eaters as they watched the helpless child. Theodore plunged his hand into his robes and drew out his wand; quick as a flash, the girl was bound by the ankles and fell with a wail onto the cruel gravel where she landed with a ‘smack.’ At once the girl struggled backwards away from the livid guard and the gigantic Troll; she looked frightened, but there was a fierceness in her young, pale face as well. Too late, Astoria thought despairingly.
“Give that Muggle brat a taste of the lash!” Bellowed Prince Gyasi to Astoria’s right. He was swigging a goblet of champagne, the jewels from his many ringed fingers glinting in the weak afternoon sun which was curiously mirrored in his cold, dark eyes.

The guard glanced round at Rookwood briefly, who gave a curt nod. The huge wizard waved his wand and conjured up a cruel looking whip crafted from dragon hide and Astoria’s stomach twisted. Dragon hide whips were traditionally used to subdue creatures such as Trolls or Graphorns due to the thickness of their skin… but on a human? The girl was now dragging herself away from the advancing guard, her arms covered in grazes while her kin and other Muggles screamed with terror. But the guard was upon her in two quick strides. He raised the whip up right behind his shoulder and brought it swishing down in a savage arc. The scream the child made when the whip tore open her flesh was almost unendurable; Astoria did not know what language the girl was shrieking in, but one word was unmistakable: “Mama.” All of the Death Eaters looked highly amused and Theodore was shouting out jeering comments while the girl shuddered and wept upon the ground, bleeding profusely from the terrible wound.

“Again, and harder!” Gyasi commanded ruthlessly as the noise and exuberance mounted even further.

The guard complied and brought down the lash for a second time and the girl screamed and screamed even harder as she feebly struggled to get away from her tormentor. On this occasion the lash had bitten into the little girl’s flesh so deeply that Astoria saw part of her spine; her head span and she determinedly gripped onto the side of the balcony, trying to keep composed.

“Whip her until she dies! Let all the other Muggle scum see what happens to those who disobey.” He called coldly down to the guard and Astoria was revolted to hear Marcel de Sade’s scream of malicious laughter and Ediva's answering giggle at his words.

Again, without question, the guard began to savagely and repeatedly whip the very flesh from the girl’s back. She was a little fighter though and continued to scream and struggle defiantly. But it was too much for Astoria now; she swayed slightly, and her vision became blurred. She vaguely saw Elizabeth looking at her past Yaxley – she alone seemed to realise something was wrong – but her concerned expression swam hazily before her eyes. Elizabeth then shrieked something that made everyone turn and Astoria felt herself beginning to topple. The last thing she remembered was Yaxley grabbing her by the arm before the world span dizzily and everything went black.

When Astoria awoke, she was in her bedchamber at the Commander’s Residence, swaddled in feather blankets and silken sheets. She felt groggy for a moment but then all the horrifying images of the Muggle camp came rushing back to her like a slap in the face. Astoria tried to rise but Rathburne suddenly loomed over her and pushed her gently but firmly back down onto her pillows. Hermione
was hovering behind him, looking concerned. She was confused and scared, all she wanted to know was that her baby was alright.

“My baby?” She asked frantically “Is there anything wrong? Why did I faint? I –”

“Calm yourself Madam.” Rathburne cut in firmly, though not unkindly. “The babe thrives, but it is my recommendation that you avoid anything that is like to disturb the delicacy of your condition from now on… and I am going increase your meal sizes as well.” Relief broke over her as she sighed, gently touched her stomach and felt her child respond. “You should rest as much as possible as you settle in here, it’s what is best for the babe... and yourself. And absolutely no more close contact with Dementors.” Rathburne concluded sternly after taking her temperature for the third time.

After Rathburne had taken his leave, Astoria beckoned over Hermione who had been standing against the wall. When she reached her bedside Astoria drew her downward onto the side of the bed. “Where is Antonin?” She whispered.

Ever since she had grown closer to Hermione they would have whispered conversations when Antonin was not there that that they both took comfort from. Astoria did all she could to make life a little less miserable for Hermione. If she was dining alone she would slip her more food, she gave her womanly aids as often as she could to help with her moonblood as all Hermione had was a dirty rag to staunch the bleeding, and once when Antonin had cracked her ribs, Astoria had stolen a soothing salve from Rathburne’s bag to help with the bruising and pain. It was a dangerous dance she danced, Astoria knew, but she could not simply sit back and do nothing after she had bonded so strongly with the other witch over their love for their children; and in any case – it was the right thing to do.

“I overheard that he is currently locked away with Vol –” Astoria sucked in her breath at the sound of the name, “Sorry… ah, the Dark Lord and Shafiq… what happened, why did you faint?”

Astoria shook her head wearily, “You really do not want to know Hermione, it was worse than I could have ever imagined… so cruel, so evil…” Her voice trailed away.

“No, I want to hear.” Hermione said in an uncharacteristically harsh voice that made Astoria stare. She has a right to know after everything she has been through thus far… she’s a clever witch and will not turn away from the truth. So, slowly, tremulously Astoria began to tell Hermione of the camps; she left out some of the more grisly details but she was sure that Hermione’s well honed mind could easily fill in what she had omitted, judging by the look of horror and anger on her face. Then her colour drained completely, “But didn’t you say…” She whispered through white, shaking lips, “Didn’t you say they put Muggleborns in there to die? They are not even using them as slave labour anymore?”
Astoria knew what she was asking, but she had no answer for her; Antonin was so unpredictable. It might amuse him to have Hermione around as someone he could casually abuse, but there again he may decide one day that he is bored and send her packing off to the Muggle camp to be killed – or not. Indeed, as Astoria’s pregnancy progressed further, his aggression and hostility towards Hermione seemed to have increased tenfold and was only getting worse.

“All we can do is hope and pray.” Astoria whispered. Hermione took both her hands in her own and they held on to one another fiercely; the grim reality of her precarious situation hanging thick in the air.

The late afternoon was warm today in the gardens as spring crept over the Rhineland and Astoria was musing over a book, occasionally glancing at Leo. They had been here for over a moon’s turn now and he had thankfully settled well, though she was loath to bring him up in a place of such evil. Indeed, she had found it very hard to accept that she was most like going to give birth here where there was so much death and misery. The trees and walls of the gardens were fantastically tall so as to block out the monstrous sight of the camp; it was as though whoever built this was trying to pretend it wasn’t there. Strange how these gardens had been made to be as peaceful as possible when she thought of the horror taking place mere feet away. Black and white striped ocelots lazed in the trees while small birds sung sweetly; there was a sizeable pond with a weeping willow hanging gracefully over the marble blue water as pure white ducks propelled themselves dreamily across its surface. It was all a lie; the garden had been enchanted and charmed to look this way. Nothing but the best for a top ranking Death Eater wife, she thought bitterly. None of this could make Astoria forget where she was though. Every day thick plumes of smoke rose from the furnace chimneys in an unending black pall as thousands of Muggles were callously murdered; she did not think she would ever be able to shake the smell of roasting flesh from her nose and pork now made her nauseous. She would see the Trolls digging the mass graves outside when the furnaces became so choked with corpses that they wouldn’t burn through properly, and there was no missing the steam trains which now came and went up to four times a day carrying thousands and thousands of Muggles to be executed or enslaved. Astoria set her book aside for the simple pleasure of watching her son; Leo was in his own little world, sat on a woollen blanket at her feet, playing with his toys and talking to himself. She had seen him do this countless times, but he never failed to enthral her, this little person who she had made who was so dependent and innocent.

“Mama, when do I get to see the baby?” Leo asked, pausing in his play and looking up at her with guileless lilac eyes, innocent of understanding.

“Not for two moons turns my darling, remember I showed you on the calendar? We still have lots of little boxes to cross off before we see the baby.”

Leo would ask this a lot now; ever since the questions started about why her belly was big, she had tried to explain in as simple terms as she could that she was carrying a baby and he would be getting a new brother or sister in the summer. Though he did not completely understand, he seemed to get the general gist; he would sometimes point at her stomach or press his ear to it and say, “Baby.” When Astoria explained that he could play with the baby like he did with Delphini and Guinevere
when he or she got a little older, he had been excited and full of questions.

Astoria was just reaching for her book again when the air was rent with a buzzing, rushing sound. Her stomach twisted, she jerked her head upwards to look into the sky and what she saw made her blood turn to ice. The air was filled with at least fifty Muggle flying objects that almost looked like queer metal birds. She screamed and pushed herself to her feet and seized Leo by the hand, heedless of her belly for once but Leo did not understand the danger they were in, nor why she was so scared.

“Come my love, we must go inside now!” Astoria said shakily as she brushed away a tear, still trying to pull Leo toward the manor; she simply would have picked him up before but in her very pregnant state that was impossible.

There was confusion in Leo’s eyes as he stared up at her, “Mama, why do we have to go inside? I want to play!”

Astoria opened her mouth to reply but there was a great explosion in the distance and she burst into tears, such was her fright. Leo started to scream and clutched at her skirts as they made their way as quickly as they could toward the manor as he grasped her hand with a desperate strength. A half dozen guards burst out of the ornate French doors leading back into the manor which made her scream worse than ever as they swarmed over them both while the metal contraptions wheeled above.

“What is going on!? I – I… the Muggles, they –” Astoria was gibbering, she could barely get her words out such was her fright and confusion as Leo continued to scream and cry, his arms now locked tight around her legs as he buried his face into the velvet.

“What on Earth are bombs!?” Astoria sobbed, still half blinded by tears as she sank into a nearby chaise and pulled Leo as close as she possibly could, stroking his hair and trying to calm him as he continued to sniffle.

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“And what is going on in here?” Came an ice cold voice from the shadows that made everyone shiver. Antonin stepped out into the open, not looking the least bit afraid or worried. He looked angry, very angry. Whoever came across his path tonight would suffer horrendously, that cold, furious expression was telling her so.

Clearwater took a knee before addressing Antonin. “Sir, we made for the gardens at the approach of the German planes and we heard Madam scream so we hastened to investigate.”

“Very well Clearwater, but I forbid you to discuss the war with my wife, her mind cannot possibly handle such things in her current condition.”

“Forgive me sir, the lady seemed distressed and I was trying to calm her down.”

“See that it never happens again.” Antonin said coldly. “Rathburne!” He barked, making Leo jump. There was a faint pop and Rathburne appeared at Antonin’s shoulder at once with his customary bow. “Take my wife and son upstairs and see that they stay there and give her a calming draught so that she might compose herself.” He then turned to the rest of the guards, “Get outside, I need every wand to deal with this German scourge tonight.” They all hastened to obey and sped up the corridor. Antonin kissed her full on the mouth “I shall return when this business is done with. Stop that mewling, boy!” He snarled at Leo who cowered worse than ever.

The explosions and bangs continued as they made their way upstairs and Leo became upset again, he does not deserve this, poor child. When they reached Astoria’s bedchamber she was mortified to see that the rapidly darkening sky was ablaze with orange and yellow, wizards below were dashing about everywhere and the balls of fire illuminated what were clearly Muggle corpses from the camp strewn all over the ground. Leo was too small to see out the window, but she wanted the curtains closed all the same and shut them with a flick of her wand.

“Your calming draught, Madam.” Wheezed Rathburne as Hermione came creeping into the room. “After the distressing events of today I wish to examine you and the babe, do you feel pain? Anything odd?”

“No, I feel fine, Rathburne but as you say.” Astoria replied as Hermione came hurrying over to help her undress. She had become queerly fond of the old Healer who seemed genuinely concerned for her and the baby’s wellbeing, though ever since she had fallen pregnant again he had been treating her like a china doll that could break at any moment. Still, it was a small comfort to know that at least someone cared about her and her children other than her.
After Rathburne had satisfied himself that the baby was fine Leo was let back into the room, still very shaken. “Mama what is happening? Why is Papa cross?”

“Come now my darling, there is nothing for you to worry about.” She lied, trying to keep calm. “Papa and the men who keep us safe are just dealing with a little problem outside, come here my love.” She flicked back the silken sheets and Leo crawled beneath them; he was still so scared that he was trembling and pressing himself as hard as he could into her, eyes shut tight.

Astoria held her son close and tried to comfort him, all the while trying to disguise how frightened she was and thinking about her other baby, wondering if it would ever get the chance to be born. Astoria was under no illusions if things went ill for the Dark Order tonight; if they lost, she and Leo would be put to death. Pregnant or no, Astoria knew she would be raped, most like in front of her son before they killed him before her very eyes. She hastily wiped away a tear at the thought as Leo drifted off to sleep, his head on the curve of her belly. Germany was angry she knew, and the wife and son of one of the Dark Lord’s most feared and reviled Death Eaters were not like to be granted any mercy. The brutal slayings of Minister Gustave Clément and his family produced a backlash of fury from the German people such as Europe had never known since the days of Gellert Grindelwald. Though Germany remained unconquered, the Dark Lord’s savage plundering of Europe had hit the country hard; as with France many were struck down by the plague, food sources had been destroyed and the economy had completely collapsed. From what Astoria had picked up from dinner conversations and ‘brandy talk,’ Berlin had become a living hell that was rife with crime, disease and starvation – just like much of Paris now.

It was past midnight when Astoria was awoken by someone hammering on the door to her bedchamber. “Mama what is that!?” Leo wailed, upset at being woken so harshly.

“Shh, my love, go back to sleep.” Astoria whispered frantically, heart hammering. What has happened? “You may enter.” She called as Rathburne came shuffling into the room and looking about wildly.

James Clearwater came bursting into the room spattered with mud and blood, his eyes were wide and panicked and his skin was as white as chalk. “Healer Rathburne! I need Healer Rathburne!” He panted over Leo’s renewed screams at the sight of this big, scary intruder. He turned to Astoria as she slipped on a bed robe, “My lady there has been an… accident involving your husband, I have been sent to fetch Rathburne at once, there’s so much blood.”

Astoria could faintly hear screams of pain and cursing drifting up the corridor and she knew those yells came from Antonin himself. Could it be? Is he finally going to die?

“Oh course, Clearwater. Tell my husband I will be thinking of him and I pray that he will recover.” She recited as James seized Rathburne’s arm and dragged him from the room.
While Astoria was calming Leo, she heard movement in the dimly lit bedchamber. Hermione had come edging inside, her expression simultaneously curious and afraid. “What is it?” She whispered.

Astoria glanced at Leo, he was drifting off to sleep again and she could hear men shouting outside. She chanced a glance through the curtain and saw there was a huge fire on the Eastern side of the camp and the shadow of what could only be a dragon’s wings sweeping in the shadows. With the camp in such a state of disarray, there may not be another chance. *Yes, now, do it now.*

“Come with me.” She whispered back to Hermione and she led her to her dressing room. Astoria rummaged through drawers filled with silk and velvet while Hermione looked on in bewilderment. Then, she found it. She drew out a velvet pouch that jingled slightly because her hands were trembling so much. Antonin did not know about this, it was all the money she owned in this world and she had been hard pressed to hide it from him since they were wed.

“There are ten Galleons in here.” Astoria said breathlessly as she pushed a velvet pouch into Hermione’s hands. “Antonin is injured, and it sounds as though it is bad. All the guards will be distracted, and it is likely that the magical bonds encircling this place have been broken; even with a good wand they are usually nigh on impossible to break.” She looked up at Hermione then, “You will need to find a good witch or wizard to help you with the collar, I would not even begin to know how to take it off. Once it is removed your magic will be unleashed again.”

“Astoria I –” Hermione stammered.

But there was no time for arguments now, Hermione had to take her chance and seize her freedom. “Take it!” She said forcefully, “You know where the furs are, take the warmest one you can find and run Hermione, run as fast as you can and never look back. Head North, do you hear me? North. The German coastline is perhaps the last safe place in Europe, but you should try and leave the continent altogether as you will be surrounded, the Dark Lord controls everywhere but Germany now. You are a very clever witch Hermione, you have a very good chance.”

“Why? Why now? Why are you doing this now?” Hermione said numbly, as a tear glistened in her brown eye.

Astoria took Hermione by the shoulders and looked directly into her face. “Because I am sick and tired of hatred, and this ‘New World’ I helped create, is drowning in it. You go now and tell the truth about what the Dark Lord is doing to Europe and its people, tell them that unless the rest of the wizarding world intervenes he will destroy everything they hold dear and the world as they know it will be gone. You know the Dark Lord Hermione, he will stop at nothing until he rules the very stars.”
“I – I don’t know what to say.” Hermione whispered as she gazed down at the velvet pouch, fingering the gold coins beneath.

“You do not have to say anything, just tell the world, that is all the thanks I need.”

Hermione then looked up at her, “What will happen to you? You should come with me... I - I could help with Leo.”

Astoria gave a sad smile, “You have a good heart, Hermione, but I am about to have a baby and Leo could not possibly keep up... the wolves would tear us all to shreds before the sun could rise – that is if we were lucky. Now please, take this chance and go and find your Rose; I have never been able to help anyone since I became a Death Eater, but now I can.” She grasped the other witch’s wasted wrist. “You are my only chance at redemption, now I can go to my grave knowing that I did some small good in the world. Now, run.”

The mention of her daughter’s name seemed to reignite that steely determination in Hermione’s eye Astoria remembered so well from their schooldays and her hand clenched around the money pouch.

“I will never forget this.” Hermione whispered, she leaned forward and gave Astoria a light kiss on the cheek before fleeing down the corridor.

Astoria watched her heels disappear behind a corner without regret; she could still hear Antonin’s yells and screams from downstairs. Perhaps there is justice in this world she thought, savagely. She hastily shut the door and let out a deep breath, running her hand over her stomach as though to calm the baby within that would not stop moving. Her hands were shaking, and her heartbeat was pounding in her ears as the enormity of what she had done crashed over her like a tidal wave. She sank onto her bed, trying to breathe. Then came the teeming thoughts within her head: what if I am discovered? What will happen to me and the children if Antonin dies? From her time at the Purification Institute, Astoria had gleaned that she would be given to someone else to marry; the very thought made her shudder. She could be claimed by some old widower who wanted more children, or she could be claimed by the likes of Silas. Astoria knew that Rowle had wanted her very, very much but Antonin was older and had served for longer, so he had gotten priority for her hand. As for her babies, a new husband would be well within his rights to send Leo and the new baby to the Purification Institute, so he could Father his own children on her. Astoria began weep silently into her pillow at the thought, not even her baby’s movements could comfort her as they usually did when she was upset; she would kill herself if her children were taken from her or die in the attempt. If Antonin survived then he was unlikely to find out, he was a hopeless Legilimens due to his love of excessive drink, but there again... what if the Dark Lord wants an explanation? Her stomach twisted at the thought and she began to work herself up into a panic again, she knew it was not good for the baby, but she had not thought of this before, in the heat of the moment she had just acted because it
felt like the right time. It was all so unfair. Knowing she was achieving nothing with these dark thoughts, Astoria pushed herself awkwardly upwards and drained the rest of the calming draught to quieten her restive nerves. She settled herself next to a sleeping Leo and held him close, wondering, with a feeling of great trepidation, what this night’s carnage would bring.

Chapter End Notes

Having Hermione escape was always in the works, I was going to put it in later but it just seemed to 'fit better' with this chapter. I enjoyed writing this as Astoria has never been able to help anyone but now she has and it's someone she has grown close to which makes it all the more special IMO.
I had the Muggles fight back as I didn't want people being lulled into a false sense of security - the Death Eaters may have conquered other countries but they are still very much at war.
The Shafiq family are JKR canon but Masakh is not - his name means 'monster' in Arabic which I think is perfect for him :-) Obviously I am mirroring Nazi concentration camps in this story because there are like 700m? people in Europe and things like concentration camps are a way of getting rid of lots of them en masse, thus lessening the threat to Lord V and his 'New World.'
XXXIV. - The King of Serpents

Chapter Summary

Hey guys sorry for the late update, it was 4/20 over the weekend so I didn't get the chance to do any writing ;-) This chapter has had to be split into two due to the length so I will probably post the next one soon when I have edited/cut etc. After the second part of this chapter there will be a bit of a shift in the story which I have already started writing as well so hopefully I'll be able to update as frequently as before.

Thanks to those who continue to read/comment <3
Same disclaimer applies
Warning: adult themes/graphic imagery

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The rising sun painted a gruesome picture as it ascended into the sky like a red, fiery orb. There was almost total silence in the camp, the manor, the land, everywhere; but that did not make the scenes below any easier to look at. Dead Muggles were wedged in twisted pieces of metal that used to be aeroplanes; all of them sporting horrible injuries, the scarlet of their blood spattered across plane wings glistened oddly in the early morning sun. Corpses were everywhere; some had been impaled, many were decapitated, and Astoria could see a dozen Half Bloods levitating great piles of bodies onto a giant heap which they were trying to keep aflame. This was proving difficult however due to the sheer weight of the crushing, rotting flesh; the air outside must be unbearable. All the wizards who had died had been lined up neatly upon the ground to the West – far away from the infinitely more numerous Muggle corpses. The identities of the bodies could not be determined, at least from up here as each wizard had been covered with a large flag bearing the Dark Mark; Astoria counted twenty five so far. More Half Blood guards were shouting at the dim witted Trolls who were dragging away destroyed fences and walls from the camp while other guards rebuilt the boundaries with flicks of their wands as they went along. Much of the forest surrounding the Commander’s Residence and the Muggle camp was still afire in places, but many of the trees were scorched and dead, their leafless branches looking like wasted, blackened limbs clawing toward the bleak sky.

Two dragons – a large green one and a slightly smaller yellow one, were soaring serenely over everything, the smaller dragon imitating the larger as they effortlessly beat their wings and let out occasional plumes of smoke from their nostrils. Will I too find a body covered in a flag bearing the Dark Mark? Astoria thought anxiously as her eyes strayed once again to where the unknown dead lay beneath a clump of trees. Her hands trembled slightly, and she massaged her chest a little as her heart felt as though it were in her throat; she felt jittery and scared, not knowing what direction her life may go in next. Nobody had told her of what had happened last night, an hour ago she had been delivered a piece of parchment commanding her to come downstairs forthwith, so she had naturally complied at once. Astoria turned sharply away from the window, took a deep breath, smoothed her skirts nervously and made for the door.

The Half Blood guards bowed for her as she walked down the cavernous corridor with murmurs of “My lady.” Black smoke crept over the windows outside and obscured some of the light streaming
through into the corridor as Astoria drew nearer and nearer to the double doors where James Clearwater was stood.

“Well?” She asked James Clearwater, “Is he…?” But Clearwater merely inclined his head and opened the door for her.

Astoria stepped inside the main drawing room which featured a rather grisly mural on the ceiling depicting a wizard slaughtering a pack of Goblins. Rathburne was busying himself by a small table, hastily clearing up masses of blood stained bandages and empty bottles of laudanum and potions as other Half Bloods milled about the room, whispering to one another. By the door there was a huge piece of metal that was covered in blood that was now congealing upon the otherwise spotless floor. Astoria’s eyes were drawn to the centre of the room, however. There, propped up by cushions and lounging on a chaise while sipping brandy from a great crystal brandy balloon was Antonin – alive. Despite everything, seeing him alive was like a punch in the stomach, a slap across the face. He was bare chested and covered in cuts, grazes and bruises. His breeches had been torn open halfway up the thigh where Rathburne had seen to the wound on his leg. His leg itself was propped up on a pouffe and there was blood seeping through the silken bandages. The cut ran down most of the length of his thigh and Merlin knew how deep it was judging from the splint. Antonin was even paler than usual, the lines upon his face seemed harsher and there were slight shadows under his eyes, yet he still gave her a lascivious grin when she approached him.

“Leave us.” Antonin said, cutting off Jeremy Bulstrode who was frantically whispering in his ear, his cold blue eyes staring at her. At once, everyone departed the drawing room swiftly, the door banging as each wizard departed, leaving her alone with Antonin. “Come.” He called imperiously as he crooked a finger at her. Dutifully, Astoria made her way toward the chaise to sit lightly beside her husband, her heart racing. Antonin studied her a moment, his eyes roving over her breasts and belly. He reached out and brushed a lock of hair away from her neck, “My lady was not too distressed by the events of last night?” He asked softly. It made Astoria shiver, she knew what that tone of voice meant.

“I knew my Lord and master would keep his wife and son safe.” Astoria replied at once. Antonin smirked as he continued to stroke her hair, but she could see that his flat, hard stomach was rising and falling more rapidly than before; he could never resist it when she played the little fool and fawned all over him as if he were a God. “My Lord is wounded.” She observed, lightly touching his arm.

“Do not worry your pretty little head my love, all is in hand.” He purred, kissing her on the cheek before shifting and putting his hands on her belly; he would do this a lot and it made her feel cold all over. “How is my baby boy doing in there?”

“Stronger every day, husband.” She replied automatically, inwardly sighing – not for the first time at his presumption of the baby’s sex.
“Kiss me.” He breathed, his arousal obvious as his hand moved, almost unconsciously, to his crotch.

Astoria complied and drew Antonin’s face down to hers as she had done countless times before and kissed him hard, knowing how much she needed him on her side just now. He roughly shoved her downwards onto her back and pulled apart her legs before awkwardly pushing himself onto his knees, grunting in pain, though he was grappling with his laces all the same. *Fool,* Astoria thought dully, but she knew what was going on here; this was not only for her husband’s gratification, he was letting her know that even though he was injured, *he* was still the strong one and in charge. Antonin pushed up her skirts and was fumbling at her underwear to find a place to rip it off, but suddenly there was urgent banging on the drawing room door.

“Who dares!?” Antonin spat, staring furiously at the door.

“Apolgies Master Dolohov, but it is urgent!” Shouted James Clearwater’s voice from the other side.

“Mark my words, boy if this is some trifling matter I shall have you and your *entire* squadron whipped raw!” Antonin bellowed back as he angrily righted himself while Astoria straightened her hair and smoothed her skirts, secretly thanking Clearwater for the interruption. “You may enter now.”

James came stumbling into the drawing room looking both exhausted and panicked in equal measures. “Sir, we have been accounting for the dead as you commanded. One of your slaves is dead and the two others live but… the Mudblood we – we cannot seem to find her anywhere.”

Antonin’s expression was stony, and he did not say anything at all as he studied the terrified James Clearwater with those icy eyes. Astoria braced herself, waiting for the explosion, but when Antonin spoke his voice was cold and flat. “You are certain you did not overlook her corpse? Or have the others outside burned her with the rest already?”

“No sir, any of us would have noticed the Mudblood, and her being your property we naturally would have set her body aside from the others if she had died.”

“Right, right!” Antonin snarled as he fought to prop himself up, the cords of his neck flexing dangerously as they always did when he was furious. “Tell Flint and Bulstrode that I want fifty mounted men and the best huntsman he can find, they are to be ready within the hour and they are to search every last scrap of the Rhineland until they find that little *BITCH!* I will give fifty thousand Galleons to the man who can bring her to me alive, that cringing piece of filth will not have the
mercy of being torn apart by wolves, oh no... when I am finished with her she will be sorry for the
day she slid out from between her dirty Muggle Mother’s thighs!” He screamed at the top of his
lungs. The rage coming off Antonin’s body was almost palpable; those cold blue eyes were full of
venom and hate and his chest was rising and falling rapidly as though he were longing to kill
someone. It was scary. Even after all this time Astoria had never seen him so enraged and she felt a
strong urge to run from the room.

Antonin looked so dangerous just then that James Clearwater actually took a step back from him, but
what he said was, “At once Dolohov, she will be found.” Astoria felt a twinge of fear as James
strode from the room, already barking out orders to the others in the corridor.

Antonin’s eyes were still narrowed and fixed on the door, but after a few moments he came back to
his senses. “Ah, yes where were we my lady?” He reached out to put his hand up her skirts again,
but he gave snarl of pain and clenched his fist when he tried to move. “Rathburne! Rathburne!” He
shouted and Rathburne appeared beside the sofa. “This wound troubles me, give me something for
the pain!” He snapped. Rathburne waved his wand and Antonin’s ‘medicines’ appeared on the tea
table; a vial of coca powder, a bottle of laudanum – and of course, a pile of dried cannabis leaves.
Antonin then gave Astoria a very cold look; clearly her seeing him in pain had touched upon his
pride and he resented it. “As for you, you have my leave to go... I – I – you... I no longer desire
you, now leave.”

Astoria was not sorry to go as Antonin began feverishly crushing the cannabis leaves with his
dagger, she had no desire at all to be roughly handled by him in her delicate state. Besides,
Rathburne had advised against him lying with her when the babe was scarcely two moons away as
the risk of an early birth was increased tenfold by doing so. Naturally Antonin had ignored him, and
he would take her whenever he could, no matter how tired or uncomfortable she was. An hour later
Astoria was sitting with Leo on a window seat while he played with a stuffed toy in the likeness of a
dragon. She watched from the window as the hunting party mounted up; Marcus Flint was shouting
and gesticulating forcefully while his unicorn mount moved about restively beneath him. As they set
off at an intense gallop, Astoria crossed her fingers and prayed that wherever Hermione Granger
was, it was far, far away from here... for both their sakes.

Antonin’s black rage at Hermione’s escape did not abate easily; in fact, Astoria rather felt that he
would curse her with his dying breath such was his outrage at being outsmarted by a Mudblood.
Every day he would rage, storm and threaten, promising dire retributions but to no avail. For the past
moon’s turn or so, he would send a hunting party out every single day to scour the Rhineland high
and low, but there was no sign of her. Astoria took this as a sign that Hermione had truly escaped.
Antonin barely questioned her about the other witch’s flight, he was blinded by his arrogance and
vicious desire for revenge, thus she was able to lie to him easily, claiming she had been asleep from
Rathburne’s calming draught. Even so, Astoria did her best to stay out of his way all the same; he
was even more like to explode over nothing these days and in her vulnerable condition she wanted to
be as far away as possible from his wand... and his fists. Despite all this, she could not help but take
a wicked pleasure in Antonin’s helpless fury at the situation; that was until she heard and saw what
befell those who failed him. Hunting parties who came back unsuccessful would be whipped with
their own riding canes or brought before Antonin himself who would *Cruciate* them to within an
inch of their lives. Her husband had all but recovered from his wound – which had been caused by a piece of metal from an explosion that had lodged itself in his thigh, but he still complained of pain and walked with a slight limp. Scarcely a week later however, Antonin decided that he would take matters into his own hands despite Rathburne’s feeble protests that he should wait at least two more weeks before riding. Rathburne’s words fell on deaf ears however and Astoria watched without regret as her husband and Marcus Flint marched out the great hall clad in riding garb to go on yet another fruitless search.

Spring was now in full bloom and Astoria could hear the enchanted birds twittering outside her window. She glanced over at the small, hovering calendar that Rathburne had left her by her bedside and saw with a start that it was exactly a whole moon’s turn until her due date. Her heart gave a nervous flutter at the thought and the baby shifted inside her a little; though she had given birth before and knew what to expect, it was still a little daunting, especially when she thought of the pain.

Though it was spring, today Astoria was clad in a gown of emerald green silk and pale silver lace; colours more suited to winter, to be sure. Antonin likewise was clad in full Death Eater robes, he was clean shaven, and his hair was freshly washed and combed. We needs must look our best Astoria thought grimly, running a hand nervously over her belly as a Muggle slave fastened a jewelled necklace around her neck; it was all of emeralds and black diamonds and the centrepiece was in the likeness of the Dark Mark.

When she was ready for the ordeal to come, Antonin came striding over to her dressing table. He still walked with a slight limp from his injury, though he did his best to conceal it. “Come my lady, we must not delay.” Astoria swallowed hard, trying to ignore her racing heart and allowed him to help her to her feet.

Everyone who had been stationed in the Rhineland was lined up outside the Commander’s Residence just before noon. There was total silence but for the tiniest whisper of wind on the sweet spring air; no birds sang outside anymore as the continued expansion of the Muggle camps had frightened many of them away. Astoria shifted uncomfortably and was just wondering dully how long they would be made to wait when there was a sudden rushing sound like a vicious wind before a storm. Black smoke span in a great twist before them, it took the form of a snake’s gaping wide mouth, its fangs bared. Then, out of the smoke came the Dark Lord himself, his terrible serpentine face shining out from the gloom. No sooner than his Lordship took his first step toward his gathered subjects, there were innumerable ‘pops’ as other Death Eaters began appearing in his wake.

Naturally Bellatrix was where she always was, at the Dark Lord’s right hand, but Astoria got a shock when Draco and Lucius apparated to his Lordship’s left. Something is different… The toils of war and being cast out had taken their toll on Lucius; his face was more deeply lined, his skin was ashen, and he had bags under his eyes – however his white blonde hair had been freshly groomed, his Death Eater robes were immaculate, and he was wearing the merest shadow of his old sneer upon his pale face. This was not the defeated, ruin of a wizard Astoria remembered. Antonin was looking thunderstruck; he hated Draco because of his affections for Astoria and he despised Lucius just as much as he blamed Lucius’ poor leadership and weakness in the furore at Department of Mysteries that got him sent back to Azkaban. Under the Dark Lord’s stare though, Antonin did not dare, by word or deed show his true feelings and he stood up to attention, awaiting his orders. Astoria and
Draco’s eyes met for a fraction of a second, but she quickly looked away, hoping she had not flushed; all she could think about was when they had been pressed up against one another in Philippe Rousseau’s powder room. In any case, she would do well to pretend that Draco did not exist under her husband’s gaze. The Dark Lord moved forward, staring around at them all with those pitiless red eyes, taking in his surroundings, Nagini draped around his shoulders as the Death Eaters bowed and curtsied before him.

“Dolohov.” The Dark Lord said in his high, cold voice as he strode up to him, the Malfoys and Bellatrix in his wake. “I am glad to see that all is in order after that business with those German Muggles, Lord Voldemort is pleased with your service.”

At once Antonin took a knee at his Lordship’s feet and kissed the hem of his robes. “My Lord honours me with his words of praise.”

“Where is Shafiq?” Demanded that cruel, clear voice.

Several Death Eaters parted and Masakh Shafiq came striding forward, imitating Antonin as he took a knee and kissed the hem of the Dark Lord’s robes. “What does my Lord require of me?” He murmured softly.

“You shall inform my latest War Council of all the work you have achieved here thus far.” The Dark Lord proclaimed coldly, “I have much to discuss with you all this day for tomorrow I shall unveil an experiment I have devoted much of my precious time to… it is perhaps, the greatest experiment ever to be attempted in all of wizarding history.” His Lordship’s face twisted with demonic amusement, “Let us just say that before too long, my Death Eaters will be feasting in the palace gardens of Berlin before the moon turns!” Like a pack of trained dogs, the Death Eaters cheered and clapped as the Dark Lord cut a wide path through his subjects as he strode toward the Commander’s Residence. “Dolohov, you shall take us all to the grand audience chamber forthwith.” Proclaimed his Lordship in his high, cold voice without looking around.

“At once my Lord.” Antonin replied, still looking daggers at the Malfoys and barely noticing as Astoria was bustled away by the other Death Eater wives to take tea while the rest of the army followed the Dark Lord to talk of war.

The tension in the air in the main drawing room that evening was almost palpable. Usually there was lots of chatter, giggling and gossip with Death Eaters and their ladies doing the rounds of the room to greet one another, but not this night. Many aristocrats were huddled together in groups, whispering and muttering to one another. No one was speaking to Draco and Lucius who were talking quietly by the fireplace, though looking rather ill at ease in this hostile environment.
“It is said that Draco led a successful attack in Bavaria, the largest region in all of Germany.” Elizabeth whispered furiously under her breath as she glared at the Malfoys; she was Astoria’s only source of information about what was going on now she was not serving in the army. Astoria glanced nervously at Antonin but he and Yaxley were also having a furious whispered discussion and paying them no mind whatsoever. “Apparently, he captured the region in under a moon’s turn, that is why they are back in favour with the Dark Lord now.”

“I see,” Astoria murmured back, chancing a glance at Draco. He looked so handsome in the firelight; the red gleamed impressively off his white blonde hair and the flickering flames enhanced those elegant Malfoy features tenfold. She inwardly shook herself and forced her mind back to the conversation at hand.

Elizabeth tossed her head and took a healthy swallow of gin squeezed with lemons. Despite her fury, she still looked as magnificent as ever in a glittering gown of royal blue silk and black lace as she continued to study the Malfoys coldly. “Doubtless Lucius will find another way to mess things up again and that family will be done with once and for all.” She said contemptuously. Astoria knew Elizabeth hated Lucius as she blamed him for usurping the position as the Dark Lord’s favourite that her Father had once occupied before he was injured in the First Uprising. She was spared having to answer her when the dinner gong reverberated, deep and loud, all over the room.

Dinner was an almost silent affair. Hardly anyone spoke even though the Dark Lord had given them leave to talk amongst themselves, but Astoria could feel the anger and resentment coming from her other fellow diners – even Bellatrix looked displeased. As usual the Dark Lord sat at the head of the table, hardly speaking and never eating, only sipping wine occasionally. Astoria and Antonin were sat directly opposite Bellatrix and the Malfoys who were on his Lordship’s right hand side and it could not have been plainer that her husband was outraged by this seating arrangement. Astoria did the sensible thing and kept her eyes on her plate, not wanting Antonin to see her even looking at Draco; though she thought she could feel his grey eyes on her from time to time, concerned. Doubtless he was a little curious as well as he had never seen her this far along before, but she wished he would just pretend as though she were invisible, lest Antonin notice.

“I was sorry to hear of the Muggle attack on the camps.” Lucius ventured into the silence, his greedy grey eyes darting slyly to Antonin as he cut through wild squid stuffed with peppers.

Astoria saw Antonin’s jaw clench slightly, but he instead forced his face into an awful sneer of which Lucius himself would have been proud. “It was rather irritating yes, but I sent forth my best wands for the task, a shame you could not join us, Malfoy.” His sneer became more pronounced and his cold blue eyes glittered maliciously, “Oh… wait, of course, how foolish of me, I almost forgot! You don’t have a wand… what was it I heard you were using? Oh yes, your wife’s wand!” At his last words, the table erupted in harsh laughter.

“Opium loving bitch.” Astoria heard Hestia Carrow mutter spitefully over the outpouring of mirth
from further up the table.

The surrounding diners continued to laugh scornfully, though none louder than Bellatrix; her disdain for her good brother was well known – it was said that she wore black when he wed Narcissa. The other wives tittered maliciously, and Astoria gave a false chuckle behind her hand which made her husband smirk, a gratified expression upon his pale face. Lucius flushed but Astoria felt no pity, he had well and truly ensnared himself into Antonin’s jibe by his would-be mocking comment.

No one was pleased by the Malfoys elevation back to favour; like Antonin, many others such as Travers, Jugson and Rookwood held Lucius in eternal contempt for their reimprisonment in Azkaban and had been delighted to see him fall. Astoria fleetingly thought of Narcissa; she was unsurprised that the Malfoy matriarch was not present, after all the Dark Lord had no use for her and to hear Elizabeth tell it, Narcissa Malfoy now spent her days lashed to a bed to prevent her from dosing herself to death with opium.

Once the laughter had subsided, Draco looked Antonin full in the face without a trace of fear, “A shame indeed that you did not have more wands, perhaps you would still have that Mudblood Granger here.” He said smoothly.

This pronouncement was followed by one of the loudest silences Astoria had ever heard. She felt dizzy and physically sick with fear; no one, no one spoke to Antonin Dolohov in that fashion, not even in jest. A vein was flickering horribly on Antonin’s right temple and for a moment, the look in his eyes suggested that he was going to kill Draco with his bare hands, right then and there. Instead he came boiling to his feet so forcefully that plates and goblets went smashing onto the floor as he plunged his hand into his robes for his wand. Several Death Eaters cursed, Yaxley banged his fist down onto the table and Silas snatched up his dining dagger, his disfigured face alive with savagery. Masakh Shafig however, simply looked amused and was watching the exchange intently with those shimmering golden eyes of his.

The Dark Lord had paid no mind to their sniping, until now. “Enough, Dolohov. Enough.” Said the high, cold voice calmly. “I command that you be seated.”

Antonin flung himself down into his chair, still staring wrathfully at Draco. The atmosphere was so thick with anger and resentment now that it was almost as though one could cut the air with a sword. McNair was hacking at his veal chop with unwonted savagery as he stuffed the bloody meat into his mouth as he looked murderously at Lucius while Avery gloowered at both Malfoys over his wine goblet. Rookwood ground his teeth incessantly, Jugson cracked his knuckles and Silas’ mismatched eyes were slits of rage – Silas had no grudge against the Malfoys that Astoria knew of, but he always did whatever Antonin did, so he hated them too. She glanced nervously at Antonin and saw with a stab of fear that no one else’s fury even came close to his. The dining dagger in his hand shook slightly as he scowled menacingly across at Draco as though he were longing to vault over the table and open his throat from ear to ear. Astoria’s fright mounted with every course that went by; she
could almost feel the waves of fury pouring off of Antonin and was dreading it when the time came for him to direct that fury at her as he so often did. Astoria was not afraid of being hit anymore, she was afraid of how much damage Antonin could do to the baby when he was in a blind rage. Draco seemed to have realised what he had done when he shot her a furtive, guilty look across the table, his grey eyes full of regret and fear. Afterward he kept his head down and spoke no more, though Antonin continued to look aggressively at him, determined for him to look up so he could stare him out.

“I am most confident that my final scheme will break Germany.” Came the high, cold voice unexpectedly, and everyone put down their silverware at once. The Dark Lord’s scarlet eyes found Antonin again, “Dolohov, it is my wish that you lead the attack on Berlin after my new branch of initial… forces, have purged the land. This experimental section of my army will ensure minimal Death Eater loss and maximum enemy casualties.” Antonin bowed his head stiffly to show his thanks at this highest honour, but he still continued to look thunderous.

The horribly familiar lipless smile twisted his Lordship’s features and many Death Eaters raised their goblets and drank before murmuring, “To the Dark Order.”

“From tomorrow and onwards, Europe – and indeed all the world will be left in no doubt as to who rules here now.” The Dark Lord finished in his high cold voice as more toasts to the Dark Order and the Dark Lord himself rang out from all over the table.

Bellatrix got to her feet, her dark eyes gleaming. “When we are through, the very streets of Berlin shall be awash with the blood of our Lord’s enemies!” She proclaimed to the table at large in her harsh voice as deep red wine splashed from her goblet and ran down her thin fingers. At her words there were roars of assent with many Death Eaters banging their goblets down on the table and stamping their feet, relishing the prospect of the blood and slaughter that was surely imminent.

Breakfast the next morn was a very busy affair; all the Death Eater wives who did not serve and their children had come to the Commanders Residence to see what foul fruit the Dark Lord’s experiments had borne in his quest to conquer Europe. Despite her heavily pregnant state, Antonin had commanded Astoria to host the all witches and children; he told her that it was her ‘duty’ both as his wife and the lady of the house. The day was humid, and she felt big and uncomfortable but no matter, she would do whatever her husband asked to keep him in a good mood and do it well. Last night Antonin had been sporting for a fight with Draco long after the Dark Lord had taken his leave and disaster was only averted when Astoria pulled Antonin close and breathed in his ear how badly she wanted him inside her. That put an end to Antonin’s desire to rip Draco to pieces and they instead ascended to their bedchamber where Astoria used every pillow trick she knew to keep him satisfied – and distracted. It had been exhausting but she had felt oddly triumphant afterward; like she had ‘won’ somehow.

The ladies and their children nibbled on fresh baked bread, poached swan’s eggs, grilled kippers,
mountains of exotic fruit, sickly sweet pastries, porridge dusted with cinnamon and pears and a myriad of teas and light wines. Astoria was facing a battle; she was trying to politely listen to a young witch named Nell Rosier while constantly attempting to stop Leo from pouring honey all over his porridge. Her clever baby boy was now beginning to utilise his powers however and there was nothing he liked more than to summon the honey back to his place at the table as soon as Astoria had banished it. Astoria scolded him and told him he would have rotted teeth, but Leo merely giggled madly at his little bit of mischievous magic, his cheeks as red as apples, his lilac eyes brimming with tears of laughter, and she had to work her face furiously to keep from laughing as well. Her son’s slightly mischievous nature was endearing, but she did not want to encourage it too much as she had no intention of raising a brat like so many of her peers.

Astoria glanced at the clock at the end of the dining chamber and got ponderously to her feet. She picked up the little silver bell to the right of her plate and gave it a little tinkle so that silence fell at once. “My ladies, I hope you have enjoyed breaking your fast at the Commander’s Residence this morn, and my husband and I wish to thank you for gracing our home with your presence.” There was some polite applause and some false smiles, “Now though, I believe the time is ripe for us to behold the wonderous experiments of our Lord and ruler which I am sure everyone is eager to see. If you would please follow me to the third floor my ladies, more wine and refreshments await you up there.”

The witches came streaming out onto the balcony in a stream of silk, jewels and lace out into the spring sunshine, their costly perfumes mingling with the smell of fresh grass and blooming flowers. Chaises and chairs were spread about the place with small tea tables that had been stocked with crystal carafes filled with wine along with cakes, dainty sandwiches and an assortment of jams on delicate china decorated with coiling snakes. Astoria had tried to think of everything to please their so called guests, not only to keep Antonin happy but also to avoid the inevitable whinging if all was not in readiness; she did not think her constantly changing moods could abide that – if there was one thing Pure Blooded aristocratic witches loved to do, it was to complain. All seemed well though as many of the children present sat themselves down and amused themselves while their Mothers gossiped happily. Leo, along with the other smaller ones had been whisked away to play in the garden, the only children left now looked to be eight years or older.

Hardly anyone spared a look at the great grey scar on the greenery of the land that was the Muggle camp to the North East, though it was clearly visible from up here. Half a dozen witches and two children pointed and whispered to each other when they saw Muggles toiling and Trolls lumbering below but otherwise, most of the guests were more intent on refilling their wine goblets. Astoria made her way to where many of the other witches had drifted to the edge of the balcony to get a better view of what was going on below. She gazed down at the assembled Death Eaters, a great mass of black on the green grass, the Dark Lord at their head; he was waving his wand and Astoria could make out faint screeches from his high, cold tone on the gentle wind, but having not magnified his voice Astoria had no way of knowing what he was saying.

“What do you expect it is?” Chirped Ophelia de Sade, Marcel’s oldest daughter, a comely witch of seventeen.
Astoria would normally make a point of avoiding Ophelia de Sade as she had inherited both her Father’s ghostly pale eyes and his taste for barbaric cruelty. As the eldest in the immediate family, she was representing the de Sade’s today as Ediva had given birth to Marcel’s first ever son one week past and was still recovering. Albért, they had named him; as soon as he had come into the world Marcel had stripped Ophelia of her longstanding birth right as his heir in favour of the newborn baby boy. It did not truly matter as Ophelia would most like be wed soon, but the gesture alone must have been most insulting from one’s own Father. Astoria thought she could see the sinewy build of Marcel de Sade below, standing a couple of inches shorter than the massive form of Antonin beside him.

“We cannot know,” Astoria replied politely, “I am sure all will be revealed in due course.”

“I bet it is some fantastical monster that will wipe out the Muggles for good and all!” Squealed the younger of the de Sade daughters, Lilith.

Ophelia smirked and opened her mouth to speak but she was drowned out by a high, cold voice that seemed to emanate from the very sky. “Death Eaters and subjects,” called the Dark Lord and all fell silent at once. “The path to Europe is firmly within my grasp as we strive to liberate these pathetic countries plagued by the defilement of wizarding blood and laws. Only Germany stands in my way now, but not for long.” The Death Eaters below were now making a tremendous amount of noise as clouds of coloured smoke began to emerge over their heads from their constantly erupting wands. “I have achieved the unachievable, I have experimented again and again until perfection has been achieved, I have pushed the boundaries of magic further than any other wizard in the history of the world! It was a dream, a dream of my noble ancestor, Salazar Slytherin and today Lord Voldemort is going to realise that dream! Now, Death Eaters, see what Lord Voldemort, the greatest sorcerer in the world has been able to achieve!”

There were gales of cheers and Astoria saw many jets of light flying up into the air while the witches on the balcony clapped daintily, fluttered their lace fans and twirled their parasols. The Dark Lord then waved his wand and all colour, the air, everything, was bathed in a curious yellow glow. Many of the witches cried out in shock and the little ones gasped in wonder at this curious yellow world they now found themselves in. Then just like that, the glow faded as though they were now in a thin yellow mist with glittering dust hanging in the air. His Lordship turned toward the expanse of forest to the East and began making those spitting, hissing noises that told her he was speaking in Parceltongue; having these sounds magnified was like listening to nails on a chalkboard but Astoria inwardly grimaced and continued to look below. Then there was suddenly a great creaking and groaning sound like a tree being felled. Astoria gazed at the forest in the distance, and there was a most ominous feeling in her chest as she saw a flock of birds in the distance scatter, squawking in protest as several more trees began to sway alarmingly. More trees gave way completely, the smashing and splintering of wood audible even from here as it got closer and closer. Leaves flew and what wildlife remained scattered and from the gloom of the trees there came the hissing; this hissing was so blood chilling it was as though a giant had snatched the sun from the very sky. Astoria felt a thrill of horror when she saw a great scaly snout poking out from the shadowy trees followed by a long, thin, forked tongue that flicked the air; she was even more terrified when she heard an answering hiss and a second snout appeared next to the first. Then, out of the forest slid two huge...
poisonously green snakes over one hundred feet long, their powerful bodies gliding smoothly across
the grass as they made their way to their Master. Astoria was not the only one who screamed and
covered her eyes instinctively.

“Have no fear, my lady.” Came Ophelia de Sade’s voice and Astoria felt the younger witch touch
her lightly on the arm. “His Lordship’s shield protects us from the Basilisks’ murderous stares, see?”

Astoria opened her fingers and peered through and saw that Ophelia was right, no one had suffered
any ill effects from the Basilisks’ huge yellow eyes with their great black slits. The Dark Lord was
stood directly in front of the two huge snakes, wand raised as they loomed over him and hissed,
showing mouthfuls of curved fangs that reached three feet in length. The venom from the creatures’
mouths was dripping onto the ground in great acidic puddles, melting all the grass and soil below.
The Dark Lord was waving and twirling his wand and the Basilisks were imitating him, following
his Lordship’s wand raptly as though he were perverse sort of snake charmer. After the initial shock
of seeing a Basilisk for the first time in her life, Astoria saw with a stab of terror, that the giant snakes
were a mated pair. Astoria knew that the left Basilisk was a male because he was considerably larger
and there was a great scarlet plume sprouting from his scaly head which fluttered slightly as both the
snakes continued to follow his Lordship’s every move, weaving, diving and ducking as the hissing
and spitting sounds intensified. The male Basilisk then gave a screech that seemed to reverberate
through Astoria’s entire body and set her teeth on edge. The Dark Lord then made a strangled,
choking sound and the male slithered away from his mate and coiled his long, thick tail tightly
around a great redwood and crushed it in two as easily as if it were a twig. Roots were ripped from
the ground and earth rained down in torrents as the tree trunk gave a great groan as if in pain when
the creature released it. Astoria could not hear for the whooping and clapping. Children were
tiptoeing to get a better view of the mated Basilisk pair and ladies were talking excitedly amongst
themselves as the snakes lashed their tongues and twined their tails together.

“This is only the beginning my friends! This is only the beginning! Soon I will unleash these beasts
upon the very world and wizards everywhere will know that they have one true Lord!”

More cheers followed this pronouncement, but they were quelled almost instantly when the Dark
Lord began speaking in Parceltongue again. More trees swayed, and the ground trembled once again
as the most terrifying sight Astoria had ever seen unfolded before her very eyes; she should have
expected this as soon as she saw the mated pair. Innumerable Basilisks were now emerging from the
forest, hissing and spitting in reply to the Dark Lord who had his arms raised and was screaming
with maniacal laughter at the sight. These Basilisks must be hatchlings, yet some were almost as
large as their parents and the ‘smallest’ one Astoria could see was easily twenty five feet long, if not
more. As the giant snakes continued to pour out of the forest, there was further rustling in the bushes
and shrubbery below from which a terrible snarling sound could be heard. In a flurry of fangs and
hair, huge shapes suddenly burst from the trees. Several of the witches let out screams of shock and
fright, as did the children. Astoria put her hand to her mouth, shocked, but she did not scream; she
was only glad that Leo was not here to see this.

“What hideous creatures!” Ophelia exclaimed, looking half impressed, half revolted. “What are they
“His Lordship created these beasts by breeding Werewolves and Vampires.” Astoria heard herself say; the memory of a vicious, snarling creature locked in a cage below his Lordship’s Fortress flashing briefly across her mind as she continued to stare below, horrified. “I believe Count Dracula and Fenrir Greyback have been recruiting Vampires and Werewolves from all over Europe to aid in their creation.”

Indeed, with the connivance of Dracula and the awful Greyback, it seemed that his Lordship’s nefarious experimentations had worked. He now had a whole host of the terrible creatures he had been experimenting on for so long; there had to be at least two hundred. Thick set and hairy with an insatiable taste for blood, these beasts had a human form, but they were slightly crouched with great claws like a bear’s, though they were still capable of bearing weapons. Some held great daggers between their razor sharp teeth while others brandished freshly wrought pickaxes, screeching and snarling incoherently. Astoria thought she could make out yellow bulging eyes below the thick falls of hair coming from the creatures and shuddered. Strange, how these beasts terrified her far more than the giant, murderous Basilisks.

“I say, they are rather curious.” Put in Nell Rosier whom Astoria had not noticed come up beside her in her blind panic. Nell had conjured a pair of Mother of Pearl opera glasses gilt in gold and was peering down below as though she were surveying a menagerie of Fantastic Beasts rather than a terrifying army that was baying for blood.

“I think they are ugly.” Sniffed Lilith de Sade, taking a sip of wine and looking down at the creatures with disdain.

A flicker of annoyance crossed Ophelia’s face, but she recovered herself almost at once. “Foolish little sister!” She said gayly with a tinkling laugh that did not meet her pale eyes, “They may be ugly but most effective I am sure, you will be glad of them when they are aiding our Lord Father in the battles to come. Finish your wine now little sister, a young lady should be an ornament to the eye, not an ache in the ear.” Lilith de Sade gave her sister a sullen look, drained her goblet and stalked away. Ophelia turned back to Astoria and Nell Rosier, “Forgive me my ladies, she is a child, she knows not of what she speaks.”

Astoria and Nell inclined their heads politely and they all turned to gaze once again at the monstrous cacophony of Basilisks and half breed demonic creatures. The half breeds were growing restive; she saw one ripping the bark off a tree with its great fangs, another was digging feverishly in the grass while others simply snarled and bared their teeth as though they were longing to break free and attack something. The Basilisks were utterly at their ease, Astoria saw that many had coiled themselves up, their great yellow eyes staring out over the layers and layers of tough scales. Others were tasting the air with their tongues or else slithering languidly over one another, awaiting their instructions from their Master. She was just thinking what could possibly be next when the Dark
Lord’s voice snapped her back into the moment.

“Behold my creations, Death Eaters, behold this army of Dark creatures of which the world has never seen. History shall be made this day!” There was an answering roar from the Death Eaters below with many blasting the Dark Mark into the sky as they jostled and shoved one another in their excitement. The Dark Lord turned to his monstrous creations and screamed, “Now, go forth and kill! KILL!” And he slashed the air violently with his wand.

At once, the mated pair of Basilisks came slithering forward across the grass to make for another bank of forest that went Eastwards, hissing and screeching while slamming trees to the ground as though they were daises. Then came their hatchlings which followed their murderous parents as they slid over one another in their eagerness to get to fresh prey. The Dark Lord’s half breed monsters hopped and jumped over the mass of powerful coils waving their weapons and moving with surprising speed and agility. Astoria rather thought that they looked like monkeys when they ran; they did not stand upright as a Vampire would, yet they did not go on all fours like a Werewolf.

“He is the King of Serpents.” Ophelia de Sade murmured as her pale eyes roved over the huge, thick, coiling bodies that were now smashing through the distant trees.

“To be sure.” Astoria replied hollowly as the grisly, slithering procession continued across the land, her mouth bone dry.

Truly, the Dark Lord had created what was undoubtedly the closest thing to an invincible army; the Basilisks would kill all within their path with a single look and roosters were unlikely to trouble them as most farms had been devastated by the plague. His half breed creations would be invulnerable to most spells as they had the combination of Vampire and Werewolf blood and thus would prove almost impossible to kill by ‘normal’ means. The very thought made Astoria feel ill. Her fellow guests were not so troubled by this grim prospect, however. The witches continued to laugh and discuss the Dark Lord’s latest enormity with excitement; as though it had been some spectacular show. Astoria kept her distress hidden by seizing upon the subject of her new baby or her impending due date whenever she was questioned, trying not to think about the horror below. The witches all continued to enjoy themselves there on the balcony, drinking strawberry wine and sampling cakes. Astoria however broke away from a group of witches and stared out across the land, her hand resting on her belly, thinking. There was nothing she could do about the crushing sense of impending doom that had closed around her chest as she watched the last few tips of the Basilisks’ tails disappear into the opposite bank of forest. She wondered grimly if the people of Germany – and indeed the world, had any idea of the poisonous and malevolent evil that the Dark Lord had unleashed upon them all.

Chapter End Notes

I was originally going to have Lord V question Astoria about Hermione’s escape but it
petered out fairly quickly as upon reflection, I don't think he would really care about one stray 'mudblood' in a country that he's planning to take over anyway... In any case I wanted the escape to be final. I am undecided as to whether Hermione will make an appearance again, I'm leaning heavily to yes...what does everyone else think?
This chapter is a little longer than the others (almost 12k) words, as mentioned before the next chapter will have quite a big shift so I wanted to lay everything out beforehand.

Same disclaimer applies
Warning: distressing material/adult themes

The German summer was unseasonably hot, sticky and uncomfortable. Astoria pointed her wand at the window and as it creaked open she sighed with relief at the cool breeze. She had just been bathed but a combination of the blistering summer heat and being so great with child had her sweating again; her due date had come and gone – and that was eleven days past. She felt as though she’d been through the whole day already as she lay there exhausted in her dampened silk sleeping shift as it negligently hung off her shoulders. The baby had kept her awake all night kicking and this morn she had spent over two hours trying to soothe a screaming and crying Leo who had a tooth coming in. Astoria gazed mournfully at the green gardens outside, she longed to go outside again as she had been locked in her apartments for over a moon’s turn. Soon after the Dark Lord had set his terrifying Basilisk army upon Germany Antonin had left as commanded for Berlin with a command of over three hundred, though not before instructing the entire household that Astoria was to be kept in confinement under guard until the baby was born. James Clearwater had been placed to stand guard outside her door, while two other Half Bloods manned the corridors just to make sure she stayed put. The Muggle slaves brought her meals, Leo was brought to her around late morning and Rathburne – who was now accompanied by a midwife named Nora, checked on her up to three times a day. Nora was supposedly an accomplished midwife who had been captured in Switzerland after the country’s surrender and had most recently delivered Ediva de Sade’s baby boy, Albért. Rathburne said that if there was no sign of the babe before weeks end, he and Nora would take things in hand and try to ‘bring on’ her labour themselves. It was a frightening prospect and Astoria had not dared to ask what it involved… but soon she may have to.

“Come on little one,” She murmured tiredly to her enormous belly for what felt like the hundredth time, barely wincing now as something that felt suspiciously like a heel pushed on her ribs while she shifted in a vain attempt to get more comfortable. Astoria stroked her stomach lovingly despite her discomfort and warmly revelled in that same wonderful feeling of overwhelming love that she had felt while expecting her precious Leo.

Despite the joyous prospect of being a Mother again Draco kept finding his way into Astoria’s thoughts during these long days that she spent largely on her own. He had not joined the assault on Berlin and was overseeing a camp to the North with Walden McNair. Doubtless this was part of Antonin’s twisted reasoning in wanting to keep her under lock and key – Draco was so close. Indeed, it was queer to think that he was scarcely twenty leagues away from her beyond the great
forest that surrounded the Commander’s Residence. Scarcely a day went by that she did not think about what Draco was doing, whether he thought about her or not… the last time she had seen him was at a dinner the night before the Death Eaters marched upon Berlin. He had looked pale and sad which had been at odds with Lucius who had looked nothing short of buoyant; doubtless running the monstrous camps had taken their toll on Draco, he had a gentle heart.

Astoria was distracted from thoughts of Draco when she glanced, not for the first time this morn, at the folded paper that Antonin had left on her bedside which was titled: Русская Хроника – or in English, The Russian Chronicle. There was a large moving photograph of the Dark Lord on the front cover. It was an old picture from when London had fallen; his Lordship’s mouth was open in a silent scream as he blasted a car aside with a jet of green light while Muggles scattered. Even though the paper was over thirty days old, she tentatively slid it off the table and gave it a prod with her wand to translate it. Though Antonin walked, talked and spoke like any English aristocrat he was nevertheless fluent in Russian and understood the maddeningly complicated alphabet which Astoria found more difficult to decipher than ancient runes. ‘TERROR CONTINUES TO GRIP EUROPE AS BERLIN FALLS: EXCLUSIVE REPORT’ read the headline above the Dark Lord’s photograph. Underneath it said ‘see pages 6 – 12 for full story and pictures’ so Astoria flipped through the paper until she found page six and began to read:


Reporting by European Correspondent, Mr. Ilya Zoyatov.

Since the early Summer of 1999, the world has looked on in horror as the wizard who styles himself ‘Lord Voldemort’ seized power in Great Britain before turning his sights to Europe. This has subsequently plunged the continent into turmoil these past three years with no signs of abating as this reporter can exclusively reveal that the capital of Germany, Berlin, has indeed fallen after a three day rampage of blood and slaughter. Officials from both Russia and America have issued dire warnings to Lord Voldemort and his Death Eaters, but that is all they have done thus far: vow, promise and threaten but with no action to strengthen their words. Thus, it is unsurprising that these ‘warnings’ have fallen upon deaf ears as more innocents continue to be savagely slaughtered across this ravaged continent. With the Dark Order also swallowing up more of the Middle East every single day, this reporter would expect a statement at the very least from the nations of Asia and Africa but so far, I have been greeted by a wall of silence while trying to investigate. More worryingly still, this reporter has exclusively uncovered confirmation that Lord Voldemort already has a considerable number of African mercenaries at his command, aided by the disgraced Namibian royal, Prince Gyasi Adimba – N’zogu who was banished from his native country by his own Father in 1997.

As detailed at the beginning of this report, this reporter is currently on the German island of Föhr which remains one of the last remaining European territories that has not yet been conquered by the Dark Order. There are around five thousand witches, wizards and Muggles on this island who managed to escape mainland Germany during Lord Voldemort’s savage plundering of Berlin with nothing more than the rags on their backs. Conditions here are very poor; many
Muggles have sickened from the devastating plague that has rampaged through Europe and many more have died. Black smoking piles of burning bodies litter the landscape of this bleak island while its inhabitants desperately await the boats that were promised by Russian and American forces. Families huddle in crude shelters made from pieces of wood and bits of debris that have washed up on the shore; remnants of the failed German air attack that had been headed toward the Rhineland. Food is scarce with parents having to scavenge in the flotsam and jetsam for dead, rotting fish to feed their children, other families have resorted to eating their own dead and there are daily fights over food. Almost everyone here is wandless. Women and children make up the bulk of the numbers here as the Death Eaters have a habit of killing all the men and wizards when they sack villages and towns. To all those reading, take this report to your leaders, make them see that Europe is dying and in desperate need of aid… this must stop NOW. This reporter will now detail how all these poor souls came to be upon this wretched island in the hope that our foreign leaders will finally listen to reason:

“A thick grey smog hangs over the city of Berlin, blocking out the sluggishly rising sun which tries in vain to shine through. After Lord Voldemort commanded his giants to destroy all the major power stations leading into the city, Berlin residents have been forced to light coal fires in place of using electricity* which is the reason behind the filthy, sooty air – and there are of course the bodies, there are always more bodies each day. The days are almost silent in this once bustling city; shops and homes are boarded up with many sporting the grimly familiar red X’s which indicate that the plague has struck and killed within. Pale, emaciated and bruised, Muggles and wizards alike emerge tentatively from the derelict buildings in the twisting back streets of the city. Many have the hope of finding a bird or cat carcass to roast over a fire which is now considered a veritable feast.

As I glance out of the window I see a group of bone thin Muggle boys kicking about a long empty food can in a grotesquely depressing version of the popular Muggle sport ‘football.’ A group of their Mothers are huddled about the doorway to the dilapidated building they now call home, feverishly stirring a makeshift cauldron filled with boiling water and some thin nettles. Strange that in the midst of this despair that children are still at play; many have witnessed unimaginable horrors, yet the childlike innocence of play still endures. This day is like every other day in the now changed city of Berlin since I arrived here three lunar cycles past. After spending much of the morning immersed in my writing, I collapse onto the mildewed bed to conserve my energy – the bed is the only thing of substance left in this once sumptuous suite on the top floor of a long abandoned five star hotel. I am the only one left on this floor, there used to be a Muggle family several rooms away but after the Father perished, the Mother of the family fled for the coast with her children, desperate. Heartsick, I give myself up to a restless slumber.

Hours, or perhaps minutes later, I am awoken by screams and the very ground seems to be trembling. Panicked, I make for the large window which gives a prime view of the city centre. Looking below, I see a sight that chills my very blood, for the Order of the Phoenix’s most dire warnings have finally manifested into a terrifying reality. Pouring from buildings, drains and the very ground itself are hordes and hordes of giant Basilisks. Those who run out into the street are
struck down immediately, others who try to run are merely devoured, unable to outrun the murderous serpents. Savage beasts covered in hair that I do not recognise chase down stragglers before proceeding to hack and stab them to death with cruel steel, teeth and claws. Thankful that I still have my wand I gather my necessities and flee, alerting the others who are hiding within the hotel. I am soon joined by two young witches – one of whom has a wand and a Muggle man with two small boys. The crashes, bangs and screams can be heard from outside in the hotel lobby as we argue on what to do for the best and I am uncomfortably aware of the faint hissing that now seems to hang in the air. We are all in agreement that the sewers are our best option, so as quietly as we can, we make for the back of the hotel to the back streets.

As soon as we make our way outside, the enormity and terror of the situation compound themselves tenfold. The screaming, explosions and hissing seems to come from the very heavens above as though it is one single sound. Black smoke is billowing to the West and the air is thick with the smell of burning wood and plaster – Berlin is burning. Without preamble, myself and the armed witch blast open a drain to make our escape – there is an awful snarling coming from a nearby street so one by one we each drop with a splash into waist deep filth. With only two wands there is near darkness in this filthy, oppressive labyrinth and I can scarcely see a foot in front of me. The two Muggle children are weeping as their Father desperately fights through the foul, thick waste and the unarmed witch is struggling to keep up. I cannot say for how long we waded beneath the city and though we are hidden it is impossible to forget what is happening above. The slimy sewer walls creak, groan and shake and there are the unmistakable sounds of heavy, slithering bodies mere feet away. Muffled shrieks, wails of anguish and pleas for mercy can also be heard as we head left, right and left again, desperately looking for some light, a way out.

After what feels like hours the progress of our party has slowed considerably. None of us are speaking to one another any longer as we continue to wade through the foul sludge – even the children have stopped crying now. We are brought back to the reality of our peril when there is an ominous splashing and hissing behind us. Not daring to look back, I make my way as quickly as I can away from the malevolent mass that is making its way closer and closer toward us as the dark water begins to churn violently. My worst fears are confirmed when I hear the hissing as clear as day echoing off the sewer walls. There is another splash and a scream, it sounds as if one of the witches has fallen and I can hear the Muggle man yelling, his children wailing. It is impossible to see what is going on in the dizzying half darkness until a blast overhead rips apart the sewer. Fresh screams rent the air and daylight streams down into our filthy abyss as I see a flurry of scales and masses of brick falling from the brightness above as the Basilisk’s many coils pour out onto the streets of Berlin.

Still trying to make sense of everything and covered in mud and human filth, I clamber my way up and out of the rubble toward the light and away from the crushing darkness. Dazed, I rub the grit from my eyes to be greeted with a scene of vicious, bloody terror in a ravaged city square. A great Basilisk is laying waste to a former office building, swallowing people whole as it wrenches them from floors high and low, its huge tail swatting frightened Muggles like flies as they scatter in terror. A Muggle man is writhing in agony upon the ground surrounded by masked Death Eaters
while a young witch is dragged away down a street by the hair by another, screaming for her parents. Almost every building in this square is on fire as toxic fumes billow into the sky. I scabble upon the ground searching for my wand until my fingers finally close over the thin strip of wood that is my last hope… and not a moment too soon. As I snatch up my wand and struggle to my feet I am eye to eye with a young Death Eater who begins to ruthlessly fire out killing curses, determined to strike me down – he cannot be more than sixteen years old. I cannot say for how long we duelled for, but our fight is cut short as a Basilisk’s tail comes slamming down between us, destroying the road beneath as tarmac erupts twenty feet into the air. Peeking out from behind a phone box, I recognise the infamous Bellatrix Lestrange at the head of at least a dozen Death Eaters hunting down a group of children and attempt to intervene, but before I can take two steps I am knocked backwards as more Death Eaters descend from the sky mounted on brooms and there is a fresh outbreak of curses and duelling. I cannot see hide nor hair of the companions that accompanied me down in the sewers, the world is now a whirl of blind panic; I know if I wish to survive then I have no choice but to disapparate. As I drag myself to my feet for the umpteenth time, I feel a terrible pang for the Muggle man, his children and the two young witches who must surely be dead by now as I turn on the spot into crushing darkness.

That, ladies and gentlemen is how I came to be on this island along with all the other thousands here who are suffering horrendously in the midst of this terrible war. My final word to anyone who is against the Dark Order is this: Muggles and wizards alike need to set aside their differences and work together to destroy this toxic evil that continues to spread, or I fear for the future of the world we have all worked so hard to build. If my family is reading this, I love you and hope to be with you soon. To the rest of my colleagues at the Russian Chronicle who are also risking their lives in defiance of Lord Voldemort’s rule, keep each other safe and good luck. They are coming.”

N.B. - *Electricity – the Muggle means for heat, light and transport.

See pages 8 – 12 for Wanted and Missing Person posters.

Astoria stared at the paper for a few moments after she had finished reading the article. Ilya Zoyatov whoever he was, had written his harrowing account with so much detail and feeling that she felt as though she were truly there with him, watching as the Basilisks and Death Eaters destroyed everything in their path, the desperate situation on the island of Föhr among frightened women and children and their miserable existence there while they were waiting for aid. Astoria looked down at the small moving picture of Ilya Zoyatov and she felt a tiny sharp pain in her chest, as though someone had briefly pricked her there with a needle. She could not say why, the feeling had been so fleeting and insignificant, like a small petal dropping off a flower and being swept gently off downstream, never to be seen again… but in that moment she knew that he was dead. He was dead, and he would never see the ones he loved ever again.

A cold hand enveloped Astoria’s heart and for a moment she wanted to cry but she was brought back to her senses when the ‘hidden’ door near her bedside creaked open to reveal Antonin, clad in
riding attire from his morning hunt.

“Good morning my love.” He murmured, his cold eyes devouring her skimpily clad figure. Even after all this time she felt a strong urge to cover herself up and hide under the sheets when she felt his gaze crawling all over her.

“Good morning husband.” She replied in her well practiced, meek and subservient manner, trying not to shudder as Antonin leaned over and kissed her on the forehead, his hand briefly touching her belly.

Antonin had returned from Berlin the day of her due date as victory was all but certain by then, though he was most displeased not to be presented with a baby on his arrival. The Dark Lord did not wish to declare true victory until he had captured and killed the German Minister for Magic, Minister Freida Geissler, and there was now a countrywide hunt to find her; chiefly by Half Bloods. The Dark Lord had put a five hundred thousand Galleon price upon her head and had sweetened the deal by promising a Pure Blood bride to the wizard who brought the Minister in alive, no matter how dirty his blood or common his birth.

Astoria shifted a little as Antonin sat on the side of the bed; he had dispensed with his tailcoat and was now fiddling with the buttons on his waistcoat and shirt. Astoria resigned herself to the worst and steeled herself for what she knew was coming. To her fury, Nora had told Antonin that lying with her could help to hasten the baby’s arrival and he had unfortunately taken to the task with much zeal.

“Do you have any idea what Berlin’s fall means for our new son?” Antonin asked as he vanished his cufflinks with a snap of his fingers, his eyes now on the Russian paper. He tossed it aside and lightly ran a hand up her leg, over her mound and up again over her belly, pushing her silk shift backward so that her belly was exposed. When Antonin began to rub her there she could have sworn that baby within flinched at his touch.

“What?” She asked confusedly, trying to ignore the cold fingers walking up her spine as he continued to fondle her stomach.

“It means,” He said in a voice that suggested he was talking to a simpleton child, “That this boy will be the first Pure Blood child born into a conquered Europe, won’t that be glorious?” Those cold blue eyes were gleaming with grotesque pride, but Astoria was mortified; she did not want her child to be known for that… it was repulsive notion.

“I am pleased to do my duty to my husband and the Dark Order.” She replied mechanically.
Antonin did not answer, he had undone his laces and was shifting out of his breeches, trying and failing to suppress flinches of pain from the injury that still troubled him, but Astoria wisely averted her eyes and slipped off her bed robe. When Antonin rose he was as naked as his name day and his member was hard as an iron bar. He grasped her by the back of her thighs and pulled her toward him at the edge of the bed, panting hard. Wasting no time, he shoved apart her legs, grasped his member and fed himself slowly inside her, grunting. She closed her eyes and moaned, willing her imagination to turn Antonin into Draco as he began to take her very, very hard while he puffed and panted. Astoria inwardly cringed as his sweaty, hard stomach rubbed against her pregnant belly as the baby began to move around restlessly, most likely discomforted by his aggressive thrusting. But as always, all she could do was lie there and let him have his way while feeling utterly helpless. Antonin’s climax finally came on him a few minutes later, though he did take his time spilling his seed noisily inside her before collapsing onto the bed.

He rolled over, still breathing hard, the blue eyes fixing the lilac with an unblinking stare. “Nothing? You do not feel the babe? You truly feel nothing?” He asked sharply. Astoria shook her head and looked away, fearful. “Good. Then you shall have no problem in greeting our guests tonight, we are having company.”

Astoria felt as though she had been slapped in the face; the child’s arrival was imminent, and Antonin expected her to dress up and bat her lashes for a dinner party? “You do not wish me to continue lying in my Lord?” She asked desperately, hoping that he would remember that it was he who had commanded her to go into confinement in the first place.

“No, this is my residence, you are my wife and you will accompany me for this formal occasion.” Antonin answered carelessly as he summoned a Firewhiskey bottle from across the room before taking a healthy swig.

As evening loomed one of the elderly Muggle slave women washed and combed Astoria’s hair, filed her nails, dusted her face lightly with powder and dripped raspberry scented oil between her sore breasts and behind her ears. When all was done with Astoria felt hot, bothered and huge like some trussed up Christmas goose… all she wanted to do was lie down and rest. She was clad in a gown of ivory and rose silk trimmed with lace; its long, fluted sleeves served to help with the uncomfortable heat.

There were over fifty guests for dinner; mainly from the inner circle, though to Astoria’s fury her drunken lout of a husband had invited both Dracula and Prince Gyasi, the former of whom leered knowingly at her when he made his entrance, his yellow eyes devouring her maliciously. There were other Death Eaters who had journeyed from Britain so that they might see the ‘New World’ at work in Europe with one Victoria Avery among them… Astoria had not seen her since Elizabeth had married Yaxley. As it was the summer and Hogwarts was closed, many Death Eaters had brought their children over to the occupied territory. Indeed, Victoria herself brought both her son Frederick from her marriage to the deceased Felix Selwyn and her grown up bastard son Emmett who had
been Fathered by William Jugson years ago. Thankfully Astoria was not expected to stand to greet their guests, so she had been seated among a cluster of witches who fluttered and fussed over her. Elizabeth was to her right and Adelaide was to her left... both were clearly intoxicated and miserable, but no one paid them any mind, for the main topic of discussion was of course, the baby. Nell Rosier and Ophelia de Sade were currently arguing as to whether the baby was a boy or a girl.

“I still say it is a boy.” Ophelia declared haughtily. “My lady Mother was the same with our little Albért, still slender as a reed with a big belly; it is one of the signs I tell you.”

“I disagree, my lady.” Replied Nell with a cold smile. “Our dear Astoria informs me that she has not sickened at all with the babe, that means a baby girl... is that not what you told me my lady?” She asked of Astoria. Astoria inclined her head, privately thinking how Rathburne would tut and shake his head if he heard such foolish old wives’ tales, but Nell Rosier’s lip curled in triumph. She would have laughed at them all if she had dared.

Ophelia’s normally comely face twisted into a smile that was so reminiscent of Marcel de Sade it was chilling, even down to those pale, pale eyes. She opened her mouth to reply scathingly but she was forestalled by the falsely jovial voice of Victoria Avery. “Astoria!” She cried, striding over to them in a swirl of blue silk. She bent and kissed both of Astoria’s cheeks and smiled, though that smile did not reach those conniving deep blue eyes. “How do you feel dear? I know it is so hard at the end, you poor little lamb.”

“I am very well, my lady, you are most kind to ask.” Astoria replied politely.

Victoria ran her fingers through her scarlet hair and her sleeve slipped a little; her Dark Mark stood out shockingly against her milk white skin and was at odds with the costly jewelled gown. “I could not help overhearing your conversation my ladies, boy or girl you say?” She turned back to Astoria, her eyes swept up and down her form appraisingly and she sighed, “I wish I could have looked like that towards the end with both of mine, I bet you do not even look pregnant from the back, do you dear? Well, my lady Mother always used to say that is one of the signs of a little boy... and she was right!” She finished teasingly with a wink while the other witches murmured their agreement, though Nell Rosier still looked stubborn. Astoria privately agreed with Victoria; she could not say why, but some strange instinct within her told her she was having another baby boy.

As the evening dragged by Astoria had to make sure that she was not spotted gazing longingly at the clock as the guests gorged themselves on lobster broth, duck stuffed with plums, monkfish medallions and roasted quail from the Rhineland itself. Though the child had increased her appetite of late, tonight everything she ate tasted of ash. Happily, Antonin largely ignored her for most of dinner and no one else seemed to notice as all the guests were still too flushed with triumph at the Dark Order’s victory and they could talk of nothing else. After a four course dessert everyone drifted to the drawing room for more drinking and revelry. Once again Astoria was centrally cosseted among witches opposite the empty hearth while Antonin was surrounded by his favoured thugs:
Yaxley, Silas, Travers, Clarence Avery, Marcel de Sade and Walter Selwyn - all of them puffing on pipes and glugging vodka.

Cheerful talk and wild gossiping filled the room as Muggle slaves crept – all but invisible among the guests, refilling goblets and serving after dinner fruit, cheese and port. The witches surrounding Astoria were now swapping baby names and putting each to her for her approval. In truth, she had scarcely thought of names at all, perhaps because the one name she wanted to give her next son would never be allowed. Since she had been a young girl, Astoria had always promised herself that should she have sons, she should like to honour her long dead brother Alcaeus by naming one of them after him. The thought of what Antonin would do if she even suggested such a thing made her blood run cold.

After exhausting the topics of the war and everyone else who was not present, the talk of the room soon turned to Hogwarts. Astoria knew that the school had been warped into a shadow of its former self; even the castle had been defiled with Dark magic to conform to the Dark Lord’s twisted ideals on ‘education.’ But the things now being discussed so casually over port shook her to her very core. Victoria’s son, Frederick Selwyn, a boy of fourteen years was bitterly complaining that they only got to practice *Aveda Kedavra* on small animals such as foxes and badgers at school and that ‘practice Muggles’ were only for those in seventh year about to join the army.

“I know I could kill a Muggle, I just know I could!” Frederick said, a very aggrieved expression twisting his Selwyn features while the older wizards exchanged smirks.

Antonin chuckled as he lit his cannabis pipe and took a great long pull before blowing clouds of smoke everywhere. “I was killing men and fucking girls when you were no bigger than the baby in her belly,” He said, jerking his head in Astoria’s direction as the others chuckled. “I never even finished at Hogwarts, I left to join the Dark Lord when I was fifteen as soon as he seized power and that proved to be the best thirteen years of my life… until Azkaban of course.” He said with a thin smile while Travers let out a harsh laugh. “I learned all my Dark magic from my Father and of course, his Lordship himself. Your time will come young Selwyn, but you have a lot to learn first.”

“Indeed, maybe start with fucking girls before you start killing men, nephew.” Walter Selwyn cut in, sniggering.

“I have so fucked a girl!” Frederick pouted, flushing angrily as the surrounding wizards roared with laughter.

“Oh yeah? Who was that then, Freddie?” Avery asked his second cousin, his voice amused.
Frederick went pink again but did not look displeased as he squared his shoulders and drew himself up tall in his chair. “We get girls at school; Mudbloods and Squibs. They are kept in the dungeons and Headmaster Nott says that it is our right to use them however we choose… so we fuck them.” Frederick raised his chin defiantly as the wizards continued to howl with laughter. “I had my first girl on my thirteenth name day.” Astoria was mortified but she could hardly be surprised; the Dark Lord would want his next generation of Death Eaters to be as brutal, cruel and hard as the ones who currently served him... What better way to mould them into monsters by having them rape, torture and kill Muggles and young girls?

“Imagine having cunt on tap at school!” Antonin called crassly over to Yaxley who grunted with laughter.

“Indeed, there would be no need to drag those little sluts into the Forbidden Forest like we used to, remember? Both the willing and… not so willing.” Yaxley replied with a smirk and raised his goblet before taking a healthy swig.

Antonin laughed reminiscently, his cold, blue eyes gleaming with sadistic excitement. He leaned over and handed Frederick his pipe which was still smoking. “Well you are a man now, go on.” The boy took the pipe tentatively, looking nervous but excited as the others watched on. When Frederick took his first, huge pull he immediately went pale, his eyes turned red and he began to cough and splutter. Astoria was hardly surprised; her husband was inclined to incredibly potent strains of the plant – far too strong for a young boy. The other wizards however were in hysterics; even Victoria, his own Mother, was chuckling behind her hand politely while Yaxley banged the boy on the back as he continued to cough.

Disgusted, Astoria averted her eyes and it was an effort not to purse her lips. She wanted to take her leave of their awful company, having no desire to listen to more stories of rape, nor watch her despicable husband ply a child with drugs. She was just going to reach for her water goblet when she felt it; a tiny, little tug in her lower belly. Astoria froze. Could it be? or was that just a stomach ache? She inwardly shook herself and wrenched her mind back to the present, trying to look as though she were interested in the conversation at hand; a disagreement as to whether the Dark Lord should utilise the Merpeople in his quest for domination or if he should simply exterminate them on account of them being ‘half breeds.’

“They could hunt down those boatloads of Muggles who are trying to escape over water.” Travers put in, taking a sip of wine.

“I think not,” Piped Silas’ reedy voice, the faintest hint of a sneer playing about his cruel mouth. “What does his Lordship want with those slimy, water dwelling fish? He has the greatest sea monster the world has ever seen, the Hydra.”
Travers shrugged, but Astoria saw his mouth twitch in irritation. “One can never have too many pairs of eyes out there. If his Lordship gives them amenable terms, I do not see why we should not use those beasts for the cause, we….”

But Astoria could not concentrate, she was feeling very warm – hot in fact, despite the light silk she was clad in as she shifted uncomfortably in her seat. Just outside her line of vision she saw Elizabeth turn her head sharply to look intently at her, but she did not meet her gaze, not wanting to draw attention to herself. Instead Astoria hastily took a drink of water and twirled one of her long golden locks between her fingers, glancing furtively about the room to see if anyone else had noticed anything. It was no good. When she felt that ominous feeling of not wanting anything or anyone to touch her, she was forced to admit to herself that though her ‘waters’ may be intact, her second child was indeed ready to be born. Still, she said nothing and sat there as the panic mounted in her with every minute that ticked by, hoping against hope that one or more of her companions would make for the powder room, so she could slip away and ask for Rathburne in private, not wanting an eager audience to her distress. She felt a surge of anger toward Antonin for forcing her to come down tonight; it was precisely for this reason that witches were kept in confinement for the last moon of their pregnancies – so they did not cause ‘a scene’ when out in society.

Astoria had not noticed that she had almost twisted the silk and lace of one of her sleeves into a knot when Elizabeth leaned in and said, “What? What is it? You have not looked right for the past half hour, dear… Is it the baby? Say the word and you will be taken out of here at once.”

“I c- cannot… take… m-much more t-than this.” Astoria whispered jerkily as she felt another little prod deep within her belly, this time more insistent.

Victoria Avery must have overheard their conversation because she then broke in, “You are as pale as milk dear.” She spoke in a much louder tone than Elizabeth, drawing the attention of many in the drawing room to them. Astoria was uncomfortably aware that Antonin had stopped what he was doing and was staring at her intently. “Frederick! Emmett! Help the Lady Dolohov to her feet at once!” She barked imperiously across the room to her sons.

The two youths made to rise but Astoria forestalled them. “I am fine.” She said faintly as she fiddled with her hair again, though she could feel the sweat beading on her brow as more of the guests broke off their conversations. Elizabeth hastily pushed herself to her feet and strode over to where Antonin was sat between Yaxley and Marcel, whispering urgently between her husband and Antonin, who had torn away his gaze and was now frowning slightly as he listened.

“Dear, you are trembling.” Murmured Nell Rosier, lightly touching her on the arm.

“She should lie down.” Came the sharp voice of Euphemia Rowle from somewhere to her right, “Someone should take her to lie down.” And before Astoria knew it, everyone was throwing out
their own suggestions on what to do while Ophelia promptly seized a lace fan and proceeded to beat it madly above her.

“What is it my lady?” Antonin asked brusquely, his voice cutting through the babble as he eyed her like an eagle.

*What do you think you fool!?* She wanted to scream at him.

Everyone was looking at her now. Astoria opened her mouth to speak but she could not seem to get the words out. “I – I – I just need… I just need to – to –” But then, unbidden, she took a sharp intake of breath and inadvertently rubbed her belly as she felt another twist, far stronger this time as she groped for words.

However, before she could utter any further, Marcel de Sade gave a shriek of delight, downed his drink in one fell swoop and slammed his goblet down onto the table so hard that it cracked. “To your next heir!” He screeched at Antonin while the other wizards echoed him and Yaxley clapped Antonin on the shoulder murmuring words Astoria could not hear.

The wizards disappeared from view as the witches swarmed over Astoria, murmuring words of luck as they helped her to her feet. “You will be fine, dear.” Elizabeth whispered reassuringly, grasping her wrist briefly amongst all the silk and velvet of the witches’ gowns that surrounded her. All Astoria could do was allow the witches to lead her trembling from the room as the place exploded with cheering, clapping and the chink of glasses.

In no time Astoria had been whisked upstairs, out of her gown and into a thin cotton shift before being bundled into bed while Rathburne and Nora fussed and scurried. Naturally she had expected the birth to be painful; she had done it before after all, but she had not expected days of long, arduous labour that left her hoarse from screaming at the top of her lungs. It started very slowly until it got worse and worse and worse until Rathburne had to break her waters himself which had been excruciating. On the first day as she screamed and cried, Astoria had heard the other Death Eater wives conversing outside the door, demanding entry but Rathburne had refused to let them in – it was usually tradition for a witch to be surrounded by fellow ‘Mothers’ as well as a Healer and a midwife when she gave birth. It was now late afternoon on the fourth day and she was so exhausted that everything around her seemed to be in a sort of haze. Astoria had lost count of the number of times she had been sick, there was blood everywhere and she felt a fresh thrill of horror when she saw Rathburne unfold a wad of leather to reveal horrible metal instruments nestled in pouches within.

“She has been pushing and shrieking for hours now!” Came Antonin’s irritated snap, but the rest of his angry tirade was drowned out when Astoria gave another guttural groan of pain as her belly hardened and contracted fiercely. Ever since her labour had begun he had been drunkenly drifting in
and out of their bedchamber to the scandalisation of Nora and Healer Rathburne; usually wizards – bar a Healer – were forbidden from coming into the birthing room. It was awful having him in here and each time he left she dreaded his return.

“Just a little longer, Master Dolohov, I promise.” Rathburne replied while wiping his sweaty brow on the sleeve of his robe while Nora fussed, poked and prodded her between the legs. He was as white as milk as he made his way to the side of the bed, looking very worried. He crouched creakily down beside her and whispered urgently in her ear, “Madam, you are so close, I just need you to put in that last bit of work.”

Astoria gazed up blearily at the room and everything seemed to be swimming, partly aided by her tears. Rathburne was next to her, Nora was red faced and flustered as she crouched between her legs and Antonin was sat on a chair not too far from the bed; drink in hand and wearing an expression of great irritation as he stared at her. She closed her eyes and blocked him out, trying to keep her mind on the baby she was trying to bring into the world – refusing to let him control the situation. Astoria summoned all the strength she had up in her and pushed as hard as she could, threw back her head and screamed to the heavens like a wounded animal while keeping a vice like grip on Rathburne’s shrivelled arm so that he was almost bent double. She felt Nora’s skilled hands working as she felt a burning, stretching feeling between her legs until finally, finally, the baby was pulled from her body with a great tug and she felt herself tear. She had not even seen her child first as Nora fell upon her at once, dabbing her here and there and muttering rapidly while Astoria weakly tried to shove her off. Something was wrong, very wrong; there was no screaming, no crying, nothing… the baby was silent.

“What is it!? What is it!? What is wrong!?”

Rathburne had his back to her so that her child was screened from view, his hands working furiously. Several times he crouched low over the form of her baby as though trying to listen to its chest, but the silence stretched on and on; crushing, oppressive and terrifying. The realisation of what this meant was slowly starting to sink into Astoria’s mind when she began to scream and cry hysterically while fruitlessly fighting to get out of bed. Antonin who had said nothing the entire time came boiling to his feet and strode over to where Rathburne was standing, his fingers now pumping on the child’s chest as it continued to lie there as still as a doll. Just as he opened his mouth furiously to berate Rathburne there was a suddenly a choking sound, then a high pitched wail which was followed by the unmistakeable sounds of a newborn babe screaming, crying and gasping for air. The moment Astoria heard that she dissolved into tears again and fell back onto her pillows, her whole body shuddering violently with emotion and relief.

“Give me my baby!” She screamed over all the noise, “Give him to me!”

None answered her, but she heard Rathburne say “Here is your baby daughter, Master Dolohov.” Her first, dizzying feeling was shock, then elation and love but just as quickly her heart plummeted,
she was scared for her little girl and dreading Antonin’s reaction. He had been expecting a boy… almost everyone had.

When Nora had whipped away the afterbirth and stopped fussing over her, Astoria finally had a clear view. Antonin had their daughter in his arms swaddled in soft wool and was staring down at her looking thunderstruck, his jaw clenched. Please do not hurt her Astoria prayed, the bile rising in the back of her throat as she beheld her defenceless little baby girl in his clutches. She was snuffling and stirring feebly, and Astoria knew instinctively that her baby wanted to be fed.

Give her to me, you bastard.

Those empty blue eyes flicked up to stare at Astoria then; cold, hard and furious. “A daughter.” He stated, his voice as desolate and cold as a lonely iceberg on the sea. “You disappoint me, wife. As soon as you are able, you shall give me another heir, or else.” She heard the unspoken threat in his voice and could not help but tremble and fresh tears leaked down her face. Antonin gave her baby girl a disinterested glance, handed her back to Rathburne and left the room, slamming the door behind him so that all within jumped. When her daughter was finally laid upon her chest, Astoria burst into tears again and held her close, knowing how close she had been between life and death; knowing how her husband must now wish that it had been the latter outcome… for the crime of being born female. After Rathburne had healed the tearing below and made sure there was no further damage, Astoria sent he and Nora away, promising that she would call if she needed anything. Astoria kissed her daughter all over, let her nurse from her naturally and cried some more, telling her how much she loved her and how she did not think she was any less of a person because she was a girl.

The morning sun streamed upon Astoria’s face and she turned in the silken sheets, wincing slightly; the long, difficult birth had left her exhausted and she had not left her rooms since. She gazed over at her sweet baby girl sleeping blissfully in the crib beside her bed. She is perfect in my eyes. Just as with Leo, she could not help but marvel at the fact that she had grown this beautiful little baby inside her. However, she could not help going cold all over when she thought about what could have happened if Rathburne had not been there to act. When Astoria looked at her daughter, it was as though she were looking at herself as a baby, only with deliberate mistakes. Antonin had given their daughter his colour, for her skin was as pale as milk but unlike his it was as delicate and flawless as porcelain – like a doll’s. Her curls were a lighter shade of gold than Astoria’s, but the most obvious difference was the eyes; her daughter’s eyes were lilac like hers, but they were tinged with blue giving them a truly astonishing colour... like lavender. This little girl of mine will be a beautiful young woman one day. She had named her Anastasia; she had always loved the name and she hoped its Russian origin would please Antonin and quell his fury. Astoria had not seen her husband since he had stormed out of the birthing room and that was three days ago.

There was then a soft rap on the door, “Come in.” Astoria called weakly. The door creaked open and Elizabeth came sweeping into the room looking resplendent in yellow silk. She had a basket of flowers slung over one hand and she was leading in Leo with the other.
“Mama!” He squealed, breaking free from Elizabeth and running toward the bed before flinging his arms around her. She had not seen him since she had given birth as Rathburne said it was imperative that she rested. Astoria smiled as her baby boy planted kisses all over her and talked excitedly before he noticed his new sister sleeping in the crib beside the bed. He gaped at Anastasia, his lilac eyes going as huge as boiled eggs. “Baby?” He asked, still googling.

Astoria smiled and nodded, “Baby.” She confirmed as he continued to stare at her baby girl.

“She is your sister.” Elizabeth smiled before turning to Astoria, “How are you feeling dear? I heard you had a hard time…Four days? I do not know how you are even sitting up.”

Astoria gave a weak chuckle and lightly brushed Leo’s curls. “It was not easy, I thought I would die at the end.”

“Undoubtedly, but she looks as sweet as peaches and cream.” Elizabeth said as she studied Anastasia. “How much was she?”

“Almost nine, I was so sure that she was a boy.” Astoria replied with a rueful smile while Elizabeth let out a good natured groan of sympathy, “Leo was nine and seven, so I counted myself lucky on this occasion. I chose her name yestermorn, Anastasia.”

Elizabeth shook her head, “And there I was thinking I was hard done by with a babe weighing eight and two. The name choice is lovely though, it suits her.” She conjured up a chair and sat, setting the basket aside. “You should know, Antonin has returned.” The fear must have shown on Astoria’s face because she hastily added, “He is asleep, Corban brought him back this morn. The pair of them were up for almost three days drinking and complaining about what useless wives we are.” She rolled her grey eyes in irritation. “Last night they went to that Merlin awful Veela brothel in Paris and now Alecto is howling for their blood…and their cocks as well I’ll wager.”

“Why?” Astoria asked, an ominous feeling in her chest.

Before Elizabeth could continue, Anastasia awoke. She opened her beautiful lavender coloured eyes to stare around at them all looking dazed and began to stir in a slightly agitated sort of way. “Hungry?” Elizabeth said with an amused smile, recognising the babe’s need at once. She rose and gently picked up Anastasia, placed her in Astoria’s arms and sure enough, her baby girl was nursing eagerly within minutes.
It had not even occurred to Astoria to cover up for Leo; he could hardly see anything and in any case, he was still gazing, enthralled at his sister while he knelt beside her on the bed. Astoria smiled and ruffled his hair so he would not feel left out and turned back to Elizabeth, “Please continue.”

“Apparently they dragged one of the whores into a room and barricaded the door. No one knows what happened but apparently the screaming went on for hours and the whore came out of it with a broken neck.” Astoria felt faintly sick, but Elizabeth prattled on, oblivious. “So now our dear husbands have a fifty thousand Galleon fine to contend with. I doubt the Dark Lord will get involved, you know how he hates it if he is bothered by such trifles. In any case, he is far too preoccupied with the Dark Order’s next… move.”

“Indeed,” Astoria replied, she was revolted what Antonin had done but that warm feeling of elation within her after the birth of her daughter had not yet subsided and it was easier to shove those feelings away. She instead changed the subject, “How is Guinevere? Leo misses her so much, she is like a sister to him, you ought to bring her over when you are able.” To her surprise, Elizabeth’s mouth twisted irritably, “I’m – I’m sorry…” She mumbled, not knowing what she had said to provoke such a reaction.

Elizabeth shook her head wearily, “No, no, you have nothing to apologise for dear Astoria, it is just… well I suppose you will find out soon just like everyone else eventually.” She grimaced, “Remember that wanton creature Veliane Ayim? One of the mercenaries Prince Gyasi brought from Africa?”

“I do,” Astoria said slowly, studying Elizabeth closely.

“Notice how she has not been attending the army, or even serving with the wives?”

“I suppose…yes I have not glimpsed her in some time.”

“Well that is because Mistress Veliane is great with child.” She gave an irritable jerk of her head, “With Corban’s child, or should I say, his bastard. Apparently, she is being kept in a manor in the French countryside, surrounded by guards whom I had to bribe to get this information. I found this out around two turns ago… it is said that she will most like whelp the brat after the next turn of the moon.”

Astoria gasped; it should not have shocked her, but it did. She did not doubt that Antonin, Yaxley, Travers and all the others had Fathered dozens of bastard children in the Purification Institute, but to
keep a concubine; a young, unwed, Pure Blood concubine who is pregnant was asking for shame and scandal. Old Edgar Nott would be baying for Yaxley’s blood when this reached his ears. Astoria knew Elizabeth cared not a fig for her husband, but the dishonour to her person obviously stung; she would have to endure other witches gossiping about her, the snide comments, the accusations of not being beautiful or fertile enough which made her husband seek the arms of another woman in the first place, all of it.

Astoria awkwardly reached over while still trying to support the babe and grasped Elizabeth’s wrist briefly. “I am so sorry he dishonoured you like that.”

Elizabeth nodded mutely “If I were expecting as well it would not be such a humiliation, but my Guinevere is only five moons behind your Leo and there has been nothing, nothing at all, not even my moonblood has been late… If that coal skinned slut has a boy I will be a laughing stock.” She finished, betraying her bitterness for the first time.

“Keep trying.” Astoria said soothingly, kissing Anastasia on the forehead as she dozed off to sleep again. “This little lady took me completely by surprise, she was not discovered until around eight weeks.” She looked at Elizabeth directly in the eyes then, “And in any case, the woman has sullied herself for life; the moment Corban loses interest she will be just another silly young witch with a Fatherless bastard.” It was a harsh sentence Astoria knew, but a very real one none the less.

After that Elizabeth cheered somewhat, she stayed for about an hour and though she gossiped a lot it was pleasant to just sit and talk freely. It transpired that as well as the basket of flowers, Elizabeth had gifted her with a crystal rattle, a tiny lace dress and a small silver bangle studded with diamonds – the first of many gifts that were sure to follow. Not too long after she had left Astoria picked up her baby girl who snuffled slightly but did not wake. She made for a sofa near where Leo was playing with his toys on the floor and gently eased herself down onto the sofa. She gazed down at Leo, at her baby girl, so perfect and so innocent. After some time had passed, Astoria directed her gaze toward the window at the many treetops and bursts of colour from the flowers in the garden, wondering what the future held. Anastasia stirred against her chest and Leo hopped up on the sofa next to her. Astoria put her arm around him to draw him close, feeling contented for the first time in what seemed like an age. Her children, her babies who would be lost without her. She was their Mother, and it was only she who could keep them safe in this brutal new world.

Summer was at its highest peak as Astoria stepped out into the garden for the first time in what felt like forever. Leo and Anastasia were both sound asleep, so she had taken the opportunity to have a little peace and quiet. Even with the help of Rathburne, Nora and all the Muggle slaves that worked in the household, caring for a newborn babe and a lively boy of two years was nothing short of exhausting on both her mind and body. She did not mind though, Leo was still such a tiny baby when she had had to leave him, and she was determined to be a part of these first few precious weeks of her daughter’s life. Antonin had not visited Anastasia once since she had been born and that had been four weeks ago; he instead payed more attention to Leo which disquieted Astoria even more than his callous rejection of his own daughter. Indeed, this morn he had ‘paid her a visit’ for the first time since the birth and used her like an animal; determined to make another child despite
Rathburne’s counsel to wait half a year before trying again. She shook off these troubling thoughts, knowing it did not serve for her to dwell on them; she had two beautiful, healthy babies and that was all that mattered – their so called ‘Father’ could be damned for all she cared. Astoria closed her eyes and listened to the enchanted birdsong, the buzzing of bees and the gently lapping water of the pond, immersing herself in the serenity of nature. She made her way through flitter bloom bushes, masses of roses and lilies as large as dinnerplates while dragonflies hovered gracefully around their colourful centres. An ocelot stared down at her with vivid blue eyes from a cherry blossom tree before scampering up a branch to chase a red squirrel, small magenta frogs scattered for the freshwater pools at her approach while their larger toad cousins stood their ground and croaked at her. She immersed herself in the flowery labyrinth, taking in all the sweet smells and trying to forget all the unpleasantness that hung about the manor. Astoria was just walking past the orangery when a hand suddenly shot out from behind her to clamp over her mouth while a strong arm dragged her backwards round her waist. Terror tore at her heart and her hand flew to her right pocket for her wand but the strong arms that had hold of her were dragging her inexorably backward into the hidden shrubbery. Astoria screamed, but the hand prevented her from doing so in earnest as she kicked and struggled, utterly bewildered – wait, wait a moment – she knew those hands; pale, strong and slender and was that… mint and lemon?

Astoria fought free and whirled around, “Draco!” She gasped as he stood there before her, bold as brass, a silvery invisibility cloak flung over his right arm. “You are following me again!? How? Who?... W – what?” This was an even bigger shock than when he had followed her to the powder room… how had he gotten in?

She never got a chance to pose a question as Draco quickly drew her inside the side door of the long, ornamental, pillared building covered in wisteria and kissed her full on the mouth, breathing hard as he pressed her up against an orange tree. Despite the shock and bizarreness of the situation, her mouth opened at once under his to accept his eager tongue. They kissed as passionately as they had done so before until Astoria gently broke their embrace and touched Draco’s face; he looked both sad and angry; had he been…crying? Draco let out a sigh and touched her hair gently, his grey eyes searching every part of her as though he would never have the chance to look on her again.

“Draco what is it? Why are you here? What has upset you my love? Tell me.” She whispered, lightly brushing a strand of his white blonde hair out of his eyes, still unable to believe that she was touching him again after so long; it felt surreal.

“Just kiss me, Tori please.” He said hoarsely, and he leaned in to continue but Astoria took one of his hands in her own and kissed his fingers, looking into his eyes.

Draco looked even more anguished than before and bowed his head for a moment. She did not push him and waited patiently for him to speak. Then after a few moments he said, “I… I have something to tell you. I wanted you to hear it from my lips first, face to face…. I owe you that at least, Tori.” Astoria’s heart quickened, she doubted Draco had risked his life sneaking into the residence of Antonin Dolohov just for a few kisses with his wife, so she waited on tenterhooks for him to speak again. Draco swallowed hard, “Now that all of Europe is conquered, Father has decided…” His
voice trailed away before he took a deep breath and said, “Father has decided that… I am to be married, Tori.”

It was as though someone had gotten a dagger, plunged it into her chest and ripped out her heart. Astoria knew that Draco had had to endure her being married to Antonin, her bearing his children, so she felt she had no right to cry but the tears made themselves known all the same as they came cascading down her cheeks. She turned away, shaking and wiping her eyes; she felt dizzy and dazed as if she had been hit by a tidal wave. Astoria flinched when she felt his hands rest on her shoulders and he gave them a gentle squeeze. “I swear to you Tori I never wanted this, never ever, but Father has commanded it.”

“Who?” Astoria asked in a choked sob, reaching up to her left shoulder to grasp one of his hands.

There was a long pause until Draco said with what sounded like an enormous effort, “Pansy Parkinson… her Father accepted the ‘bid’ yesterday.”

Astoria turned around to stare at him, Pansy Parkinson? Vain, cruel and sarcastic, Pansy had been one of Astoria’s least favourite people at school. Draco had been enamoured with the other witch in his younger years as she had appealed to his childish personality at the time and for a couple of years they had been nigh on inseparable. Pansy had eventually driven Draco away with her demanding nature and once he had joined the Death Eaters along with Astoria their relationship was well and truly over as the feelings between the two of them had started to grow. Thus, Mistress Parkinson disliked Astoria even more so than Astoria disliked her, holding her wholly responsible for “Stealing her Draco” – as she was so often heard to complain in society.

They stood there in silence for what felt like an eternity; Draco hugging Astoria tightly from behind as nature continued to frolic all around them. Nothing needed to be said, they were both trying to put a lot of unspoken things into that hug, but there was one thing that ran true above all else; “I love you.” From time to time Draco would whisper pleasant daydreams in her ear; how much he would love to take her to the sea, how much he loved her… just blissful fantasies that they both knew would never come true. Fantasies aside, Draco also questioned her concernedly about the birth of her daughter and how she was feeling; apparently the news of her difficulty in bringing her daughter into the world had travelled fast. Astoria loved him even more for that; thinking of both her and the babe, even when the babe in question was the offspring of the man he hated most in this world.

Regardless of what Draco said to her, serious or not, it was a pleasant fiction to lose herself in his arms once again and pretend just for a little while that she was not Astoria Dolohov and he was not Draco Malfoy. All fiction must come to an end, however. After a time, Astoria gently disentangled herself from Draco’s embrace and turned around to kiss him on the lips, hard, before breaking away and touching his face again. “Please do not come and visit me again, Draco.” She whispered, “The first time was madness, coming into the house is suicide and….and I also think that it is best that we distance ourselves from one another altogether from now on. You are to be married –” Draco tried to
interrupt, hurt on his face, but Astoria overrode him. “It is over Draco. Once you are wed to Pansy the danger of discovery will be even greater, you know the woman loves me not. If – if you try approach me alone again I will walk away, believe that. It is time to move on, it is time to let go my love.”

“I don’t love Pansy, I never did.” Draco said baldly, looking utterly miserable.

“You do not need to. If you want to be happy, give Pansy a child.” He looked shocked that she would suggest such a thing but Astoria pressed on, remembering what Narcissa Malfoy herself had told her in Yaxley’s dining hall when Leo was just a quickening in her belly “You may not love Pansy, but you will love the children you make with her, I know you will Draco. I thought I knew what love was until I had my children, one day you will understand I am sure.” She got on her tiptoes and gave him a delicate kiss on the cheek, the lump in her throat painfully tight. “Be kind to her Draco, I know you have it in you.” Astoria stepped backward from him, her hand on the doorknob of the orangery. “Perhaps you could even be happy together.” She finished with a sad smile, “The only happiness I have in my life is my children and they will always be my main concern, no matter what. I make the best of what I can and so should you…Goodbye, Draco.”

“Tori please, just a moment –” He pleaded, reaching out as though to touch her.

“Goodbye Draco.” Astoria cut in firmly before he could utter anymore. And, feeling as though her heart were literally breaking, she turned her back upon this man, this wonderful man who she had once disliked before he stole her heart, this man who was the only one she ever loved.

Masked and hooded, the Death Eaters gazed at the scene before them. Summer had long since fled; the sky was an iron grey and though the wind was gentle it was ice cold, so cold that Astoria felt as though a dagger were slicing through her cheek when it kissed her. The once grand gates to the Palace of Charlottenburg in Berlin were smashed and burned, the ornate columns that had once framed them were nothing more than piles of rubble and dust. In their place there were rows and rows of black metal pikes adorned with heads which Astoria studied unflinchingly, yet they were still hard to look upon. Some had rotted beyond recognition and were scarcely slimy skulls, but the freshly impaled ones still had the horrified expressions they were wearing when their heads were struck off - their eyes pointing in different directions where they had rolled in terror, their mouths agape from their dying screams as flies flew in and out of their mouths while the crows pecked and pulled at their rapidly blueing tongues. The palace’s central tower had been completely blasted away and the Dark Mark swirled malevolently in the sky above, bathing the pale limestone of the building in an eerie green glow.

Further evidence of the slaughter that had taken place in the palace could be seen as the Death Eaters trooped swiftly through the corridors to their commanded destination. Paintings had been slashed, much of the gilded furniture was broken and there were numerous blood stains and spatters on the walls and floors. Astoria inwardly grimaced and filled her head with thoughts of her children who
remained tucked safely away in the Rhineland while she went out into this cruel world to risk her life for ‘the cause’ yet again. On and on the Death Eaters strode until they entered what had once been a grand banquet hall, though all the tables and chairs had been shoved up against the wall and parts of the marble floor had been torn up. The Dark Lord was sat in his great black throne on the dais which looked at odds with the lavish reds, golds and brightly coloured paintings of food decorating the walls. His Lordship was as still as a statue, his hairless head bowed, his long white fingers steepled and his catlike eyes closed as all his followers, old and new gathered before him. But for the hushed footsteps and the soft hissing of Nagini coiled at his Lordship’s feet, there was total silence in the hall as it continued to fill. Finally, James Clearwater flicked his wand to close all the doors leading into the cavernous room and they all shut with a ‘click.’ At that precise moment, the Dark Lord’s eyes opened and those shockingly scarlet pits roved slowly over the room, the nervous faces, all of it. He stared for a painfully long time, letting the silence spiral horribly and Astoria could almost feel his Lordship’s relish at keeping them in suspense.

At last, the Dark Lord finally spoke, his high cold voice echoing off the sparkling walls. “You all know why I have summoned you here this day. Europe is finally mine. In a thousand years all who served in this historic movement will be honoured beyond their dreams while I rule eternal as wizardkind’s one true Lord and Master.”

Astoria chanced a glance at Antonin standing next to her; he was gazing at the Dark Lord raptly, a horrible sort of anticipatory hunger on his pale face. What does he know? She thought anxiously before turning her attention back to the world’s most formidable wizard.

The Dark Lord had risen from his grim seat and had begun to pace up and down the dais while Nagini slithered up the throne and coiled herself through one of the arms to gaze at the waiting Death Eaters with her large orange eyes. His Lordship put back his terrible snake’s face to gaze at the colourful mural above them all and sniffed deeply, his slit like nostrils dilating horribly. “But Europe is by the by.” He murmured softly as though he were almost talking to himself, “Europe is but a small portion of the world, we must ensure the continued rise of the Dark Order everywhere to suppress those foolish, meddlesome fools who think themselves ‘heroes!’” His Lordship spat the last word out like venom before continuing in a far louder tone, “This day I shall set in place a plan that will stun the world; no wizard in history has ever even attempted what I am setting out to achieve, and with your help my friends, it will be possible and we shall emerge victorious! See now what nation is to befall Lord Voldemort’s wrath next!” He screeched at the top of his voice while every Death Eater in the hall cheered and stamped their feet, the flashes of light from hundreds of wand tips bouncing off the walls and shattering the glass in the windows. And, grinning like a maniac, the Dark Lord waved his wand. There was a blinding flash of white light and the banquet hall vanished for a moment. Like everyone else, Astoria’s head jerked upwards to look at the ceiling. The heavenly mural depicting flying cherubs and winged horses had vanished to replaced by a map, a huge glittering map which stretched across the vast space glowing green and black. Many people gasped, and Astoria heard Antonin’s triumphant, cruel chuckle in her ear. It only took her a fraction of a second to realise what part of the world she was looking at, but when that realisation set in – heavy and absolute, Astoria’s heart hammered and her stomach gave a great twist as she continued to gaze at the vast nation that Lord Voldemort had singled out next for his reign of red terror.

Chapter End Notes
I used a newspaper article in this story as I wanted the war described from a completely different point of view as we have been in 'Death Eater World' for a long time now and I felt it was time to switch it up a bit...let me know if this worked/didn't work for you. Don't want to say too much now but (so far) Anastasia will play an important part later on.
Chapter Summary

Hi everyone, sorry for the long delay in posting this chapter, I had my first real block while writing this and it took a while to get over but I have finally decided how this is going to end/who dies etc. I plan to finish this by chapter 45 so consider these last few chapters to be the final part of the story. (for now at least) I feel that this chapter speaks for itself, hope everyone enjoys...

Thanks to all those who continue to read <3

Same disclaimer applies.
Warning: potentially disturbing material

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

~*Six Years Later*~

Astoria gazed out of the window and sighed at the sight of the enormous snowflakes drifting lazily past the glass, adding to the already heavy fall that had carpeted the grounds just as it had the day before last… It is always snowing here, and always so cold. She supposed she should be used to it by now having lived in Russia for almost three years but that was by the by; the Justiciar’s Palace in Moscow was never a place that had ever evoked warmth for her, regardless of the weather. To be sure the summers could be pleasant here but most of the time it was either raining, snowing or hailing.

“I am pleased with his growth my Lady, very pleased indeed. I think from now on I will check him every other day unless you would prefer otherwise?” Asked Rathburne as he peered over his spectacles at her. He looked more grey, stooped and elderly than ever; he must be approaching at least seventy by now, though his wits remained as sharp as a man of twenty.

“I agree.” Astoria replied, smiling contentedly as warm relief broke over her. “If I have any cause for concern I will alert you at once.”

“Very good My Lady.” Rathburne replied with a strained bow before vanishing with a faint pop.

Astoria gazed down once again at the tiny baby who had been nursing at her breast for the past hour or so; he had now had his fill it seemed and was in a contented slumber. She stroked his golden curls and glanced up at the gilded, many handed clock mounted on the fireplace which displayed both the date and time. Antonin was supposed to return from St. Petersburg two days past, but as was his wont he took his time sampling the many ‘pleasures’ that the Chief Justiciar of Russia enjoyed while
travelling round the Empire. As far as Astoria was concerned, the longer the left side of her bed stayed empty, the better. Over the years as the Dark Lord built up his armies and expanded the Empire, Astoria had been at her husband’s side almost constantly as she was shunted from country to country with young children in tow… thus life was nothing short of blissful in his absence. As she continued to stare down at her tiny son, Astoria reflected how the time had flown. To be sure, the last six years her life had been something of a repetition while the world around her was warped into something she scarcely recognised, yet she still remembered it all as though it were yesterday…

After Germany’s fall, the Dark Lord had declared open war on Russia; the largest nation on Earth and “The key to smashing Asia” as he put it. His Lordship had unleashed all manner of his diabolical experiments upon the country in a savage slaughter that lasted half a year and had left millions dead. It was the worst mass death toll in the war… at that point in time. As the Dark Lord had predicted, Russia being dragged into the war saw the collapse of Central Asia and the Death Eaters were given full rein to repeat what they had done all over Europe: they looted, raped, enslaved and killed, bringing red terror to countless innocents. The Middle East soon buckled under the thousands of troops that the wicked Minister Yildriz sent forth from Turkey, allowing the Southern European Forces to infiltrate Northern Africa which was also crushed within half a year.

The Dark Lord had an easier time in toppling countries in Asia, Africa and the Middle East rather than in Europe as they were ruled by Pure Blood families and not Ministries. Therefore, the families had a vested interest in keeping their wealth and positions as long as they pledged their allegiance – and their power – to the Dark Lord. Those who opposed the Dark Order, Pure Blooded or not were destroyed root and stem, whether it was by the Dark Lord arming a rival family to exterminate them for him, turning oppressed witches and wizards against their rulers or even by use of a family traitor. Indeed, Prince Gyasi finally achieved his heart’s desire when the Dark Lord granted him troops, Nundus and Dragons to invade his native Namibia which he had done with sadistic zeal. He terrorised his own countrymen for close to two years before breaking through the magical defences of the Royal Palace and slaughtering his entire family, including his elderly Father who had banished him all those years ago.

Russia had taken three years to completely conquer, and after the Dark Lord had painted the streets of Moscow red, he passed one of the craziest decrees yet of his bloody reign; he named Antonin Chief Justiciar of Russia. The Chief Justiciar was the position used in times of old before Ministries came into effect, thus it made her husband the most powerful man in all the land; the only power that stood higher than his was that of the Dark Lord. Astoria had felt physically ill when Antonin was ‘sworn in,’ knowing how much of a brutal ruler he would be… and so he had been. Though his family had been banished over three generations ago, Dolohov was still a name that frightened witches and wizards in Russia and after the first year of Antonin’s tyrannical rule, the name was spoken with almost as much fear as the Dark Lord himself. Antonin had revenged himself upon all his Father’s and Grandfather’s enemies who had called loudly for all members of the House of Dolohov to be expelled from Russia all those years ago and had naturally shown them no mercy. Their ancestral castles and palaces were burned, their family heirlooms stolen or melted down for Galleons; their wives and daughters raped, and their sons tortured to death.

Once Russia was truly under his Lordship’s rule, he had declared that all conquered territory was
now part of an Empire – his Empire. The toxic cloud of the Dark Order now engulfed almost half the
world with only the Americas, Australia and parts of the Far East remaining unconquered… and
perhaps not for long. All captured Muggle cities were flattened and destroyed to be rebuilt into cities
for witches and wizards where they were segregated by blood status – exactly what was done in
Paris. Basilisks, Quintapeds, rabid Thestrals and all other manner of ferocious Dark beasts now ran
wild throughout all conquered territory with the cities being the only safe place from their wrath.
Thus, if by some small miracle a desperate Muggle managed to escape their enslavement in a Pure
Blood manor, they would not long survive the treacherous jungles and forests that stretched out over
the vast Empire. Pure Bloods were allowed to travel within the Empire, but never out of the magical
boundaries at the borders that repelled the Dark Lord’s enemies; no one came in and no one came
out. America with the connivance of China and the Resistance kept trying to intervene and break into
the Empire but it was all too little too late; by the time they had bothered to take a hand the Dark
Lord was already far too powerful with equally powerful allies and Dark creatures behind him and
all their attempts had failed in misery and blood.

Astoria shuddered a little despite the warmth of the room and as she awkwardly reached for her
wand to light more candles, there was a timid knock at her door accompanied by the low murmur of
excited voices. She could not help but smile; those voices always brought her so much joy.

“Come in,” She called softly so as not to wake the babe.

Sure enough the door creaked open and several small figures came darting toward her on even
smaller feet which whispered softly upon the plush carpet. One by one in their silk sleeping shifts her
children crawled and wriggled onto the bed, though the smallest two with their little baby legs had to
be lifted by the Muggle slave woman that had accompanied them. Wordless, the Muggle bowed her
head and departed the bedchamber after the babes were settled. Astoria smiled again at her babies
and they smiled back at her; all those pairs of eyes in various hues of lilac and blue were fixed on her
adoringly while the dim morning light sparkled off their golden curls as it streamed through the
window. While Antonin had been out fighting his war, this was what Astoria had dedicated her life
to, her children; he faced bullets and bled on the battlefield while she grew great with child and bled
in the birthing bed.

“Good Morning Mother are you well?” Leo asked with a smile, kissing her on the cheek before
planting another on the baby's forehead. He had not jumped up on the bed like his brothers and sister
but preferred to sit in the chair by the bedside and slipped his fingers between her own and gave her
hand a squeeze...just the way he had always done since he was little. Though Leo was eight and
wiser than his years, he was still very attached to her and never missed a moment to have a long hug
with his Mother when all the smaller ones were at rest.

Astoria smiled back at Leo and kissed his hand, “I am very well my love, and you?”

But before he could answer, Anastasia cut in excitedly, “Mother! Oh, Mother is baby Fedor awake!?
Can I hold him Mother??” Her lavender eyes were gleaming in the candlelight and her masses of pale gold curls tumbled to her waist in a sort of careless beauty as she gazed at her youngest brother excitedly. Leo did not seem to mind the interruption; he absolutely adored his little sister and his younger siblings and was always very patient and gentle with them.

“Shh! He is asleep silly!” Hissed Aleksander and Konstantin as they edged closer. “You will wake him if you are not quiet!” Vividly violet eyed like her Great Grandsire Zeus and golden haired like her, the twins were identical down to the last curl and would often speak in unison or else finish one another’s sentences.

“Will not!” Anastasia replied angrily, thrusting out her lip.

“Hush now, darlings.” Astoria cut in swiftly, correctly sensing a great big argument brewing. She touched Anastasia’s face lightly before wincing a little as she gently disentangled little Aires’ chubby fist from her hair which he had been playing with as he giggled and gurgled. “Fedor is sound asleep for now and we do not wish to wake him by arguing, do we? Anastasia, you may hold Fedor later when you are dressed but only while you are seated.”

Astoria looked down at her youngest again and rocked him a little to reassure herself. Despite having her children so close together they had all been born big, strong and healthy… but not so much her poor little Fedor. Her baby boy had almost been lost several times in the womb and did not grow as large and as fast as his siblings. Nevertheless, her little one had almost made it through the whole way and toward the end he had grown bigger and stronger after Rathburne’s intervention. It had been a relief when she had started to show a lot more and felt her baby moving more frequently but like much else in her life, her relief had been short lived. Astoria had been a fortnight away from giving birth to Fedor when Antonin had come home drunk, angry and empty handed from the gaming tables, determined to claim his marital rights and take out his rage. He had been so rough and frightened her so badly that she went into labour that same night and her baby boy was born early. Rathburne had warned Astoria to brace herself for a stillbirth but once again little Fedor had been determined to survive and after she had lain for a day and a half trying to bring him forth, he had come screaming into the world just eight short weeks ago. That is how she had settled on the name Fedor, for the name in Russian simply meant: ‘Gift.’ Her sweet baby was a precious gift and under her constant care he was getting stronger every day, despite Antonin referring to him as: “The runt of the litter.”

Nikolai, who was only three and had plainly not listened to a word of the conversation suddenly blurted, “Mama I’m hungry!”

No surprises there Astoria thought, amused. Though there were less than ten short lunar cycles between Nikolai and the twins who were now four, he could easily fit into their clothes and eat twice as much. Antonin had given him his middle name because out of all her children, Nikolai favoured him the most in looks which also made him his ‘favourite.’ Unlike the others with their skins of pale
gold, Nikolai had inherited the porcelain white skin like Anastasia, his hair was wavy instead of curly and it was a darker shade of gold than his siblings. His eyes were a cornflower blue with just a hint of violet and his nose was similar, though not the same, as Antonin’s; “malen’kiy Antonin” was what her husband’s men called Nikolai which meant: little Antonin. Astoria could vaguely see Antonin if she looked hard enough at her son, but otherwise to her he was her sweet faced, laughing boy who loved his food and always made her smile.

“Indeed,” Astoria replied, gently easing the corner of the sopping wet silken sheet out of his mouth that he had been chewing. “Well, you may have a biscuit or something I suppose. Leo darling, pass Mother her wand.”

“Aires wants biscuits too!” Piped Aires loudly, now trying to crawl up her leg; at two he was also growing fast, always eager to be a part of what the older ones were doing. Aires had been named for the constellation that burned bright at the moment of his birth, but Astoria wished – not for the first time, that she could have named him after her brother; the likeness between Alcaeus and Aires was so striking it was almost haunting.

Astoria sighed and summoned the biscuit jar, “Only one each.” She warned, “You will ruin your breakfast if you are not careful.”

When the children had taken their leave and Astoria had cleared all the crumbs now littering her bed, the same Muggle slave from before came in to help her dress for the day ahead. After Astoria was meticulously gowned, powdered and primped, the Muggle woman held out a velvet box that was filled with brooches; some were old family ones, the others were ‘official honours’ from the Dark Lord himself. He had created several styles and honours to be bestowed upon deserving Death Eaters who had served him loyally. There was the Order of Salazar, an MDE – Member of the Dark Empire, and so many more that his Lordship had dreamed up in his deluded mind, but those honours were for wizards and rarely given to witches. Indeed, the Dark Lord had wasted little time in showing the world what he truly thought of witches now he no longer had any need of them due to the huge numbers he now had at his command. He had decreed that witches were be to removed from any sort of education after they had their first moonblood and were instead to be taught in ‘Bridal School,’ or as it is now known as: The Witches Society of Purity and Beauty.

After Russia’s defeat when Nikolai was scarcely a few weeks old, the Dark Lord had once again sought out Astoria himself to “Fulfil her true role in the Empire” only this time he had named her head of the Society in Russia. Just like her time at the Purification Institute all those years ago in Paris, her work to ensure ‘racial and blood harmony’ within the Empire left her sick to her stomach and often kept her awake at night with troubled and conflicting thoughts. Her duties mainly involved emphasising a witch’s place in this grim Empire in which they all lived, which was to be the perfect, loyal and loving wives of their Death Eater husbands and to have as many Pure Blooded babies as possible – preferably boys. The Society placed a heavy emphasis on child bearing and child care and witches involved themselves with the planning of balls, luncheons and always stayed out of politics and war; they were wives and Mothers now, nothing more. That was how a witch’s worth was determined now in the Dark Lord’s twisted little kingdom; by the number of children she could breed
for his monstrous army. Witches were no longer allowed to join the army without the express permission of a male relative if they were unwed or their husband if they were not. Naturally there were few wizards willing to give their consent; they wanted to keep their female counterparts as vulnerable and downtrodden as possible while they continued to brutally carve up the world for their own selfish gains. Thus, for the past three years Astoria had spent most of her days poisoning the minds of young witches by parroting the Dark Lord’s twisted beliefs on blood purity and reproduction – often while she was carrying a baby herself. She hated herself for it but there was naught to be done; she would be no use to her children if she was imprisoned or executed.

Astoria studied the brooches before her, knowing she had to choose at least two to make herself seem ‘impressive’ to her young charges as this would be the first time she would receive young witches since having little Fedor. “I think we shall go with the Serpent of Samara and the Society brooch today if you please.” She murmured absently to the Muggle who promptly nodded and proceeded to pin the brooches onto an emerald green sash emblazoned with the Dark Mark in silver thread. Astoria was required to wear the wretched sash when she was carrying out her duties for the Empire and by extension, the Dark Lord himself; to forgo the sash would mean swift and severe punishment.

When all was said and done Astoria studied her reflection in the mirror; though it had only been eight weeks it seemed like forever since she had been really dressed up and it was strange to see her stomach so flat again. She was clad in a gown of palest silver silk to compliment the damnable sash where two elaborate and jewelled brooches glittered by her left shoulder; like the Dark Mark, such adornments and honours were never placed to the right. ‘The Serpent of Samara’ brooch was an honour reserved especially for witches. Samara Slytherin had been Salazar Slytherin’s first wife and had borne him twelve sons and three daughters. Now in the Empire a witch was given an elaborate bronze brooch in the likeness of a snake after the birth of her third child, silver for five, gold for seven and platinum worked with diamonds and emeralds for nine or more. Astoria had received her green velvet box containing her golden Serpent of Samara within hours of Fedor’s birth. Her Society brooch also featured a snake, naturally; a pale green snake rising from a pink lotus flower with a large pearl locked between its fanged jaws. Beneath the adornment read the words: ‘Aeternum Pura’ which meant: ‘Eternally Pure.’ The serpent represented their eternal service to the Dark Lord, the lotus flower for their fertility and the pearl, their purity; all the things the Witches Society of Purity and Beauty stood for.

The familiar sounds of excited laughter and gossip could be heard from the end of the corridor as Astoria walked carefully toward the main drawing room with a sleeping Fedor in her arms. Cries of welcome and murmurs of “My Lady” greeted her when she stepped into the grand salon.

It was a great cavernous room lavishly decorated in green and silver with high ceilings. Antonin had filled the place with stolen art that he had plundered from his enemies as a show of strength; jewelled snakes gleamed in alcoves and a richly painted black dragon breathing blue fire covered the vast ceiling along with countless dark and valuable objects scattered about the room. Littered on carved velvet chairs and chaises were over a score of young witches aged from eleven to fourteen, they were all nieces, granddaughters, goddaughters and cousins from some of the most ancient and revered Pure Blood families in the world, here so that they might be moulded into obedient Death
Eater wives. On the largest sofa sat Elizabeth, languidly sipping tea with her children all around her, the youngest cradled in her left arm as he slept. It had taken longer for Yaxley to get the heirs he wanted from Elizabeth, but he had gotten them none the less; two girls and two boys to go with his four bastards that he had sired with the wanton Veliane Ayim, his mistress.

Before Astoria could utter a reciprocatory greeting there was a flash of purple silk, flying chestnut hair and laughing grey eyes, “Auntie Tori! Auntie Tori!” Squealed Guinevere Yaxley breathlessly as she came skidding to a halt in front of her as the tiny gown she was dressed in billowed out behind her from her flight. “Is that the other baby Auntie!?”

Guinevere used the phrase ‘other baby’ as Astoria and Elizabeth had been expecting their babies at the same time with her son Theodore being born exactly a moon’s turn before Fedor; though he had arrived on time. Though Astoria misliked the work she did for the Society, her friendship with Elizabeth could not help but flourish after spending close to three years in one another’s company almost every day and raising their children alongside one another.

Elizabeth then gave a tinkling laugh, “Let Auntie Tori sit down first dear child, honestly! And do not run, my dear.” She then turned her grey eyes to Astoria, “Good morning darling are you both well?” She asked, smiling at Fedor as Astoria sat down next to her, the eyes of the other young witches fixed upon them avidly.

“Stronger every day.” Astoria replied with a smile as she winked at little Guinevere who grinned a little sheepishly, “How is your little Theodore?” She asked, glancing at the slumbering chestnut haired babe in Elizabeth’s arms whom she had named after her brother.

“Theo is well enough” Elizabeth smiled again, stroking the babe’s hair lightly, “I am glad to hear sweet Fedor is doing well, he looks so much bigger.”

“He always wants feeding now.” Astoria said, not quite keeping the pride out of her voice as she lightly touched Fedor’s face; he looked just like Leo when he had been a babe. Indeed, at her touch Fedor squirmed slightly and stretched out a small hand.

Instinctively, Astoria conjured a milk bottle and began to feed her baby; despite the Society’s excessive emphasis on child bearing, breastfeeding outside one’s bedchamber was strictly forbidden. Nevertheless, since she had been named Head of the Society she had been encouraged by Alessandra Zabini who had ‘mentored’ her in the beginning, to bring her babes along with her whenever she received witches to reiterate their role in the Empire.

“My dears,” Elizabeth called to her other three children and as one they all looked up at her. “Time
to go now, Mother needs to teach. Leo, Anastasia and the others are in the morning room, you have my leave to play with them there until luncheon. Guinevere help Thomas and Helen up if you please.” Guinevere curtsied and beamed before taking her infant siblings by the hands and tottering from the room while a Muggle slave trailed silently behind them.

Astoria glanced at the carved jade clock on the Eastern wall and saw that it was past time they started. “My ladies, if we could all rise for the preamble in honour of our noble Dark Lord and ruler.” She called over the low murmur. At once there was a great flurry and rustling of skirts as all the witches got to their feet; everyone had to rise for the preamble – no exceptions. The preamble was always used before official engagements, school classes and meals, a witch or wizard caught reciting the preamble while seated would find themselves subject to one hundred lashes from a Troll and a one hundred thousand Galleon fine… if they were lucky. “Today I have asked Mistress Rowle to lead us in the preamble.” Astoria finished once everyone was stood.

Clarissa Rowle, a niece to Thorfinn Rowle was lovely young girl of thirteen years; tall, blue eyed and blonde and clad in cerise silk she looked almost a woman. *Doubtless she will be married and expecting a child within the two years* Astoria thought grimly as Clarissa got gracefully to her feet, smiled sweetly, cleared her throat and recited in a high girlish voice:

“*Keep your blood pure*…”

And all the others, Astoria included, joined in for the second line and onward:

“*It is not yours alone,*

*It comes from far away*  

*It flows into the distance*  

*Laden with thousands of ancestors,*  

*It holds the entire future!*  

*It is your eternal life,*   

*Keep your blood pure.*”

“Good morn to you all my ladies, I hope you are all well rested?” Elizabeth asked the room at large while the witches took their seats and arranged their skirts. There were some silent nods and murmurs of assent; some of the witches looked excited, others anxious. “That is just as well, for tonight you may very well meet your future husbands.” At this Clarissa Rowle and Greta Mulciber burst into fits of excited giggles but Elizabeth paid them no mind and pressed on. “We have gone over the plans for tonight’s ball half a hundred times already, but I would like to bolster the words I spoke to you three morns past concerning your behaviour in front of the Dark Lord.”
Just the mention of his Lordship wiped the smiles off Clarissa and Greta’s faces and all the other witches fell silent at once. It was a tense silence, full of anticipation and fear; many of them had only ever seen pictures and statues of the Dark Lord, who spent most of his days shut in his Moscow Fortress, sometimes not emerging for weeks upon end. Indeed, the last time Astoria herself had seen him was at the last Muggle baiting at the city amphitheatre a few turns ago before her confinement with Fedor. Tonight, though he would be present, and she would see him. There was to be a ‘Coming of Age’ ball this evenfall and every witch present now was required to attend as a witch was no longer considered a woman when she was seventeen but rather as soon as she had bled which meant that she was fit to be put in the Bridal Book and subsequently wedded. The sole purpose of tonight’s ball was to dangle these young maidens under the noses of unwed Death Eaters in the hope that they might ‘bite’ and take them to wife.

“Once again my ladies, I cannot stress how important these instructions are when you are in his Lordship’s presence.” Elizabeth continued forcefully, “No matter what is happening or what anyone else is doing you are never to look his Lordship directly in the face and you are not to speak aloud unless he invites you to do so. In the unlikely event that you are called upon to speak, you are to keep your eyes lowered and your head bowed. You are not to sit until his Lordship sits first and you do not start your meal until the preamble has been rendered and the Dark Lord gives his leave for everyone to start. Of course, it goes without saying that you need to be on your best behaviour not only for our Lord and protector, but good conduct this night could very well land you a favourable match. When a wizard looks through the Bridal Book, you want him to remember you for all the right reasons. If you are approached by a wizard you are to wait until a male relative, myself or the Lady Dolohov introduces you, be polite, smile and speak as little as possible… a young lady should be the ornament to the eye, not an ache in the ear, remember?”

“Understood Madam Yaxley.” The witches all chorused in unison before many of them turned to one another excitedly, discussing what each of them would be wearing that night, how they were going to have their hair, oblivious to the twisted use they were being put to in their childlike innocence.

Astoria could never escape those feelings of deep sadness when she saw scenes such as this one; young girls on the brink of womanhood, so full of life, hopes and dreams, not knowing that those fairytale daydreams of what their lives might be like would be shattered as soon as they were claimed by a wizard and rushed into Motherhood far too young. The noise level in the salon began to creep up again and little Theo had just awoken so Astoria decided to take things in hand.

“I have nothing further to add my ladies, just please be on your best behaviour.” She said earnestly, “Now my ladies, what have you been covering with Madam Yaxley?”

Greta Mulciber raised her hand at once, “Please my Lady, last time we discussed Blood Shame, the dangers of diluting Pure Blood by intermarriage and essential child care.”
“Very well, can anyone give me an explanation of what Blood Shame is and three potential dangers of mixing magical blood?”

A hand from right at the back shot up this time from one Eloise Travers, a third cousin to Edward Travers and one of his ‘favourites.’ “Blood Shame is a form of treason my Lady, it is when a witch and wizard who are not of an equal blood status lie with one another.” Eloise said promptly, looking immensely proud as her Society badge gleamed on the left side of her gown. “Blood Shame and intermarriage should be avoided as it can lead to an increase in Muggles and Squibs and a decline in blood purity which bodes ill for those of us who are from the true magical blood. Birth defects, slow wits and aggressive behaviour are just some of the unfavourable effects that can result from the mixing of magical and common blood. This has been well documented for many years by fully qualified Healers throughout the Empire.”

“And what is the punishment for Blood Shame child?” Elizabeth interjected as Theo nursed from a bottle.

Several of the witches shifted uncomfortably, averting their eyes but others turned around to look at Eloise Travers, their expressions almost fearful. Eloise’s smile faded, and she looked uneasy, trying and failing to repress a shudder. “The punishment is… death Madam Yaxley and – and the witch in question must be cleansed of her wanton wickedness for the betrayal of her blood, her family honour and the Dark Order.”

Elizabeth nodded grimly and looked around at them all, “I am sure you have all heard the stories about what happens to such a witch, see that it is never any of you my ladies. That handsome young Half Blood guardsmen guarding your Father’s castle may whisper sweet words of love, but there can only be destruction should you choose to walk along this path, only shame, dishonour and disgrace. This is why we castrate male Muggles, so they do not try and seduce and corrupt your innocent young minds and bodies; stay on the course of virtue and you will have a suitable Pure Blood husband and hopefully after that, a child.”

Astoria nodded gravely as if in agreement as many of the young witches leaned forward intently to listen, drinking in every word. After asking more questions on the crime of Blood Shame and the so called ‘dangers’ of having children with any wizard who was not a Pure Blood, they soon moved onto child care. Luckily both Fedor and Theo were relatively quiet and did not object to being held and bottle fed by witches other than their Mothers. Clarissa Rowle in particular seemed to enjoy the exercise greatly and she was as gentle with Fedor as though he were made of spun glass and seemed genuinely sorry to have to hand him back to Astoria. After a brief luncheon with the witches and all the children, the afternoon was given over to other womanly pursuits such as needlework, advanced charms or the high harp.

“What are you going to wear tonight my lady?” Jocelyn Avery asked Astoria excitedly while the two pure white doves she had conjured soared above her head with roses in their beaks as the others
looked on, impressed.

Astoria smiled at the excited young girl before her in spite of herself, “I am undecided Mistress Avery, I daresay I shall be pleased to fit into any of my former gowns so soon after Fedor.” Elizabeth laughed, and the young witches giggled nervously among one another. “I will wear something recognisable so that you can find me, I promise.” Astoria then gestured up at the doves who had perched on the mantle and were staring down at them all. “Those are handsome birds my dear, your practice with charms does you great credit.”

When Astoria had pointed at the birds the long, fluted sleeve of her left gown slipped momentarily, she hastily grabbed it but too late. Clarissa Rowle and several others gasped in shock and wonder. “M – my Lady!” gasped Jocelyn Avery “You have – you have the Mark!? The Dark Mark!?”

“Correct.” She replied stiffly before reciting mechanically. “The Mark is no longer given to witches unless she has permission from a male elder to join the army, we are Marked by our place in this most womanly of Societies, nothing more. A witch’s duty is to be at her husband’s side and give him sons.”

“But –” interjected Eloise Travers who had inched closer to see.

“– No more questions about the Mark, it does not concern you.” Elizabeth said repressively over the curious murmurs which were quelled instantly under her stern look.

Just as wizards were branded with the Dark Mark when they joined the army, witches were also branded once they joined the Society of Purity and Beauty so – just like the wizards, their devotion to their place in the world would be seared in their memories forever more. Rather than being branded on the inner left forearm, the witches were branded with the Society badge on the upper left thigh as part of their initiation as future Death Eater wives. Astoria remembered how badly it had burned, it had hurt worse than getting her Dark Mark all those years ago when she had been a girl of sixteen.

Astoria was flustered, she felt the heat rising to her face as she rearranged baby Fedor’s blankets fussily and averted her eyes from the young witches, trying to grope for another topic when she froze. She heard the sound of laboured footsteps on the marble outside the drawing room coming closer and closer and her stomach gave a jolt; she knew who that was. Sure, enough her Lord husband soon came limping into the room, his cold blue eyes greedily taking in the flurry of femininity before him before resting directly on her.

“Good afternoon my ladies.” He announced graciously, vanishing his travelling cloak with a flourish.
of his wand before limping heavily over to the sofa where Astoria and Elizabeth were sat with their babies.

“Good afternoon Justiciar Dolohov.” All the witches chorused sweetly, flashing white smiles and batting their lashes while Antonin’s mouth gave a pleasurable twist as he settled himself between Astoria and Elizabeth. Astoria’s young charges gasped, giggled and whispered among themselves, gazing at her husband in awe while he continued to undress them all with his eyes.

Antonin shifted uncomfortably despite the luxuriously soft sofa, for the past six years had not been kind to him even if they had not succeeded in killing him altogether. When the Dark Lord had ordered a final assault on Russia, Antonin was hit by a curse in his bad leg that had first been injured in Germany. The curse had been a mortal one and it was only with Rathburne’s remonstrations that his leg – and his life, were saved. After that though, Antonin’s fighting days were largely done and after briefly overseeing the reconstruction of Durmstrang Institute with Yaxley he was appointed Chief Justiciar to reward him for his unwavering loyalty to the Dark Lord. Antonin’s position gave him immense power, but it was not without its costs. Now that he spent his most time sitting behind a desk or else being entertained in palaces all over the country he was no longer as fit and muscular as he once was. He still had enormous strength but his hard, flat stomach had given way to an unsightly gut because of his excessive drinking and the extra weight put a bigger strain on his bad leg so that he limped worse than ever. Astoria was twenty three years junior to Antonin so she had always thought of him as ‘old’ but now she truly saw him as an old man albeit a scary one. His dark hair had receded more than ever and was streaked liberally with silver, his face was deeply lined and his jowls had begun to sag; an aging Death Eater whose glory days were fading fast while he slowly drank himself to death.

“My darling wife.” Antonin purred softly as he leaned over and kissed her on the forehead before inclining his head to Elizabeth, a lascivious grin twisting his face as he ogled her. Despite it being late afternoon, the smell of vodka coming off him was immensely strong, “Good morrow to you, my lady. I have just been in conversation with your Lord husband at Durmstrang, you shall be pleased to know that all is well.”

“You honour us with your presence, Justiciar Dolohov.” Elizabeth said with a radiant smile that did not reach her grey eyes which were filled with nothing but poison as she looked at him. “It gladdens my heart that my Lord husband is excelling as Headmaster.”

Antonin gave her another wolfish smile before turning back to Astoria and lifting little Fedor out of her arms. Where his wedding ring should have been there was a great heavy ring crafted of black diamond and emerald which featured a carving of a Basilisk crushing a tower; his Member of the Dark Empire ring. It glittered sinisterly and was quite at odds with the soft colours and delicate wool that Fedor was swathed in. Astoria’s pulse quickened slightly as Fedor stirred in her husband’s arms; she always hated it when he picked up or touched any of the children. “Perhaps this little man will make a good Death Eater yet.” He announced as he stared down at Fedor, “He has grown these past weeks it would seem. Where is little Antonin today?”
“Yes husband.” Astoria said meekly while the other witches continued to watch on eagerly, doubtless taking mental notes on this exchange for when they met their potential suitors tonight. “Your son Nikolai is asleep just now, my love.”

“Sweet Fedor is very handsome Justiciar Dolohov, you must be so proud to have seven healthy babes.” Piped up Hera Yildriz, one of Minister Yildriz’s many, many daughters from one of his many, many wives.

Antonin flashed the young Turkish witch a smile that was almost charming and replied, “Very proud indeed Mistress Yildriz, but we hope to make it eight by the year’s end, do we not darling?” He asked Astoria with sickly sweetness as he took one of her hands and kissed it to more sighs of longing and excited murmurs from the young witches.

“Of course.” Astoria replied with the vacant, empty headed smile that she knew her husband loved, “It is an honour to fulfil my duty to give my husband more children.” She leaned over and planted a soft kiss on his cheek, lightly touching his arm as she did so.

Antonin smirked and kissed her full on the mouth before getting heavily to his feet and turning back to the room at large. “See that you follow her example my Ladies,” He said with another lascivious grin and a roguish wink to fresh outbreaks of giggling. “It is time I took my leave and I hope to see you all this evenfall, I am sure you shall all be a sight to behold.” And with that he bowed, turned on his heel and half strode, half hobbled from the room.

The sky outside was as black as pitch behind the yellow velvet curtains of the nursery. Candlelight filled the room and danced off the many toys and illuminated the lace trimmed beds of various sizes. Astoria tore her gaze away from a fawn painted on the wall which was gambling about with a flock of blue birds and continued with the task at hand. “…And then, the little unicorn looked around and said: Oh no! I’ve wandered off the path! How will I ever find my way back to the golden valley with all my friends? The little unicorn began to cry then, he missed his friends and his Mother, he wanted to go home… but then suddenly he heard a squeaking above him. The little unicorn stopped crying at once and looked up, startled. It was a squirrel, a red squirrel that was talking to him in a high, squeaky voice: Do not cry little unicorn, I know the way back to the golden valley and I have some great friends that can help us along the way too!”

She stopped once again to draw breath and held up the storybook so that all her children could see the colourful moving pictures within of the golden unicorn foal and the red squirrel in a forest clearing. They all leaned forward excitedly clad in their sleeping shifts, ready for bed. Even Leo, who had long outgrown this story was waiting on tenterhooks as she read while little Fedor remained oblivious and continued to doze happily in his basket.
“What happens to the unicorn!?” Nikolai asked excitedly from Leo’s lap, his blue eyes full of wonder.

“We want to hear about the squirrel!!” Aleksander and Konstantin shrilled over him as they wriggled closer on their stomachs, gazing at her.

But before Astoria could continue, the door to the nursery creaked open and Antonin stepped inside, resplendent in green and silver, the left side of his chest glittering with various honours and badges he had been given by the Dark Lord over the years while the Empire grew larger and stronger. Astoria was also richly garbed for the long, taxing evening ahead despite the fact she was reading a bedtime story to her babies. Gowned, bejewelled and crowned, she had her hair up and had donned the glittering tiara that Antonin had stolen from Muriel Prewett all those years ago in Holland. Silvery silken gloves came to her elbows and she wore a long flowing gown of midnight blue adorned with the finest diamonds sourced from deep within the Ural Mountains, her golden Serpent of Samara gleaming from within the fiery stones on the bodice.

“Time for bed I think.” Antonin said with a thin smile that did not reach those ice cold eyes.

It was remarkable at the effect that Antonin had on the children, though sadly, unsurprising. A moment ago they had been happy, at ease and smiling. Now they became meek, quiet and solemn, huddling ever so slightly together on the soft rug at Astoria’s feet. All the children had seen Antonin drunk and angry, though none of them had seen him put his hands on her either except for her poor sweet Leo. When he was six he had unexpectedly walked into a drawing room one afternoon and he had seen Antonin grab her by the throat and shove her up against the wall while she had been very pregnant with Aires. Her brave little boy had begged Antonin to stop hurting her, but Antonin had roared so ferociously at him to get out that he had fled in terror. It was just as well that Leo had fled because after that encounter, Antonin had raped her. She remembered how scared Leo had been on that day, the look on his face and Astoria did all she could to protect her babies from their Father, even if that meant letting him use her how he liked… as long as that was what kept them safe. Astoria drew out her wand, vanished the storybook and got to her feet before hastily walking across the room to join Antonin.

“Be good tonight my darlings,” Astoria said softly with a little smile and a wave to put her frightened children at ease. “I will see you on the morrow, alright?” They all nodded mutely, and Anastasia looked as though she were going to cry.

“See that you make no trouble.” Antonin said brusquely to the children as Astoria took his proffered hand while the Muggle slaves crept into the room to put them to bed. As the door swung shut Astoria glanced back and had a brief look of each of her babes being herded off to bed.

The grand ballroom in the Justiciar’s Palace was awash with candlelight, jewels and finely dressed
guests. A fantastical chandelier at least fifty feet wide crafted from black diamond and rubies gleamed imperiously in the centre of the cavernous ceiling while silvery painted snakes coiled and slithered up and down the silken wallpaper. On the Western side of the ballroom there was an enormous champagne fountain crafted in the likeness of the Society badge. The carving of the snake was so large that it had to be as thick as a man’s waist, the great pearl locked between its jaws had to be three times the size of a Quaffle and the fountain basin that was slowly bubbling with rose champagne below a giant, real life lotus flower was the size of a bathing tub. Anyone who was anyone was here tonight and over the chatter and laughter there was the constant click and flash of a camera followed by copious amounts of purple smoke. No Pure Blood ball in the Empire was complete without a photographer, the pictures taken here tonight would be splashed across the society pages in the papers for Half Bloods to hope and dream of advancement in the Empire when they read about the fun and frolics of the evening.

Astoria was stood at the head of the hall next to her husband while he sat in the Lord’s seat as they welcomed all the guests. Her smile was so frozen in place from greeting all these foreign dignitaries from throughout the Empire that she rather thought that her teeth might have cracked. She ground the teeth in question and finished her fifth goblet of wine in one fell swoop, feeling more at ease as the warm feeling in her chest and light headedness intensified, making everything slightly more bearable. The corset she had been laced into was way too tight as her body had not returned to normal yet so soon after having a baby and it was making her sides and breasts ache painfully. No amount of wine could put Astoria at ease when their next guest came shuffling up to them however, and it was an effort not to recoil in revulsion.

“Ah, Rasputin old friend, so glad that you are here this night.” Antonin said smoothly as he held out a large hand.

Grigori Rasputin smiled, showing raw scarlet gums and crooked yellow teeth. Astoria knew that the man was well over one hundred years by now. His long grey beard came down to his waist and his equally long, straggly hair had been swept back from his face which was deeply lined and scarred. Two milky, bloodshot eyes that may have once been blue peered out from the haggard ruin of his face and his right shoulder poked higher than his left, making him look hunched and crooked. His wasted appearance was at odds with the stunning Veela bedslave stood next to him with her hair of purest white and her curious red eyes that gleamed like rubies with a costly glittering gown to match, though the slave tattoo scrawled across her collarbone would leave none of the guests in any doubt as to what she was.

“My thanks young Dolohov and congratulations on the birth of another son.” Grigori rasped in his thick Russian accent, inclining his withered head to Antonin before turning to Astoria “My Lady, you are looking as lovely as ever.”

“You are most kind Master Rasputin.” Astoria said sweetly, batting her lashes for the twisted old warlock while he placed a papery dry kiss on her gloved hand. It was all she could do not to wrench her hand away in disgust.
Long before the Dark Lord’s time, Grigori Rasputin was one of the most feared Dark wizards in Russia, but not because he terrorised Muggles in the streets and gathered bloodthirsty followers; his most deadly powers were in his wandmaking. He was able to craft wands of spectacular strength and power, selling them to the highest bidder so Dark wizards could go and wreak havoc upon their fellow man. Indeed, it had been Rasputin who had secretly crafted Antonin’s own lethal wand when he was just a boy of eleven: Laburnum wood, thirteen and a half inches with a shard of a dragon tooth as the core. Rasputin, along with Antonin’s Grandsire and his gang of thugs had helped murder the former Muggle Russian ruler Emperor Nicholas Romanov II and his entire family which plunged the country into a bitter civil war that lasted for years. Thus, it was only natural that Rasputin had come crawling out of exile when another Dolohov was let loose on Russia and he had been instrumental in bringing the country to its knees.

The ballroom was almost filled now as the last few guests came strolling in. Astoria watched as Hestia Carrow – now Hestia Rookwood, came trailing into the hall alongside Augustus, both of them grim faced; four years of marriage and two sons had not brought them any closer it would seem. Her blood boiled when she saw Yaxley swaggering in with Elizabeth on one arm and his mistress Veliane Ayim on the other, Travers came in without Adelaide – his wife, and Prince Gyasi made a rather ostentatious entrance when he came striding into the hall flanked by his two stunning wives while he led in a cheetah by a heavy gold chain to many shocked gasps and murmurs. No sooner had Astoria greeted Gyasi and his wives, a loud deep gong reverberated about the entire ballroom and everyone fell silent. Antonin got ponderously to his feet and led her away from the head of the ballroom to stand closer to the wall, mirroring their counterparts on the other side of the room. The air was tense, excited as everyone waited, every eye fixed upon the great double doors. Slowly, the doors began to open and at once everyone began to sink to their knees as the Dark Lord himself stepped over the threshold, Bellatrix Lestrange five paces behind him as he glided into the ballroom. Astoria chanced a glance upward as he swept by her, his long black robes not making a sound as he headed for the Lord’s seat. The Dark Lord’s conquests and experiments had taken their toll over the years; he was now thinner than ever so that every bone in his body protruded horribly, there were dark shadows underneath his red eyes and his hairless head was no longer smoothly chalk white, for many dark red veins were now etched across its surface, making him look more strange and terrifying than ever.

Only when his Lordship was seated, and Bellatrix had taken her customary position at his side did another gong sound. “You may begin.” Came that cold, cruel voice which was more high pitched than ever now.

The doors were thrown wide open then and streaming through them came the youngest members of the Witches Society of Purity and Beauty clad in sparkling gowns of maiden’s white as they were led in by their Fathers or by some other male relative. One by one, each young witch was brought before the Dark Lord and presented to him. They curtsied respectfully and were twirled around by their male companions, so his Lordship might see them fully, after which he would give a stiff nod before the next innocent lamb was brought to the slaughtering block for his ‘approval.’

“I think this is going rather well.” Elizabeth murmured to Astoria as noise began to return to the hall
after the last witch was presented to the Dark Lord. “All the girls were perfect; would you not agree?”

“Just so,” Astoria replied absently as she watched a nineteen-year-old Frederick Selwyn approach Clarissa Rowle, bowing low and kissing her hand while she blushed furiously against the pure white of her gown. The past six years had seen Frederick grow from a stringy, petulant thirteen-year-old boy to a tall, muscled, highly dangerous Death Eater who was one of the youngest wizards in the Empire to be awarded the Order of Salazar. Antonin spoke highly of him so Astoria knew that could not mean anything good for any future bride to be that he had his eye upon.

“Good evenfall my ladies.” Came a soft, Swedish accent from behind them.

When Astoria turned, she was looking at yet another Rowle though this one was a Rowle in name only; it was Thorfinn’s wife, Linnea. She had been barely sixteen when Rowle had wed her to bind Sweden to the Empire, for her Father had been the wealthiest Lord in all of the land and his Galleons and influence had made a marked difference in the war. Standing at six feet tall with hair like spun silver, skin like cream and eyes of aquamarine, Linnea Rowle looked as though she were some stunning mermaid from one of Anastasia’s stories… but Astoria could see the unhappiness and worry in her eyes.

“My lady,” Astoria said gently, kissing both of the other witch’s cheeks before lowering her voice considerably. “You look ill at ease, is it your babe?”

Linnea looked startled for a moment and her hand automatically flew to the soft curve of her belly which was largely hidden by her gown as she was still very early on. Astoria thought she knew why the other witch was so upset and frightened; in the five years Linnea had been wed to Rowle she had given him three children – but they were girls and worthless to him. Doubtless she was sick with worry over her husband’s reaction should she fail to give him a boy yet again; like Antonin, Rowle was a monster and would not hesitate in laying his hands upon her.

“Oh no my lady it is just that I –” Linnea looked around nervously, but her husband was huddled in a corner with Antonin, Prince Gyasi and Yaxley; their heads together while they clutched brandy balloons as they spoke quietly with one another.

“Go on.” Elizabeth urged her as she stepped closer, her expression curious.

“Well I heard Thorfinn raging and storming about it this morn after he returned from the Dark Lord’s War Council… it seems there is some trouble out in Siberia, the Americans have seriously wounded a Hydra and are attempting to break through. It sounds serious, I have scarcely seen my husband so
enraged before." Linnea shuddered, and Astoria touched her lightly on the arm to calm her while her eyes swept the room to make sure no one else heard what they were talking about; topics such as war and combat were forbidden to be discussed or commented upon by a witch.

“I am sure it is nothing.” Astoria said soothingly, “Of course you are worried, you have another little one to worry about now, but think about how many times the Empire has been threatened by the Resistance over the years and naught has ever come of it.”

“That is so, but still you did not see him, he was so angry.” The last word came out as barely a whisper and Linnea looked more frightened than ever.

Astoria and Elizabeth looked at one another uncertainly for a moment, then Elizabeth said in a falsely cheery voice, “Why don’t we get you something to eat dear? You need to keep your strength up, I was absolutely exhausted with my fourth and you can tell us if you have any names picked out yet, I always find that….”

Astoria made to follow the other two through the throng of drunken, leering wizards and blushing maidens, trying to weave through them all between the levitating drinks trays and the long trains of ladies’ gowns. The place was so crowded though, and she was starting to feel dizzy from all the wine drunk before and she stumbled into a tall figure.

“My pardons –” she began as she struggled to straighten herself before freezing solid as though she were suddenly carved from ice.

“It is no trouble my Lady Justiciar.” Answered the tall, pale young man coolly as Astoria was given an unnecessary helping hand by the red faced and sweating Maharaja of India, Farouk Sayyid. Why does it feel like a blade in my bowels every time look upon him? Even after all this time? She thought with a pang as Maharaja Sayyid patted her shoulder feebly with a damp hand.

Draco was standing before her in magnificent black velvet dress robes accompanied by Pansy who glittered in emerald green; the latter’s dark eyes were filled with naught but venomous loathing as they rested on Astoria, the thin mouth becoming thinner as it hardened with fury.

For a moment Astoria felt speechless, but then she found her tongue, “The fault was mine Admiral Malfoy.” She said stiffly, “I am but a woman and must take care as to where I step in future. My apologies, Madam Malfoy.” She inclined her head to Pansy Malfoy, who had no choice but to curtsy while Draco bowed seeing as Astoria outranked them both.
As you say, my Lady.” They both murmured, almost under their breaths.

Not wanting to prolong the agony Astoria turned sharply from Draco and Pansy, saying nothing more. Naturally everyone parted for her at once as she swept away, still trying to disguise how drunk – and how upset she was for fear of retribution. Wizards may get drunk and make merry at these dinners and balls but witches were to stay poised, composed and elegant. If not, their husbands and Fathers would be well within their rights to chastise such a ‘wayward’ witch. Indeed, many of the wizards tonight had passed the point of drunkenness long ago; Antonin was surrounded by young wizards while they all listened to him avidly as he boasted loudly, Masakh Shafiq was arm in arm with Silas howling with laughter and Rookwood had found a bedslave from… somewhere and was dangling her on his knee while she giggled. Astoria could not take the stuffy heat of the ballroom, the mindless, gossip, the high false laughter that rang out so often that it was jarring on her ears, she had to go, she had to get out even for a few minutes. After another careful look round she took her chance, she sidestepped a drunken Marcel de Sade before seizing a fresh goblet from a hovering golden tray and striding over to where the red velvet curtains stretched up to the ceiling. She slipped behind them and shoved open one of the great French doors that led out onto a great balcony. As soon as the freezing air hit Astoria she felt the effects of drink lessening so she took a great swig from the goblet to remedy that, vaguely reminding herself that she needed to cleanse her milk before feeding Fedor tomorrow. She did not realise that her goblet had been filled with neat gin and she coughed and spluttered while the night wind whistled eerily about her.

Astoria gazed out over the vast plain of pure white snow, the great black fir trees capped with white, the shadows of Russian bears skulking at their bases while huge snowflakes began to fall everywhere yet again. She took another great swallow of gin and hissed when the burning liquid hit the back of her throat and had to blink her streaming eyes furiously as she reflected, not for the first time over these past six years and what the future held. By now Astoria Greengrass had accepted that her children were all the love and happiness she was ever likely to get in this world and she treasured them each and every day for that, but still… it got very lonely. There were also some days where she could not help but cry a little when she thought of how many years Antonin had stolen from her life; when spring came around this year they would be married for eight years; eight long, trying years that she never expected to survive. Most of the time though, Astoria did not fill her head with selfish thoughts of herself but of the health and wellbeing of her children. She worried about them constantly; this terrible new world they were all growing up in was no fit place for young, impressionable minds yet it was only the protection of the Empire that kept her little ones safe. Astoria did not delude herself, without the protection of the Dark Lord and his Empire her children were as good as dead should they fall into an enemy’s clutches.

“An Empire indeed.” She announced drunkenly, toasting her goblet to the cold, dark night as she swayed slightly before draining the rest of the gin.

Astoria glanced down at the intricately carved crystal goblet with its detailed snake facets, their emerald eyes gleaming insolently up at her. The goblets had been wrought by the finest craftsmen to celebrate the creation of the Empire and as one of the Dark Lord’s most favoured servants, Antonin had been gifted a whole set. This goblet symbolised victory, dominance, the birth of an Empire and a new world order, but Astoria had nothing but contempt for the gaudy thing. Yes, the Dark Lord had
forged himself a vast Empire; an Empire built on built on the skeletons of starving children, the blood of millions of slaughtered Muggles and magical folk alike and the crippling, vile addictions that had taken hold in the lower end of society which his Lordship made ruthless use of to control his Half Blood subjects and keep them in misery. Astoria scowled down at the snake for a moment before flinging the goblet from her so that it tumbled over the balcony and out of sight; she was so high up she didn’t even hear it break on the marble patio below. She allowed a few tears to fall before drying her eyes and donning her false smile. With an enormous effort she turned back toward the sounds of muffled laughter and the yellow glow streaming through the French doors, ready once again to step into her part as the Chief Justiciar’s dutiful and loving wife… as a good little witch ought to be, in Lord Voldemort’s Empire.

Chapter End Notes

In the last chapter we leave Astoria with a new baby which is replicated at the beginning of this chapter; this is deliberate as I wanted to emphasise how little her life has changed and how repetitive it has been. I decided on doing a timeskip as I just thought it would be dull describing each and every country Lord V takes over which we've already seen. I also wanted him in power for longer as I felt it was pointless for the Death Eaters to conquer all this land only to lose it after a couple of years. This chapter's main purpose is to give a snapshot into what life is like in 'the Empire' - the issue of Draco and where he stands will be addressed up in the next chapter as I start to round this off. The treatment of women in this 'new world' is echoed by what the Nazi's did to their own women which was forcing the issue of Motherhood and valuing them only by the amount of children they are able to have. I know the location of Durmstrang is hotly contested among some fans but for the purposes of this story I moved it to Russia Grigori Rasputin and Emperor Nicholas Romanov were real people from 1900's Russia - I did not create their characters.
Hi everyone, sorry for the dreadfully long update between this chapter and the last but I've had a lot of crazy things going on in my life recently. I know there are some who are still following this and have been waiting patiently and I am truly thankful for your understanding. I am back to writing full time now so I hope to be updating this on a similar sort of scale as I was doing before.

Thanks again,

S x

In the weeks following the highly successful *Coming of Age* ball Astoria was inundated with letters of bids and proposals from all the prominent families that had attended to enquire about this maiden or the other. It was tedious work. The Dark Lord had to approve all marriages in the Empire, but it was Astoria who had to reply to potential bids, counter bids and letters of acceptance. All the young women in her care seemed to be set for marriage with the Maharaja of India bidding a staggering one million Galleons on behalf of his son for the hand of Clarissa Rowle, only to be beaten by the Avery’s on behalf of Victoria’s son Frederick who claimed her for one and a half million. Indeed, when Astoria had received her young charges for the last time Clarissa Rowle had excitedly shown her the magnificent, glittering pale blue diamond that now adorned her wedding finger as she gushed about her husband to be. Astoria had wished her every happiness, refusing to let her true feelings of profound sadness and dread to surface. She was determined that Clarissa should at least enjoy the ‘fairytale’ for now, for she was in for a very rude awakening when she finally came to wed Frederick Selwyn – Avery.

All that was weeks ago now however; congratulations had been abound, wedding dates had been set, seamstresses had gotten to work and life in the Empire had ground on as usual. Astoria squinted a little as the weak morning sun shone down into the circular dining chamber, illuminating the pale green walls adorned with fanciful marble carvings of exotic fruit and birds of paradise. Muggle slaves came and went in silence carrying silver trays laden with cold meats, fresh baked bread and sweet smelling teas. She smiled as she gazed across the table at Anastasia playing with Fedor. Her once poor sickly baby was now giggling uncontrollably, his lilac eyes alight, his small fists reaching out to his sister as he was propped up by cushions in his crib. Anastasia was tickling his cheeks with an ostrich feather that looked suspiciously as though it had come from one of Astoria’s hats. She was very encouraged to see Fedor so strong, but he still remained smaller than any of the others had been at that age which worried her. *It is all Antonin’s fault* she thought furiously as she continued to watch the pair of them in their own little world, remembering the night Fedor was born with searing clarity when Antonin had brutally raped her.
Astoria shoved the anger away with irritation; she should never be unhappy around her children, ever, they were the only thing that kept her going day after day, year after year. After picking at a few eggs and some bread, she drew her attention back to the task at hand which had been commanding her attention since they had come down for breakfast.

“No! Aires hates porridge! I don’t want to have any more!” Her second youngest stubbornly declared for the third time that morn. He thrust out his lip and turned his face away from the ornate, porridge laden silver spoon Astoria had been attempting to negotiate into his mouth.

“But you like porridge.” She said, trying and failing to keep the exasperation out of her voice, “You ate it two days past!”

“No porridge!” Aires repeated doggedly, shaking his head with alarming force and banging his chubby fists on the table.

Astoria was just on the point of suggesting that her son take his porridge with honey to sweeten the deal when she was distracted by the twins’ shrill arguing voices.

“You had it first, it’s my turn now!”

“Did not! I haven’t finished yet.”

“Don’t push me! –”

Then there was a gasp, a shriek of fury and an almighty CRASH! Astoria wheeled around in time to see a great crystal carafe of pumpkin juice go smashing onto the delicate lace tablecloth. Fedor, startled by the noise and still being so small, promptly burst into tears – those great, weeping baby sobs that only a Mother could soothe. She vanished the mess of juice with a wave of her wand and rose to her feet, feeling more than a little irritated now. Astoria swept over to Fedor, scooping him up easily in her arms as she held him close, making soothing noises and stroking his hair while he continued to howl.

“Look what you did!” Anastasia chided her brothers crossly, “You upset the baby!”

“Shut up!” Alexander shot back while Konstantin opened his mouth, stuck out his tongue and made a grotesque face at his sister.
Astoria was just about to scold the twins for behaving in such a manner when she was distracted by yet another shout behind her.

“Mama, Nikolai took my porridge!” Aires screeched from the other side of the table. Sure enough, when Astoria had had her back turned for those few seconds, Nikolai had taken it upon himself to take Aires’ bowl as he had long finished his own, the porridge now covering half his face as he grinned guiltily.

“Stop it!” Astoria said over Fedor’s continued cries, real anger beginning to surface now, “Stop it all of you!” She loved her babies very dearly, but moments like these made her want to scream with frustration; it would serve her well to have three more pairs of eyes to keep a watch over all of them. But alas she was one and they were seven, all needing and deserving of her attention, especially as they grew. It was a very daunting prospect, wondering if she could be an equally good Mother to them all, compounded by the fact that she never knew when another baby was going to arrive.

Astoria rarely raised her voice in anger – they heard enough of that from Antonin – but it seemed to have done the trick as her children had all fallen silent, looking contrite; even the twins had put on their best ‘remorseful’ faces that made the corner of her mouth twitch with amusement. She was just on the point of saying more when there was a timid tap on the oaken door and Astoria turned around to be faced with a Muggle slave standing in the doorway.

Grey and meek, the Muggle kept her eyes lowered to the floor as she spoke, “The Lord Justiciar requests your presence in the drawing room at once my Lady.”

Astoria’s stomach twisted, and her heart gave a lurch as she glanced back nervously at her children. Fedor had stopped screaming and was now slowly drifting to sleep as she carefully laid him back in his crib. She gave him a swift kiss and lightly brushed Anastasia’s curls before straightening and replying to the Muggle, “My thanks, I shall be there forthwith. Please see to the children.” The Muggle finally looked up with cold, dead, Imperioused eyes and inclined her head stiffly as Astoria swept past her through the arched doorway.

As Astoria made her way through the labyrinth of rooms and corridors of their family apartments her heart hammered painfully hard against her chest and her eyes would moisten every now and then, only for her to blink furiously as she drew closer and closer to the drawing room far below on the ground floor. *I must not look displeased* she told herself harshly as she glided down the main staircase which brought her to the great hall before she turned left up another corridor, *but this day has arrived far to soon for my liking.* As she travelled up the deserted passageway, she heard the unmistakable sounds of Grigori Rasputin’s wheezy, cracked voice and Antonin’s harsh laugh accompanied by a small boyish one that she had no trouble in recognising. Astoria took a deep breath and slipped into the drawing room as quietly as she could, bracing herself.
“Twelve inches, birch with a unicorn tail hair as the core, it is perfect. The boy shows great talent Dolohov, that cannot be denied.” Rasputin rasped in Russian, his red rimmed, milky blue eyes watching Leo’s every move as the boy flourished and waved a new wand delightedly making several costly urns whizz about the room. Antonin and Rasputin were lounging on sofas sipping wine while they surveyed her son who was stood before them, beside himself with excitement.

Neither Antonin nor Rasputin acknowledged Astoria’s presence as she stood discretely by the sofa watching on, but as soon as Leo saw her he gave her a wide smile that made her heart melt. She knew better than to interrupt her husband’s conversation, so she smiled back at her son and gave him a little wave.

“Of course, he does.” Antonin replied stoutly, “He is my son after all, who else would he get it from?” He asked mockingly with a sly sideways look at Astoria which she pretended not to notice – her understanding of Russian was far greater than Antonin gave her credit for and she preferred to keep it as such.

“I see you my love, you are doing wonderfully.” Astoria said with only a half hearted smile. She was immensely proud that her son had been deemed ready to have a wand due to his magical talent, but the sight of Leo clad in those small black robes with the Dark Mark emblazoned over his heart filled her with both disquiet and revulsion. She knew she should have awoken to this inevitability long ago and prepared herself better, but that did not make it any easier to bear.

The time had finally come for her son to be educated in one of the many institutions for Pure Blooded boys littered all over the Empire where they were moulded into Death Eaters. Today he would be presented into society and tomorrow his ‘lessons’ would begin under the instruction of some elder Death Eater who was no longer fit to serve in the army. She dreaded to think whom. Astoria had known that this had been coming for a long time now, after all Antonin had been pushing for Leo to start since he had been six, but despite trying to ready herself for this day, the notion did not fail to make her blood run cold every time it crossed her mind. Indeed, as Leo had gotten older Antonin had taken a far greater interest in him and Astoria was always frightened that her twisted husband would corrupt and poison Leo’s innocent mind or worse still – try to turn her little one against her. Thankfully Leo remained as sweet and kind as ever, but Astoria’s fears were never far away; all we Mothers do is worry, she thought wearily as she continued to watch Leo laughing as he slashed the air with his wand causing a window to fly open so that clouds of giant sparkling snowflakes came billowing into the room.

“That is enough for now, boy.” Antonin said, abruptly switching back to English. He spoke with
such cold finality that Leo hastily dropped his wand onto the tea table and promptly took a step back, his arms at his side, his back straight and his eyes alert and forward. Antonin’s thin mouth gave a twist of amusement, “Good boy, we are learning already are we not?”

Rasputin gave a papery dry cackle, Leo gave a stiff nod but did not answer and Astoria wanted to weep, Leo was still just a child not some teenaged cadet in combat training for the army; those days were far, far away just now. If it were up to her he could play with his wand until his heart’s content, so he might get the feel of it, but this was the Dark Lord’s Empire and her husband’s will ruled supreme under this roof.

Antonin drained his wine goblet and got heavily to his feet, observing her critically as he did so. “You are looking rather lovely this morn my lady, this gown is a pleasing one on you.” He declared before kissing her hand.

“It pleases me, to please my Lord husband.” Astoria recited dutifully.

Indeed, the gown she wore was a grand one; it was all of purple silk, long and flowing with a rather gaudy working of the Dolohov family crest on the bodice picked out in jewels – two green king cobras entwined about a jewelled sword… how she sparkled. She needed to stand out today after all and what better way to do that than to display her Lord husband’s sigil upon herself in such glittering vulgarity. For this day Antonin had commanded that Leo’s introduction into Pure Blood society would be marked by taking him to the Justiciar’s Court. Astoria had been mortified. The Justiciar’s Court was where Antonin dispensed ‘justice’; sentencing criminals or resolving disputes between Pure Bloods and it could all get rather ugly what with her husband’s utter mercilessness and his barbaric desire to cause pain and suffering in others.

“Ought we not to leave Dolohov?” Rasputin wheezed, peering dully down at a many handed pocket watch that he had withdrawn from his rich velvet robes. “There is that other… matter we need to attend to before Court begins.”

“To be sure.” Antonin replied, a spasm of irritation flashing across his pale face. “I expect to see you forthwith.” He said brusquely to Astoria, drawing her in briefly for a kiss before he turned to Leo and said in the same tone, “Escort your Lady Mother to the Court at once. I shall look for you both.”

“Yes Sir.” Leo said at once, striding over to Astoria and holding out his arm.

Astoria could not help but smile at Leo as he took her by the arm like a little gentleman. Though only eight years old he was big for his age and the top of his head was almost of a height with her shoulder. He will tower over me one day. It was sometimes a little strange to think of Leo as the red
faced screaming babe that had been laid at her chest all those years ago now that he was slowly growing into a young man. After bidding Rasputin farewell Astoria and her son made for a secret door which was posing as a book cupboard; a wave of her wand and a muttered incantation was all that was needed for it to swing wide open.

When they stepped out into the main palace it was surrounded with witches, wizards and Muggle slaves going about their business. Astoria watched as she saw a harassed looking Muggle hurry up a kitchen passageway with a struggling, squawking goose under his arm, watched as Fadila Norton – Silas’ wife – strutted across the great hall with a great gaggle of young cousins behind her, and when she glanced at the great courtyard framed by pillars she saw a huge group of Half Blood guardsmen laughing and shouting amongst themselves. She glanced down at Leo whose lilac eyes had gone huge with wonder having never seen this part of the palace before.

“Shall we my love?” Astoria asked gently so as to nudge Leo out of his trance. Leo nodded vaguely in reply still gazing about the place.

They were both greeted by everyone they passed as they made their way down the cavernous stone corridors. Muggles who were forbidden to speak without being spoken to first merely bowed or curtsied, but witches and wizards would murmur “Good morrow Master Leonidas.” To Leo or “You look ravishing this morn my Lady Justiciar.” As she had instructed him Leo smiled and nodded, acknowledging the greetings – though only the magical folk to be sure.

“Mother, Mother what is happening over there?” Leo asked suddenly, looking over at the courtyard curiously and craning his neck. They were on the opposite side now and had a clearer view of what was going on.

When Astoria realised what the Half Blood guards were doing her insides seemed to freeze as hard as the snow packed ground outside. She had hoped that their journey to the Justiciar’s Court would pass without incident, but those hopes were now dashed. The Half Bloods had erected a wooden post in the middle of the courtyard where a wizard was tightly bound to it, trembling like a leaf. His entire back was a map of red ruin from where he had been so viciously whipped that pieces of flesh and skin could be seen upon the marble floor amongst the pools of blood congealing around his filthy feet. Astoria could see why there had been no screaming that so often accompanied whippings, for the unfortunate wizard was barely conscious; his eyes were screwed up in pain and his breathing was ragged as spittle drooled from his mouth where he had emptied his insides.

“Why are they doing that Mother?” Leo demanded, his eyes confused and shocked, snapping her out of her mortified trance.

Astoria looked down at her son, wanting nothing more than to cover his eyes and whisk him back to the private quarters of the palace where he could draw, laugh, play and ride unicorn ponies with his
brothers and sister; he was a child, that is what he should be doing rather than being exposed to all this horror.

“Because –” She began, “Because he –”

“Because he is a foolish Half Blood who has forgotten his place in our Lord’s Empire.” Came a deep Russian voice from behind them and Astoria’s stomach gave another twist both of fear – and deepest loathing.

Sure enough she turned around to be faced with the looming figure of Vadim Dolohov. Vadim was a cousin of Antonin’s who had spent his years in Central Asia working as a mercenary due to the family’s banishment. However, he had come crawling out of the woodwork when the Dark Lord set his sights on Russia. Vadim looked like Antonin may have once looked when he was younger before his looks were destroyed by years of imprisonment in Azkaban and his relentless abuse of drink; he was at least a decade and a half younger, fresher faced – almost handsome. Nevertheless, Vadim Dolohov frightened Astoria as much as her husband. She had first crossed paths with him when he had been sent to ‘guard’ her and the children in the height of the war on the island of Sardinia when she had been expecting the twins. Vadim had been anything but a protector though. He had continuously made obscene suggestions toward her, groped her anywhere and everywhere he could when none of her other guards were around and once he had actually tried to force himself upon her. He was as disgusting and vile as Antonin and with an equally savage reputation; perhaps the old saying was correct: ‘Blood runs True.’

“My Lady…” Vadim murmured softly as he bent to kiss her hand, those horribly familiar cold blue eyes never leaving her. “You are looking most exquisite today, I must say I have never enjoyed looking at my family sigil more.” He leered and ogled over her chest so that his likeness to Antonin was striking and Astoria willed herself not to crack him across the face.

“Please… ah, Sir.” Leo asked timidly, gripping her arm a little tighter as he did so, clearly feeling her discomfort. “Why has he forgotten his place?”

Vadim looked down at Leo and gave him a smile that did not reach his eyes and replied, “He was caught wondering about in a Pure Blood section of the city, half drunk. We do not allow such beings to wonder where they do not belong in his Lordship’s Empire cousin, remember that.”

“I will remember, Sir.” Leo replied meekly as Vadim continued to watch the half alive wizard with the utmost satisfaction and relish.

Astoria wanted nothing more than to get as far away from Vadim as possible; she was just about to
inform him that they would be taking their leave when a harsh female laugh cracked through the cool air of the courtyard like a thunderclap. All the Half Bloods in attendance fell to their knees at once as though they were puppets that had had their strings cut. Indeed, Astoria herself bowed her head and Leo followed suit as the gaunt, pale figure of Bellatrix Lestrange came striding toward them; her silver haired daughter Delphini at her side.

“Well met Master Dolohov, my Lady Justiciar.” Bellatrix declared into the now silent courtyard while Delphini looked about the place with an arrogant, disdainful look upon those proud Black features as though she were making sure that no one dared get up off their knees.

“Good morrow my Lady.” Vadim replied with a sly smile, bending slightly in what he evidently thought was a bow of respect – Astoria knew he loathed the idea of bowing to a witch, even if this was the most powerful and feared witch throughout the Empire. “You are looking well this morn.”

It was all Astoria could do not to snort with disbelieving laughter as Bellatrix shot out sharply worded questions at Vadim and paying no mind to his compliment, for Bellatrix had not looked ‘well’ in quite some time. Having spent so many years immersed in evil and committing the most despicable acts along the way, Bellatrix looked a shadow of her former self and grew more like her beloved Master every day. She was bone thin and as white as chalk with deep lines etched across her face; her hair which was once so thick and lustrous was now limp, thin and dead looking. Her full lips which used to drive wizards wild – especially when she would paint them red, had all but vanished and her eyes were more sunken than ever, giving her the appearance of a skull.

Those cold eyes in their sunken pits now swivelled to rest on Astoria and it was then that she finally found her words. “Good day to you my Lady, Mistress Delphini. How are you faring?” She kept her voice meek and subservient – that was always the safest course of action, for Bellatrix was known to drink wine from dawn until dusk which exacerbated her wild and uncontrollable temper.

“Well, my Lady Justiciar.” Bellatrix replied, the slightest hint of a sneer playing about her thin mouth. “It is good to see you out in society once more, though I had heard that you were expecting again, is it so?” Her last words were laced with mockery; Bellatrix absolutely relished that she was not condemned to bear child after child like the rest of the witches and openly flaunted that fact in the faces of all.

Astoria fought to keep her face a mask of cool courtesy as she replied, “No my Lady not as yet, I fear such talk is mere gossip.”

Bellatrix gave an odd sort of twitch before turning her gaze upon Leo and Astoria felt her pulse quicken as she looked him up and down. “Ah, it is past time Dolohov’s eldest son joined us in our glorious Empire, how many years have you now boy?” She demanded imperiously.
Leo squared his shoulders, looked Bellatrix directly in the face and answered, “Eight years my Lady, I shall be nine come December.”

Bellatrix nodded approvingly, her eyes still fixed unblinkingly upon Leo. “A good age – the best age I would say to start learning what is expected of you in this world.” She jerked her head in the direction of Delphini, “My Delphi was also eight when she received her wand and now at ten I intend to take her out for seasoning to hone her combative skills.” Bellatrix then turned back to Vadim and Astoria. “I intend to take her back to Britain. I suppose she ought to see the place and the terrain is relatively fair for a newcomer while still allowing for good… practice.”

A twisted smile lit Bellatrix’s haggard face at her last words and Vadim gave a grunt of amusement while Astoria smiled faintly, wondering what horrific acts Bellatrix would start teaching her daughter at such a tender age. She felt very sad that the little girl who had once played so gently with Leo when he was a babe was being raised to be as ruthless and cruel as her Mother, but there was naught to be done, Delphini had been in Bellatrix’s clutches for years now.

Astoria could see the disquiet upon Leo’s face, but he nodded respectfully all the same as though her words were of the utmost importance. “As you say my Lady.”

Bellatrix gave another unpleasant smile “Well, the boy is no fool that is plain to see and if he is anything like his Father he will make a worthy Death Eater someday.” Cold fingers walked up Astoria’s spine at these words, but she did what she always did regardless of how she felt: nod and smile. “Delphi and I are off to inspect the troops who are being dispatched to Egypt three days hence, those savages have been rather truculent of late as I am sure you have heard.” She inclined her head stiffly at Astoria and Vadim, “We must make haste, good day to you both.”

Everybody was silent until Bellatrix and Delphini were well out of sight and noise slowly started to return to the courtyard. Vadim, who had watched the pair go turned back to Astoria and Leo, “Surely it is fitting for the boy to inspect the troops as well? Or perhaps a look at Traitors Walk to see what happens to those who break the law?” He held out his arm expectantly, a mocking smile twisting his thin lips.

“That is most kind Master Dolohov, but my Lord husband is expecting us in the Court of Justice, we must be getting along.” Astoria replied courteously, trying with all her might to keep the edge out of her voice. Traitors Walk was a stretch of outer wall on the other side of the Palace where the heads of all those Antonin had condemned were stuck upon spikes to serve as a warning to potential lawbreakers. It was no place to take a child.

Vadim inclined his head with another cold smile, his eyes filled with rage at the rebuff, “As you say
my Lady, my cousin does not suffer lateness lightly after all.”

“Indeed.” Astoria replied as she curtsied, and Leo gave a little bow, “Good day to you Sir.” As she and Leo were walking briskly away from the courtyard, Astoria could feel Vadim’s cold blue eyes crawling all over her and she smoothed her skirts uneasily. “Are you alright my darling?” She whispered to Leo as they turned up a deserted passageway.

“I am fine Mother.” He replied quietly, but he seemed very subdued compared to the excitement of receiving his wand this morning and there was still worry and confusion in his lilac eyes. *He has a gentle heart,* Astoria thought lovingly as she gave Leo’s hand a squeeze which he returned at once.

There was total silence but for the echoing of their footsteps on the richly decorated marble that paved the cavernous corridors of the Justiciar’s Palace. Hidden behind the thick stone walls Astoria knew there were Muggles labouring hard; preparing to clean rooms, cooking breakfast, delivering messages or any other backbreaking task required of them by their cruel Masters. Attendance in the top gallery of the Court of Justice was by invitation and of course, exclusively for Purebloods. Muggles were only allowed upstairs to serve wine, fruit and cheese to those witches and wizards who came to watch Antonin dole out ‘The Empire’s Justice.’

When Astoria and her son turned yet another corner to be faced with a long, wide corridor Leo suddenly stopped dead, his mouth moving soundlessly and his eyes huge with a mixture of fear and awe. At the end of the corridor were two huge double doors which were obscured by two even larger mountain Trolls. The beasts were clutching savage looking spears with cruel metal points which were presently crossed over one another, barring entry to the Justiciar’s Court on the other side.

“Trolls.” Astoria murmured quietly to Leo as she gently led him in the direction of the creatures. “They are here to protect us, they will do you no harm.” Leo nodded almost imperceptibly as he allowed her to lead him closer and closer to the leering Trolls and the doors they guarded, seemingly struck dumb at the sight of them. Astoria drew herself up to her full height and looked directly up at the larger of the Trolls, “We are here to enter the gallery of the Justiciar’s Court at the Justiciar’s very own invitation, let us pass if you please.”

The Trolls briefly glanced at one another and grunted in unison before turning to reveal their scaly backs as they heaved on the great wooden doors for their entry.

“Are you ready my love?” Astoria asked Leo softly under the sounds of groaning wood and the screech of enormous iron hinges as the Trolls continued to push and shove. Her baby boy nodded, looking incredibly nervous as the doors opened wider and wider to reveal the court beyond and as Astoria looked up she heard him let out a small gasp.
The Court of Justice was a large, imposing cavernous dome crafted from black marble. A plush green carpet snaked down the centre of the room stopping just shy of the Justiciar’s Throne where Antonin always sat. Different galleries of seats encircled the hall so that they had a full view of the entire court with standing areas for Half Blood commoners along the walls and at the back of the court. The galleries themselves were separated by gender; the witches’ gallery was on the Western side of the hall and the wizards was to the East. Like so many rooms of note the ceiling of the Court of Justice had been bewitched to look like the sky above, only the sky in here was always grey with a glittering green Dark Mark floating malevolently in the centre which served to make the atmosphere within ten times more threatening – little ‘justice’ was scarcely found within these walls. Astoria gently led Leo through the throng of Half Blood wizards who all bowed or dipped their heads at their approach with some murmuring greetings, though none daring to make direct eye contact. Purebloods clad in all their finery were seated in the galleries above them and they peered over the edge to watch as Astoria steered Leo toward a spiral staircase in the likeness of a coiled, snarling snake, its eyes glowing a wicked green which made her son stare even more, his mouth agape. Up the stairs they went, and Astoria could feel the eyes of everyone in the room upon her back, but she hastily brushed away the uncomfortable notion and grit her teeth. Leo on the other hand was completely dazed and overwhelmed, he had never seen so many people at once in his entire life and had seemingly lost the power of speech as he trailed meekly beside her though he kept a tight grip upon her arm.

When they reached the top of the staircase and turned in the direction of the witches’ gallery there was a great ripple of colour as all the witches rose from their seats and began to shower them with the usual sycophantic greetings and compliments. Astoria glanced across to the other gallery which seated the wizards; it was almost full, and their arrival had not gone unnoticed. She saw the mismatched eyes of Silas Norton gazing at her, watched as Theodore leaned over to Rookwood before whispering something in his ear and hastily averted her eyes when Marcel de Sade gave her a lecherous wink and rolled his tongue over his crooked teeth.

“Good morrow Master Dolohov, I trust you are well? You are looking most handsome this day.” Adelaide said graciously to Leo, dipping in a curtsy and offering him her hand to kiss. Leo may be a child, but the fact that he was born a boy meant that he outranked every single witch in the gallery and as such the proper courtesies must be followed.

Leo shrank back a little from Adelaide and looked up at Astoria, unsure, but she gave him a nod and a smile of encouragement and her little boy seemed emboldened. “Thankyou for your kind words Lady Travers, I am very well.” He recited in his boyish voice and Astoria was pleased to see a genuine smile on Adelaide’s face as most of the time she looked strained and constantly on the verge of tears. Being married to Edward Travers must be horrid enough, but three years past Adelaide had failed to produce a child after two years of marriage and had been forced to drink frightful concoctions of fertility potions which resulted in her carrying three babes at once. As Astoria was exchanging pleasantries with Adelaide she could not help but think back to the horrific birth the other witch had to endure as a result of having ‘triplets’ as Rathburne called them… she had never really been quite the same since and Astoria knew she lived in terror of becoming pregnant again.
They were stood up in the gallery for quite some time as many other witches continued to fawn over Leo with much curtsying and the offering of their hands for him to kiss. Once again Astoria could not help but feel proud as her son performed his courtesies unfalteringly, his confidence burgeoning with every powdered, perfumed lady that put herself in his path.

“You did wonderful.” Astoria whispered swiftly in his ear as they made their way to their considerably grander gilded seats which were front and centre of the witches’ gallery.

He looked up at her and smiled and she smiled back, gazing into his lilac eyes; Greengrass eyes, eyes she had given him. “Thank you Mother.”

Minutes later Elizabeth finally came sweeping through the arched doorway of the gallery. She was clad in seafoam green silk and silvery lace, a goblet of wine clutched in her slender hand. After they had exchanged kisses and pleasantries, Elizabeth settled herself in the seat to Astoria’s right and set her goblet upon a delicate silver tray that was hovering by her elbow. “Your Lord husband finally got his wish then.” She murmured very quietly, her lips barely moving, “I dread the day when I have to bring Thomas here. Corban will probably want to do the same, you know how he and Antonin talk.” Astoria made a helpless gesture of despair by way of reply, and Elizabeth did not pursue the issue any further, lest they be overheard.

The Justiciar’s Court was a babble of talk and laughter and chinking of wine goblets which was steadily getting louder and louder with every minute that went by. The air had become hazy from all the pipes and cigars billowing smoke from the wizards’ gallery and it was growing hot from the sheer number of witches, wizards and slaves present today. Astoria was just going to ask Leo if he was in need of refreshment when a large gong sounded three times and collective hush fell over the Court. Sure enough, when she looked up Antonin had come lumbering into the hall from a secret doorway near the throne. He was flanked by Marcus Flint and James Clearwater, his favoured guards. Proof of their ascension in society could be clearly seen as medals and honours glittered on the left side of their chests. Astoria knew that both had been richly rewarded by the Dark Lord for their assistance in the capture and eventual execution of Minister Freida Geissler of Germany. Wizards like Clearwater and Flint were revered among the Half Blood population – ‘proof’ that one could rise high if they pleased the Dark Lord. Both now lived in the main quarters of the Palace in a string of lavish apartments with Pure Blood brides from junior branches of noble Houses to warm their beds at night.

Astoria watched as Antonin slumped down in his seat while a meek and defeated looking Gabrielle Delacour held up a tray with a goblet of wine balanced atop it with shackled wrists. She was clad in a very vulgar gown made from green and silver silk which was slashed at the thigh, low at the front and even lower at the back to expose as much of her milk white flesh as possible which was littered with bruises. Poor girl, Astoria thought sadly as Gabrielle shuffled away to stand by the wall with a Muggle slave who was as still as a statue.
Disgusted by Astoria’s constant sickness and fainting while she had been carrying Fedor, Antonin had bought Gabrielle at the beginning of the year to keep him satisfied whenever he required. Prior to that however, Gabrielle had spent her years being farmed out to every exclusive Pure Blood brothel all over the Empire for the use and abuse of her captors. She must have been raped thousands and thousands of times during her time there and made to perform the most disgusting sex acts so often requested by depraved Pure Blood patrons. Everyone Gabrielle had ever known or loved was probably dead. Her only sister Fleur had been strangled by William Jugson two years past to keep his wife from discovering that he had put a child in her and Gabrielle’s parents were most likely gone too. Astoria hardened her heart and inwardly shook herself; for every heart breaking story like Gabrielle’s, there were thousands more just like it and absolutely nothing could be done for any of them, nothing.

Once the preamble had been rendered and everyone in the court had taken their seats, Marcus Flint stepped forward and barked, “Bring in the first petitioner!”

At once the large double doors leading into the hall swung open and two handsome wizards came striding down the long green carpet. One was olive skinned with golden hair and high cheekbones and the other was blonde, slender and fair. However, both were looking livid and resolutely refusing to look at one another.

“Who petitions the Justiciar this morn?” Demanded Flint as the wizards halted and bowed at the throne.

The darker of the wizards glared at his companion briefly before answering “I am Mateo Zabini – Fernandez, my Lord Justiciar.”

Astoria had thought the wizard had looked familiar; Mateo was clearly a Zabini from the Spanish branch of the family; yet more proof of the Zabini’s seeking to further their ambitions in Europe. Indeed, at that moment Elizabeth leaned over briefly and whispered feverishly in her ear, “Mateo is Blaise’s third cousin, is he not divine?”

Astoria made no reply but directed her gaze across the Court to the wizard’s gallery where Blaise and his brother Josiah sat. Both looked as they always did; casually arrogant as they slouched languidly on their comfortable seats, occasionally pluming vivid blue smoke in the air from their ever burning cigarettes, their slanted eyes fixed on the spectacle below but betraying nothing.

“I am Ilya Arnutzov.” Growled the fairer wizard in a broad Russian accent, his blue eyes swivelling briefly toward Mateo with the utmost loathing.
“What would you have of the Lord Justiciar this day?” Asked James Clearwater brusquely as he fingered his wand with black gloved hands, his expression guarded.

Mateo squared his shoulders, stepped forward and said in a cold, clear voice “Myself and the ah… gentleman who accompanies me are in a dispute which we are unable to resolve. It concerns a woman, my Lord Justiciar.”

Marcel de Sade let out a screech of shrill laughter from the wizard’s gallery while many others chuckled and murmured amongst themselves. Several witches tittered and giggled and even Antonin looked amused as he continued to slouch on his throne, toying with his now empty wine goblet.

“We are unable to come to an agreement of who will take her hand for his own, there is no bride price either of us will not pay to have her.” Ilya declared haughtily, “Though I am the worthiest I think we can all agree, this fool is half a woman himself, all he cares about is his precious Zabini looks.”

Several more wizards laughed openly but Mateo gave a growl of fury and plunged his hand into the pocket of his velvet robes, “You, insolent bastard!” He spat, “I am sure that the Court does not need to be reminded, Arnutzov, that the House you hail from is nothing more than a rabble of new gold upstarts who have barely been around for two hundred years!” Ilya’s face had turned an angry blotchy red at Mateo’s words, his mouth open in wordless fury as the hilarity from the wizard’s gallery mounted.

Mateo was presumably going to draw his wand as he continued to root about in his pocket, but Flint and Clearwater moved forward at once, their own wands raised threateningly. “No wands to be drawn in the Justiciar’s Court, Sir.” James said sternly, and Mateo’s hand fell back to his side at once.

“Gentleman.” Antonin said, raising his hand for silence as a malicious smile played about his thin lips. “There is a simple way to solve this and my judgement is this: you shall both duel for the hand of this maiden, three days hence.” There was a murmur of approval around the Court, but Antonin was not finished. “A duel, to the death.” He smirked. Antonin always loved wizards to duel to the death, no matter how trifling the disagreement between them was. There were even more murmurs of interest after this pronouncement as Ilya and Mateo stared with rank hatred at one another, the cold knowledge of their intertwined fates solidifying between them like ice; that one of them would be dead before the week’s end. “The victor will bring me the head of the loser in three days and the family of the loser will take no revenge. That is my judgement, you are both dismissed from the Court.” Antonin said carelessly, waving the wizards away with his wine goblet. “Flint send in the next one.”

Next came Fabian Rousseau, Philippe’s son and heir. Unlike his fat ruin of a Father Fabian was tall,
strong and rather handsome, he had however inherited Philippe’s greedy and avaricious nature. Fabian complained for almost half of an hour, demanding land concessions on one of his family’s Swiss estates to the mounting annoyance of all within the Court. Indeed, Astoria was growing bored of his droning and she could tell her husband was becoming angrier and angrier with every word that came out of Fabian’s mouth. She surmised that Antonin was only refraining from tearing Fabian to shreds due to all his backhanded ‘arrangements’ with his corrupt Father.

“That will do Rousseau!” Antonin suddenly snapped, cutting Fabian off in mid sentence, at to which the latter looked distinctly peeved. “You may extend the land by twenty leagues from both the East and West, no more.” Fabian looked as though he were about to argue when Antonin said dangerously, “That is my final judgement Rousseau, you are dismissed.”

White faced, and furious Fabian bowed stiffly, muttered his courtesies and stalked from the hall while witches and wizards whispered to one another. No sooner had the great oaken doors banged shut behind Fabian, two Half Blood guards burst through them, dragging in one of their comrades who was accused of stealing a share of gold from the plunder brought back on a recent campaign in East Africa. Antonin was already growing bored by now; he had dispensed with drinking wine and was now well into his preferred poison: vodka. Thus, it was hardly a surprise that he wanted the tiring business of duty over and done with and without bothering to listen to the full account of the events in question, he commanded that the thief be taken to the nearest courtyard to have his head struck off by a Troll’s machete.

“I want his head speared on Traitor’s walk before day’s end!” Antonin shouted at the guards as they dragged the sobbing wizard from the Court while the wizards above and the Half Bloods below shouted and jeered.

Astoria looked anxiously at her son to see how he was taking all of this, her worry mingled with stabs of rage that he was ever allowed to come here; he was still so young. Leo felt her eyes upon him and turned to face her for the first time, giving her a vague smile, but his eyes looked uneasy and frightened, he simply didn’t understand what was going on or why. Astoria gave him a reassuring smile back and discretely slipped her fingers through his; trying to tell him without words that she was here for him, however horrid and bewildering this must be.

On and on the petitioners came, each more tedious than the last with Antonin dreaming up worse and worse punishments for the ‘guilty’ to relieve his boredom. Astoria looked without really seeing as a parade of richly dressed Pure Bloods and hardened looking Half Blood guards came streaming in and out of the Court, the latter often dragging prisoners behind them to be judged. Antonin’s voice was becoming louder and more slurked with every petitioner brought before him, but she barely heard him, allowing each drunken pronouncement to merely wash over her. They had been in the Court for hours now and had only had one brief recess thus far. Astoria was tired and stiff having had to sit up straight and feign interest for so long; she knew there would be dire retribution should her husband direct his gaze at the witches’ gallery and saw her looking bored.
“Mother? Mother!” Came a voice from Astoria’s left shoulder and she turned to see Leo tugging at one of her sleeves as another Pure Blooded wizard went strutting from the Court after a successful petition.

“Yes, my love?” Astoria asked vaguely, her mind a million leagues away.

“I asked you if there was anything the matter Mother, you look funny.” Leo said, a hint of indignation in his voice that she had not been paying attention.

“Forgive me my darling, Mother was just… thinking.” She replied, gently patting his small hand by way of apology. Astoria was on the point of saying more to Leo who was peering timidly down at the vast court when she suddenly froze.

Slowly but surely a cold came creeping over her, a cold so bone chilling that she could not help but shudder before grasping Leo’s wrist with a desperate strength. All sound seemed to have fled the room and she could feel her wits beginning to fog.

“Mother – what?” Leo began, but he was unable to utter any more for he too started to shiver and tremble, his lilac eyes huge with fear.

There was now complete silence in the court as everyone stared at the large doors which were wide open, the icy blast emanating from the other side now painfully cold. Sure enough two black hooded Dementors came gliding through the troll flanked doors dragging a wizard between them, his head bowed, the rags he was wearing hanging off his emaciated frame, his dark skin littered with angry red wheels and black bruises. Those stood in the common areas shrank away as the Dementors made their slow and silent way up the long carpet to where Antonin was sat, their displeasure plain to see. Antonin’s cold blue gaze was fixed upon the creatures and their captive and his expression was grim, not looking even slightly uncomfortable at their presence unlike Marcus Flint who was absently edging away from them and keeping a firm grip upon his wand.

“Expecto Patronum” Hissed James Clearwater into the silence and a great lion leapt from his wand tip to land lightly at the foot of the Justiciar’s throne where it began to doze lazily. The commons below huddled closer to the bright glowing warmth of the Patronus – anything not to feel the terrible effects of the Dementors.

Astoria rubbed Leo’s shoulder to try and put him at ease before glancing about at herfellows in the gallery and saw that many still looked afraid and uncomfortable, so she too drew out her wand and echoed Clearwater’s incantation.
“*Expecto Patronum.*” She murmured softly, and a huge silvery butterfly burst from her wand tip to soar in the air above the witches’ gallery and Astoria could almost feel the collective sigh of relief when warmth enveloped them all once again.

“Are you alright my darling?” Astoria whispered to Leo who looked very shaken. He did not answer but nodded absentmindedly and grasped her hand tighter than ever before; she rubbed her son’s hand in both of her own, wishing she could take him far away from these foul creatures.

“Silence in the Justiciar’s Court!” Shouted James Clearwater over the low murmur of chatter that had begun to creep upwards now that the effects of his and Astoria’s Patronuses could be fully felt and silence fell at once.

Many witches and wizards drew their attention back to the doors which were still wide open and moments later Thorefinn Rowle came striding through them, his expression stony, a dark green silken cape rippling from his shoulders. Rowle was the Commander in Chief of a ruthless paramilitary force simply known as ‘The Viper’s’ who were identified by the elaborate green cloaks they wore, hand gifted to them by the Dark Lord. They were charged with keeping the peace on the city streets throughout the Empire but their reputation for brutality and savagery was well known – and feared. The presence of Rowle made Astoria nervous, something serious must have happened for him to break from his favourite sport of terrorising Half Bloods and to come all the way to the Court of Justice accompanied by Dementors. She chanced a glance at Linnea, Rowle’s pregnant wife who was seated a little further down the row and saw that even from a distance she looked utterly terrified by his presence as she nervously ran a hand over the curve of her belly and averted her eyes.

Rowle marched straight up to the throne, looking neither left nor right as the candlelight gleamed off his rapidly silvery blonde hair. When he stood before Antonin he briefly took a knee, still unsmiling and murmured, “My Lord Justiciar forgive the interruption in your petitions today, but this is something that needs your immediate attention.”

Antonin waved his hand negligently, “It is no trouble Thorefinn but why so sour, hm? What have you brought me today? A thief? A liar? A *traitor*?” Asked Antonin idly, briefly peering up at the Dementors before taking a great swig from his wine goblet.

Rowle did not answer himself but looked to the Dementors and gave a curt nod. The Dementor on the right grabbed a handful of the prisoner’s woolly black hair and yanked his head backwards to reveal his face. Astoria was not the only one of her peers who gasped in shock, Antonin’s goblet went flying to the floor with a great *SMASH* while many wizards in the opposite gallery let out yells of surprise with at least a dozen leaping to their feet to crane their necks over the edge.
There was silence for a moment as the Court continued to stare at the prisoner, utterly thunderstruck. Then came the reedy, high pitched voice of Silas Norton, “It’s that Mudblood, Thomas! Dean Thomas!”

Astoria turned to stare at Elizabeth and Adelaide, utterly lost for words, their expressions of blank shock mirroring her own. She blinked furiously as she stared down at her old classmate, unable to believe that this was really happening. Dean looked as though he had been beaten and tortured and was barely conscious. He was so thin that his cheeks had become hollow and the bones of his hands stuck out horribly, the back of his filthy shirt had been slashed and was peppered with blood where he had been whipped and his face was covered in scratches and cuts with his left eye being completely swollen shut.

It was Marcus Flint’s furious voice that sliced through all the disbelieving, shocked chatter. “Clean that up at once!” He snarled at Gabrielle, pointing at the remnants of Antonin’s smashed wine goblet. Gabrielle jumped like a startled cat before promptly falling to her knees as she scrabbled about on the floor, wincing as she picked up the shattered pieces of glass with bare, trembling hands as her manacles clanged, adding to the din.

“Don’t be afraid.” Astoria whispered as quietly as she could to Leo who was still shaking, “Everything is going to be fine, Mother is here.”

Flints’ words also seemed to snap Antonin out of his dumbstruck trance, for his expression hardened and he finally said with cold malevolence, “How…how can this be? How did this Mudblood come to be in our Empire?”

Rowle cast a venomous look at Dean before answering, “He was found skulking about the port of St. Petersburg early this morn, attempting to blend in with those filthy vagrants that congregate about the markets and such. When asked for his name and slave identification number by a guard he ran, that is when we knew he had something to hide… no one runs from us.” There were murmurs of agreement from the surrounding wizards below, but Antonin held up his hand for silence and Rowle pressed on, “We gave chase and eventually caught him on the East side of the city just as he was attempting to pass through some sort of portal which we assume is how he managed to slither his way in to begin with. This portal sealed itself as soon as we dragged him back, however. We have yet to question him fully, but I have men turning St Petersburg upside down looking for any potential accomplices as it is unlikely he managed this alone.”

The air was tense as the watching crowd waited with bated breath as to what Antonin was going to do or say, Astoria included as her heart thumped loudly in her ears. Finally, her husband cleared his throat, trying to smooth over his shock when he said, “Wake that cockroach up at once.”

Rowle nodded, pointed his wand at Dean and muttered “Ennevarte.”
As soon as the spell hit Dean the Dementors released him from their clutches and he fell to a crumpled heap upon the floor while they swirled and glided above him. Dean’s back was rising and falling rapidly, his breathing audible even from up here as slowly, very slowly he pushed himself up onto his knees then his feet; as though it cost him every ounce of strength within him to do so. Astoria could not help but have admiration for the Gryffindor, standing tall and defiant up against the entire Court and of course Antonin and his cronies, all while not displaying a hint of fear.

Even Antonin’s eyes widened briefly in surprise, but the look was gone in an instant to be replaced by a smirk, as though he couldn’t care less about Dean or any of it, but Astoria saw the poorly disguised fury behind it.

“So, Mudblood.” He began, though his voice was oddly constricted from suppressed rage. “I have a proposition for you. If you confess to me how you came to be in the Dark Lord’s Empire and who aided you I give you my word that you shall have a quick clean death, a Pure Blood’s death. Lie to me and I will make your ending longer and more painful than you can possibly imagine. Believe me when I say that you will be begging me to kill you if you choose the latter path… now, what say you?”

“Fuck you Dolohov.” Dean spat, his expression showing naught but the vilest contempt for his captor.

The collective gasps and shouts of outrage from around the Court were punctuated by Rowle’s furious bellowed curse, “CRUCIO!”

“Look away.” Whispered Astoria to her son under cover of all the noise as Dean fell to the floor at once, his body convulsing horribly, his wails of pain echoing off the hard stone walls.

Leo obliged at once looking down into his lap, utterly terrified, his eyes over bright. Astoria glanced nervously around to see if anyone had noticed but soon found that her fears were baseless. Every eye in the Court was fixed upon Dean and Rowle as the torture went on and on. Silas was the first to clap and before she knew it the entire Court was clapping and jeering, their faces alive with savage pleasure as Dean continued to writhe and froth at the mouth.

At last Antonin held up a hand for Rowle to cease with the torture; his arrogant smirk had vanished to be replaced by a look of blind rage. Astoria tried and failed to suppress a shudder, she knew that expression all too well; Dean would suffer even more later on for that remark and badly.

“Had enough Mudblood!” Rowle thundered at Dean, his wand raised threateningly, “There’s plenty more where that came from I can assure you; hours and hours, days and days unless you tell
us the truth.”

There were titters from the surrounding crowds as Dean fought his way back to his knees, evidently too weak to stand once again but refusing to be crushed by these thuggish bullies. “The truth?” He panted, a bizarre, mocking sort of smile twisting his swollen, bleeding lips. “The truth is that you, your Lord and your minions are not nearly as invincible as you think you are, and you may very well live to regret that my Lord Justiciar you –”

But before Dean could utter any more, Marcus Flint sent a crashing blow into the side of Dean’s head. Astoria winced as Dean landed face first onto the cold marble with an audible crunch, blood and teeth flying everywhere while Antonin gripped the arms of his throne so tightly that she rather thought they would snap.

There were even more yells and jeers ringing about the Court now while many of the witches turned their faces away, disgusted, hiding behind their costly lace fans. Astoria was really starting to get upset now. In truth she had barely exchanged a word with Dean before, but his presence symbolised the old world; what once was and what could have been and to see that played out before her with such bloody barbarity was incredibly distressing. What was more Dean didn’t deserve this, any of it. But who in this wretched world does? Astoria thought miserably as she continued to gaze downward, unable to tear her eyes away.

Dean had once again righted himself to his knees. He smiled a terrible red smile, displaying both smashed and missing teeth to their fullest extent. His eyes were streaming but from pain or hysterical laughter Astoria could not say.

“Enjoy this time you have left.” Dean sneered, “Soon she will come for you, all of you!”

“Who!?” Antonin raged, “Who do you speak of Mudblood? Answer me NOW or I swear I shall command Count Dracula to peel the flesh from you like a grape!”

Dean spat out another one of his teeth in a spray of blood and cackled as he looked up into Antonin’s livid face. “Oh, I think you know her quite well already my Lord Justiciar,” He crooned mockingly, “Let us just say that you and your Lord think that you have slaughtered many of us Mudbloods but there are more of us my Justiciar, far more and we intend to exact our revenge! There will nowhere to run, nowhere to hide, the very skies of Moscow shall be ablaze when the Resistance comes for you led by one of the greatest witches in the world, Hermione Granger!”

Dean bellowed the last two words with all his might and Astoria saw something crazed flash in her husband’s eyes as he clenched his jaw tightly. Even from up here, his demeanour frightened her, and
she wondered with dread how what was going to happen when her husband took out his rage upon her in their bed tonight.

“That Mudblood Granger is dead!” Antonin spat at Dean, slamming a huge fist onto the arm of his throne so that it creaked alarmingly. “You are a filthy little liar, just wait until I am through with you boy, you will regret the very day you were born!”

Dean merely let out another derisive laugh which promptly turned into a gargle of pain as Rowle hit him with the Cruciatius curse once again. There was a steely hatred upon Rowle’s face as he let the curse stretch on and on and on as Dean shook like a leaf upon the floor and Astoria could tell he was desperately trying not to scream out in earnest.

When Rowle lifted the curse, this time Dean was taking in great gulps of air as though he had been held underwater and his limbs were still twitching horribly as he balled his bony fists in an effort to make it stop. Amazingly though, as his breathing returned to normality, Astoria distinctly heard another ragged laugh.

Dean defiantly raised his blood stained face up to Antonin and grinned again, “You have nothing, nothing you can threaten me with; all your spells, all your torture, all your strength, it means NOTHING! I am not like you and your Master, I am not afraid to die any longer, so you may as well just kill me! However, I’ll say it again for you Justiciar, she is coming… we are coming, and I look forward to the day when it is your head stuck upon a spear.”

Astoria was not the only one who gasped in horror, her hand flying to her mouth. He will make Dean’s dying last a moon’s turn for that remark she thought with dread, trying to push away the thoughts of what horrific things Antonin and his thugs would do to this poor Gryffindor.

At Dean’s words Antonin came boiling to his feet, the throbbing vein on his left temple threatening to erupt completely. “Take him! Take him!” He bellowed over the tumult of the hall, the spittle flying from his mouth, “Take him to the Serpentine Tower to await the Dark Lord’s pleasure and let us see how well he fares after a few days in there! No food and no water!”

At once the Dementors swooped downwards to Dean’s bloodied figure, their scabbed rotting hands outstretched. Even as he was dragged to his feet, Dean continued to laugh manically, his eyes rolling and blood bubbling from his ruined mouth. There was a tremendous amount of noise coming from both the wizards’ gallery and the common areas below as they screamed insults and promises of dire retribution as Dean Thomas was dragged from the court, a trail of blood trickling behind him as he cackled on and on like a madman.
Marcus Flint pointed his wand in the air which emitted several loud firecrackers, “Silence! Silence! We shall have order in the Justiciar’s Court!” He roared at the top of his lungs.

The rapid chatter and shouts of outrage soon subsided and as the Trolls heaved the heavy doors shut with a great thud, silence soon fell over the court. Antonin rose from his throne, stone faced, but trembling with rage. Leo was trembling too, though he was doing so out of fright as Astoria continued to keep his hand in a vice like grip, a mixture of terror and rage coursing through her like venom.

Antonin stared around at the hall at large with such a thunderous expression that it made Astoria feel unwell. “This audience is at an end!” He shouted, “Get out. Get out, all of you, NOW!”

After everyone had fled from the Court, the Pure Bloods that had been present all congregated in the Justiciar’s dining hall as was the custom. The conversation was feverish, even excitable after the spectacle they had just witnessed. Astoria did not feel excitable in the least and she felt that her peers were not taking what had just happened seriously enough. She was very scared and felt sick with worry, Dean seemed completely sincere, if a little mad. Leo had been whisked away by a Muggle slave back to the main palace at Astoria’s insistent command that he was to be put to bed immediately with some hot cocoa and a calming draught. Antonin could punish her all he liked later, but she refused to let her sweet baby endure a minute more of this horror.

Trying not to reveal her true feelings Astoria determinedly kept a fixed smile on her face while Silas’ wife, Fadila babbled away to her, Elizabeth and Linnea Rowle about the ineptitude of one of her Muggle dressmakers. Petite, beautiful, and Masakh Shafiq’s favourite sister, Fadila Norton was both an important witch and lovely to look upon, but Astoria disliked her spiteful demanding nature and it was with a great effort that she forced herself to listen to her.

“An inch too wide at the waist I tell you!” Fadila exclaimed, her golden eyes bright from drink, “Whoever Imperioused her clearly did not do it well enough, I had to resort to requesting Dracula for one of his House Elves. I know the man was once a Pure Blood but there is no denying what he is…”

Astoria let Fadila’s disdainful words wash over her and chanced a glance about the hall, searching for her husband; he would want her by his side at once the moment he entered after all. Instead her eyes fell upon a tall figure with white blonde hair who was edging up the side of the hall, making for one of the doors. Draco. Astoria had a sudden urge to follow him, she needed answers and he was the only one that might give them to her. Hastily excusing herself by lying about a ‘woman’s complaint’ so as to avoid questions, she weaved through the chattering groups made for a different door, but one that she knew led out into the same passageway. Smiling and nodding at all in her path so as not to detect suspicion, Astoria, slipped all but unnoticed into the quiet passageway. It was rather gloomy with only every other of the snake fire sconces lit as flame gushed from their open, hissing mouths. She looked left, then right and saw Draco heading toward the end of the passage, his
steps brisk, the firelight dancing off his pale head.

“Draco!” She hissed into the silence so as to avoid shouting. He did not turn but continued to walk onward so she tried again, “Draco!” Then as loud as she dared she called, “Admiral Malfoy!”

Draco jerked to a halt and turned, a brief look of surprise upon his pale face in the half light as she came striding toward him, her long skirts whispering upon the marble floor. “My Lady Justiciar, forgive me.” He said ever so formally, “I was just… away with my thoughts.”

“No matter,” Astoria said stiffly. Their eyes met for a brief moment and she willed herself not to look away, not knowing when she would have the chance to look upon him for this long again, even if the stretching silence between them was now becoming increasingly awkward.

Draco was still as tall and strong as ever, but the stresses and burdens of the past six years had made themselves known upon his visage; there were premature lines under his eyes and his expression was always wary...guarded. Though his position in the Empire was not as high as Antonin’s, Draco was a powerful and respected wizard in his own right now. He had put himself – and by extension his family, back in the Dark Lord’s good graces when the Death Eaters had first invaded Russia. Draco had led the attack from the sea and had sacked the port of Novorossiysk so savagely that the sea itself had been set afire and thousands were left dead. The Dark Lord had been so impressed with Draco’s campaign that he had made him an Admiral of the Empire and put him in charge of all of Russia’s sea defences. This change in fortune conveniently allowed Lucius to worm his way into a comfortable position in the Empire’s Treasury. Astoria had been mortified when she heard tales of what had happened at Novorossiysk, but she could not think ill of Draco for what he did; this was the path that they had both trodden so wearily for so long: kill or be killed.

Astoria continued to stare into those grey eyes of pain. She knew that like her, Draco was trying to hold in eight long years of pent up longing which is why he addressed and treated her as such, as though he could pretend she were just another Lady to make it easier…it never did.

He moved toward one of the arched windows and stared out over the grey mass and plumes of black smoke that was Moscow and murmured tiredly, “What would you have of me, my Lady?”

“I want to know what is going on Draco.” She said without preamble, “Linnea Rowle told me two moons ago that there was an attempted attack on Siberia and that a Hydra was wounded, and now we have the likes of Dean Thomas turning up in the Empire swearing bloody revenge upon all of us. Things have not felt right for a while now and I don’t like it; Antonin has been travelling more than usual and unlike before he has forbidden the children and I to accompany him. I’m... I’m scared Draco, I’m scared that something dreadful is going to happen and I want to be able to protect my children should that come to pass. Please, just give me something, anything to put my mind at ease, but if not, I want to be prepared.”
Draco had made no move nor sound during her plea, but she knew he had listened to every word. He continued to stare out the window and when he spoke he sounded vacant, empty, utterly devoid of any emotion. “I will not conceal from you that the attack in Siberia was a very close thing. Had it not been for our dragon reinforcements and some quick thinking to contain the onslaught they may very well have broken through.” Astoria’s insides twisted with fear, but she did not interrupt, she wanted to hear everything she could. “During the war, the Dark Lord destroyed many of those Muggle weapons they call missiles, but unfortunately the Americans have more, far more than was first thought. They have sent several of them our way and most we were able to repel but in this particular incident that the Lady Rowle spoke of, one of them landed in the sea which caused the injuries to the Hydra.” He paused and turned to face her, his expression still oddly blank. “We were not expecting that… I have truly never seen anything like it, the entire sea seemed to erupt into the very sky such was the force of the explosion and every living thing that was not shielded from the blow was killed; the birds, the fish—” Draco stopped abruptly when he saw the horror upon Astoria’s face, then went on impassively, “But there’s really no need to panic, the Dark Lord has redoubled forces around the coastlines and he is experimenting more than ever to prevent such an occurrence from happening again… he took long enough to build this Empire after all, he’ll not give it up easily.’’ His last words were laced with bitterness as he once again turned to gaze out the window – the only true feeling he had evoked thus far. Something was amiss here, but what?

“And what about Dean? The Resistance? The Order?” Astoria pressed him, her heart filled with fear despite his words.

Draco shrugged, “There has been nothing to suggest that Hermione Granger is even alive, there’s been no sighting of her in years since she escaped from the Rhineland and both your husband and the Dark Lord searched high and low, believe that. The Resistance are a scattered and spent force with most of them hiding away in the Americas and all but a few Order members are dead… Dean may very well have been lying and in any case the truth will come to light as to what he was doing here once the Dark Lord is through with him.”

“But then how did he find his way into the Empire?” Astoria demanded, now becoming a little irritated at Draco’s casual, emotionless attitude when she was so obviously afraid. Astoria wanted to shake him, to make him feel some of what she was feeling; but it had been over half a year since they had spoken privately with one another and he seemed to have turned into some sort of empty shell.

Draco’s eyes snapped away from the window to fix on her and to her great surprise, they narrowed in annoyance. “Look, things of this nature happen all the time, it is just that you never hear of them. The Empire is constantly under attack; only half a year’s past we executed a group of Americans who were smuggled in by Chinese wizards, but naturally we were all commanded to keep silent on the matter.” He paused for a moment, staring at her intently, almost appraisingly. “You ask much of me my Lady, I could have my head struck off just for repeating this to you.”

Astoria’s irritation and fear vanished almost at once, knowing how much this must have cost him to
tell her what were effectively secrets of the Empire. She reached out to touch his face, “Draco, look I am sorry my love, here let me –”

But Draco shied away from her hand, taking a step backward from her as he did so, “Don’t touch me!” He snapped so roughly that it made her jump, “I have a wife and you have a husband, remember? I am not your ‘love.’”

Astoria could not believe what she was seeing and hearing. Draco had never ever spoken to, or treated her this way before; this was the type of behaviour she expected from her brute of a husband. She continued to stare, bewildered into his eyes which were now slits of fury and as hard as stone, eyes she did not recognise.

“How… How is your wife? How is Pansy?” She asked in a very small voice, trying to be kind.

*A mistake.*

Draco’s face hardened, and his mouth contorted as though he were desperately trying to fight down the urge to shout, cry or both. “Still devastated obviously, it will have been a year in three turns time,” He snarled with such venom that it was Astoria who now took a step back from him. “Her health does not concern you, my Lady.”

She knew where this pain stemmed from, she understood that Draco was protective of Pansy, it was in his nature after all but that did not mean it frightened her any less and did not take away the hurt and confusion that he was taking everything out upon her.

It had been almost five years ago now since Draco Malfoy wed Pansy Parkinson in a lavish ceremony off the Southern coast of Spain. After Astoria had cried herself to sleep on their wedding night, she had spent the next few moon’s turns bracing herself for a baby announcement, dreading it yet feeling horribly guilty at the same time for feeling thus. Only, the baby announcement had never come. While Astoria bore child after child over the years Draco and his new wife were plagued by infertility, miscarriages and last and worst of all, a stillborn little girl almost a year ago. The Malfoy babe had been three lunar cycles away from being born when she was lost, and the devastation of that terrible chapter in his life was still etched as plain as day all over Draco’s pained face.

“Draco, I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!” Astoria pleaded with him, tears rushing to her eyes as he continued to glare at her. “I’m sorry I asked I didn’t know what else to say! Please forgive me, I know I cannot imagine what you have both been through… I’ll – I’ll keep you both in my prayers.”
Astoria turned to leave, not wanting to prolong this… this *torture* any longer; she felt dazed and confused, as through she’d been thrown from a balcony and clubbed round the head. *This could not be real.*

Draco however, let out a harsh, humourless laugh that hurt her very ears. “Ah I suppose we are saved then! Dolohov’s *mount* sends us our prayers, so all shall be well.” His voice was thick with sarcasm and it was an effort for her not to burst into tears. Draco was slowly turning back into the vile, mean spirited boy she had once despised as a young girl; she thought he had left that boy in the corridors of Hogwarts, but she was wrong. Draco must have noticed the moment of confusion on her grief stricken face as he raised a pale eyebrow coldly, “Oh yes, Dolohov’s mount, *that* is what everyone calls you behind your back, because all you do is let that bastard shove babies inside you like a broodmare,” Draco sneered.

Draco may as well have slapped her across the face, because that was how his words felt. “That isn’t fair!” Astoria choked, finding her voice at last, though she was half blinded by tears now, “Draco, you *know* that isn’t fair!” This had to be some cruel jape, it was like something out of a horribly grotesque nightmare…

*How could he? Her Draco, her rock, how could he say such monstrous, cruel things?*

Draco ignored her words and continued to survey her coldly, “I suggest that you compose yourself and take yourself back to the dining hall my Lady, doubtless your husband will begin wonder where you are.”

And with that, the man who Astoria once believed to be the one true love of her life, spun on his heel and strode away from her down the dingy corridor. He did not even stop for a moment to turn when the stone walls began to echo with her heartbroken sobs.

Chapter End Notes

I guess the main thing for me in this chapter was the interaction between Astoria and Draco which has been re written several times. I know I have written him as a rather sympathetic character in this fic (As opposed to JKR’s one) but I also wanted readers to be reminded that he is also a Malfoy and I wanted that Malfoy spitefulness to rear it’s ugly head. This is mainly because Astoria sees Draco as this sort of perfect Knight in shining armour and I wanted to highlight that while he is not rotten to the core he is still human and still a Malfoy and Astoria ought to be on the receiving end of some of the more unpleasant traits of his personality to truly understand him.

By the way no, Draco doesn’t hate her, he’s just hurting alot :(


XXXVIII. - Vengeance

Chapter Summary

Apologies for the delay in posting, this chapter had to be seriously edited and cut and it took me longer than first thought. I am almost halfway through the next one so I hope to have that up fairly soon.

Many thanks to those who continue to read,

S x

Warning: potentially disturbing material.
Same disclaimer applies.

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Astoria’s heartbreak after the vicious diatribe that Draco had hurled at her in the corridor had lingered for days. She had cried herself to sleep a fair few times, her sadness being all the more desolate seeing as she could not confide in anyone about the incident, not even Elizabeth. Tired of gloom, her river of tears had soon run their course and had quickly morphed into something else: rage. Blind, unadulterated rage and outrage. She knew Draco was hurting, even jealous perhaps but that did not excuse his vile words towards her, especially with regard to her babies. He knew she had absolutely no right to choose how many children she had or when she had them, yet he still chose to say those terrible things all the same. That just made it hurt all the more.

He is a man after all, Astoria thought with savage contempt. What was it he had said? –

“All you do is lie back and let that bastard shove babies inside you like a broodmare.”

Despite her anger the words still stung. Indeed, Draco in his blind ignorance may have thought it was as simple as that, but he could never comprehend the struggles and sufferings Astoria had had to endure to be a Mother to so many. She supposed being a wizard he could never truly understand but that only made her even angrier. His cold contempt for something he hadn’t the slightest inkling about was yet another slap in the face.

Wizards are all alike, they care not a fig for what we witches must go through to give our children life.
To be sure Motherhood came with some wonderful, uplifting moments but it also had its challenging moments as well. Draco would never know the gruelling strain carrying a child put on one’s body, nor what it was like to be up half the night with screaming babes while being days away from delivering another, nor could he possibly fathom the battle between life and death that was birth. These thoughts only served to stoke the white hot rage burning within Astoria, searing away any affection she ever had for the man she thought she had known and loved… once.

*How dare he? It is like the wool has been removed from my eyes now that he has allowed his mask to slip. He is more like Lucius than I ever knew… a true Malfoy indeed, rotten to the core.*

Astoria angrily shoved away her thoughts about Draco, she would not allow her feelings to be dictated by him and it would do her nothing but ill to constantly sup off hurt and anger. In any case, she had bigger worries to occupy her mind just now.

In the weeks following the spectacle in the Justiciar’s Court, one could be forgiven for thinking that nothing out of the ordinary had taken place. Astoria had not seen or heard of Dean Thomas since he had been dragged from the Court to be imprisoned in the infamous Serpentine Tower on the other side of Moscow. The Serpentine was a place of terror where only the most notorious traitors were taken; usually wizards who had either tried to escape the Empire’s oppressive rule or those caught trying to pass information to the Dark Order’s enemies in the outside world. Astoria had heard tell of some of the horrific things that had taken place within the Tower that made her blood run cold – those who went in never came out again and were guaranteed to die screaming. Indeed, she wondered if Dean was still alive at all. If so then she pitied him as he was likely to be in exquisite pain as the Dark Lord tortured every last piece of information out of him while Antonin and his thugs exacted their revenge. She desperately wanted to speak with Linnea Rowle to see if she had overheard anything from Thorfinn, but Linnea was great with child being less than a moon’s turn away from giving birth and was seen out in society less and less. In any case it was probably best to wait as they were now forbidden from speaking about the incident and Astoria didn’t want to upset her while she was in such a delicate state. A few days after Dean’s imprisonment Yaxley had exploded at the dinner table when Elizabeth carelessly threw out his name after a little too much wine. The next morn she had shown Astoria the map of black and blue bruises littered up her arms and back. News of Elizabeth’s punishment had spread and now no one dared broach the subject, even privately.

Antonin certainly wasn’t about to let anything slip either. On the day that it had happened he did not return to the Justiciar’s dining chamber and Astoria had returned to their apartments in the main Palace alone which was highly unusual. She had waited for him all night in their bed, naked but for some vulgar lace stockings with a large flagon of his favourite wine at the bedside, knowing that this was how he would want to find her; bracing herself for when he came storming in as he so often did when his day had not gone as he desired. He had not come back that night either and when he finally did make his return to their apartments stinking of whisky and whore’s perfume, he seemed determined to act as if the furore at the Justiciar’s Court had never happened. Astoria did not dare breathe a word about it and cautiously played along with his little act but that did not stop her tossing and turning late at night, continually going over Dean’s words again and again in her head:
“She’s coming for you, all of you.”

Despite Antonin betraying nothing however, she could tell that the Dark Lord’s inner circle was restive. Her husband was gone for long stretches of the day at the Dark Lord’s Fortress and many of the ‘old guard’ such as Travers, Avery, Jugson and Rookwood came and went from Antonin’s private solar, sometimes spending hours up there. Dementors were more present throughout the Palace and on the streets of Moscow and Antonin had commanded that the city gates be sealed, redoubling the magical protection around it. Indeed, on more than one occasion Astoria’s personal protection guard that watched over her and the children had been sent out into the Moscow slums several times to deal with Half Blood brawls and riots… or so it was rumoured. It seemed that Dean’s sudden appearance in the Empire had riled up some of the Half Blood population who were not satisfied with the lies that they had been fed which was what surely inflamed these so-called outbreaks of rebellion. All these whispers, rumours and ominous inferences only served to intensify Astoria’s unease that she never seemed to be able shake these days, not to mention her complete and utter frustration at it all. Without knowledge she was powerless to do anything – it was utterly maddening.

Astoria sighed as she gazed at her reflection in the gilded mirror before her, knowing that it did her no good to fret endlessly over this. All she needed was a little luck and then she may have a chance to find out what was truly going on in the Empire.

“My Lady!? My Lady!?” Antonin’s voice barked from the adjoining room, “Get in here at once!”

Like a kennel master calling to his bitch Astoria thought wearily as she uncomfortably adjusted the great heavy tiara that sat upon her honeyed curls. It was laden with enormous emeralds and diamonds; beautiful enough, but she had scarcely had it on for a few minutes and it was already making her head thump and ache. Knowing Antonin expected her to look immaculate she looked over herself once more in the mirror, smoothed the Dark Order sash over her dress and hastily made her way into the drawing room.

Astoria found her husband slumped at a table, a half empty brandy glass clutched in his hand and wearing a very irritated expression on his pale face, though this vanished at once to be replaced by a lascivious grin when his gaze roved up and down her form. She was clad in one of his favourite gowns that he had gifted her shortly after the birth of the twins, though in truth this ‘gift’ had been a sort of thinly veiled threat to get her figure back and quickly. Thankfully even after three more babes it still fit her like a glove. It was crushed cream velvet adorned with lace and pearls which was cut incredibly low at the bust, leaving very little to the imagination. Her husband’s family crest glittered from a rope of diamonds around her neck and yet more emeralds sparkled at her ears in unison with the brooches that rested on her sash.

“My, my, my.” Antonin purred softly as he rose awkwardly to his feet while she curtsied for him. “You are lucky you look so divine this morn my Lady or I just may have had to chastise you for
Astoria felt a stab of annoyance; even after all this time she had never quite gotten used to her husband constantly treating her like an ignorant child. In truth she was not that late, and her slight tardiness could have been avoided if he had chosen to bed her once rather than twice earlier this morn. Naturally he had used her roughly as was usual, but Astoria suffered his embrace with as much dignity as she could while he groaned and growled like a beast, pumping away at her like she was an object. It seemed that Linnea Rowle’s looming due date had invigorated Antonin’s perverse desire to have as many heirs as possible and he had been trying harder than ever with mounting annoyance to get her with child again.

“My Lord husband is both kind and merciful.” Astoria murmured sweetly as he coiled an arm around her waist and drew her in close, pressing her slender figure into his horrible soft gut as one of his hands wandered down to her backside. She did not dare look him directly in the face and instead delicately straightened one of his many badges and honours, simply for something to do.

However, in the blink of an eye Antonin grasped her under the chin with his thumb and forefinger, forcing her head upwards so that she was looking right into those glacial eyes. Instinctively Astoria smiled for him at once, trying to ignore the chill whispering down her spine as she did so.

“Are you afraid my Lady?” Antonin asked silkily, his hand now cupping her cheek. “You seem rather… out of sorts.”

“Every dutiful wife has a healthy fear of her husband.” She replied immediately, knowing that this was what he wanted to hear having grown well used to his games by now.

“To be sure.” Something sinister had gleamed in his cold blue eyes when she had spoken those words. “Would that I could just keep you all to myself up here, you did have a rather… fertile feel to you this morning after all.” Antonin murmured, his fingers lightly tracing her left collarbone as he continued to ogle her. “But alas, duty comes first.” He gave one of her breasts a casual squeeze before glancing at the ugly carved grandfather clock that stood near the window, “Shall we my dear?” Astoria nodded meekly, took his proffered hand and allowed him to lead her to the towering fireplace on the other side of the room. When they were stood before the roaring fire, her husband seized a pinch of glittering green powder from a jewelled pot and threw it within. “The Dark Lord’s Fortress!” Antonin shouted, and they both promptly stepped into the warm green flames.

They emerged into a cavernous black marble hall adorned with carvings of dragons, snakes and other such monsters set into the ceilings and walls. Despite the blazing fire sconces the place was gloomy and there was a distinct chill in the air. The firelight danced upon the walls, making the beasts seem almost lifelike as it flickered upon their snarling faces. Astoria shivered a little but made no obvious sign of her discomfort as she walked obediently beside Antonin; the fussy elaborate
gown she was clad in was rather at odds among all this bleakness. They made their way toward a
towering staircase in the adjoining hall and proceeded to slowly clamber up the stairs, hampered
somewhat by her husband’s bad leg. By the time they made it to the floor above Antonin was
puffing and coughing, his years of heavy smoking making themselves known. Astoria pretended not
to notice, instead looking straight ahead to the set of double doors gilt in black and silver that they
were making towards. The doors were slightly ajar so that the babble of talk, laughter and the smells
of rich food came drifting down the corridor. Astoria took a deep breath and braced herself as the
doors swung open at their approach.

Cries of welcome broke out from all over the richly decorated room at their entrance as wizards and
their ladies glittered under the glow of an impossibly intricate emerald chandelier crafted into the
likeness of many snake heads. Though it was daylight hours everyone was dressed to the nines for
this most special of occasions today, all determined to outdo one another. It was a very rare
occurrence for this many to be invited to the Dark Lord’s Fortress at the same time after all. Witches
were clad in elaborately embroidered and jewelled gowns, proudly swathing themselves in their
Dark Order sashes while their Death Eater husbands silently yet boastfully proclaimed their high
rank in the Empire by the number of medals and honours that clinked upon their chests atop rich,
costly dress robes of every colour. Wine flowed, glasses chinked, and the laughter was merry as
Astoria and the witches kissed one another’s cheeks and exchanged pleasantries while their husbands
puffed out their chests at one another like peacocks.

Predictably Yaxley soon came barging over in a swirl of deepest blue velvet, cutting a wide path
through the guests who parted at once as Elizabeth trailed in his wake clad in the family House
colours of scarlet and black.

“There you are old boy!” Yaxley exclaimed as he and Antonin embraced. “We were wondering
where you had got to. Today was your doing after all, I was just remarking to Travers what an
excellent notion this was.”

“Good morrow, Corban. Oh, you know witches,” Antonin replied with a sly smirk, his cold eyes
darting maliciously toward Astoria for a moment, “They cannot help but seduce the mirror while
they are tarting themselves up, no matter what the occasion.”

Yaxley guffawed before looking her up and down with his pale blue eyes, a lecherous smile warping
his brutal features. “Well what an occasion it is, your Lady is looking rather lovely if I might say so.”

“Quite.” Antonin replied, his mouth twisting with pleasure, “Now I needs must speak with you, we
have much to discuss.” He released Astoria and peered about the room, craning his neck. “Cousin!? 
Cousin!?” Antonin barked with an abrupt change to Russian, “Where are you? I command you to
escort my Lady wife to the balcony without.”
Astoria’s heart sank as Vadim Dolohov came striding of nowhere, his arm outstretched and poised, his blood red robes flowing as he grinned like a cat in cream.

“It would be my pleasure, Cousin.” Vadim murmured in his Slavic drawl before planting a kiss upon Astoria’s hand. He looked as though all his name days had come at once as she proceeded to take his arm, albeit stiffly.

Yaxley turned around to give Elizabeth an appraising look, “This is no fit subject for your ears wife, you shall also accompany them.” He too snapped out orders for a male cousin to escort Elizabeth; a young whippet of a boy named Peter Yaxley. Like Vadim, Peter had only been to happy to oblige in this duty; he had but one medal on his chest and to have a witch such as Elizabeth on his arm was a great honour for a Death Eater who was only beginning his service.

The four of them made their way out of the drawing room; Astoria and Vadim in front as protocol dictated while Elizabeth and Peter followed three paces behind them. They soon found themselves in a long, gloomy passageway that was lined from floor to ceiling in deep green velvet. There was nary a sound but the for the soft click of Astoria’s and Elizabeth’s slippers combined with the heavier footfalls of their wizard companions, yet the air was thick with tension. Astoria pressed her lips together angrily and looked neither right nor left, determinedly ignoring Vadim leering down her bodice. Finally, their quartet came to a large set of thick metal doors covered with spikes at the end of the passageway and Vadim let go of Astoria to draw out his wand. He made a complicated movement that she could barely follow and slowly, slowly the metal began to whine then groan as the doors swung open for them.

“Shall we?” Vadim asked with an unpleasant smile as he offered her his arm once again and Astoria inclined her head stiffly.

They stepped out into the gloomy morning air onto a colossal balcony floored in black marble, an intricate painting of the Dark Mark planted in the centre, the snake protruding from the skull weaving and coiling malevolently. During the daylight hours the sky did not shine blue as it once had before the Dark Lord’s reign of terror. The Dark magic that had permeated so much of the land left the sky an angry purple and the sun a hazy white orb that always struggled to shine through. Fluffy white clouds were also very much a thing of the past and had been permanently reduced to a dismal iron grey as they swirled about sluggishly. Astoria could barely remember what it was like to look out upon a bright, crisp morning any more. Tall elaborate candelabras gave added illumination to the shadowy balcony and a green silken pavilion with silver crenelated decorations had been erected over it all which gave the place a rather grand feel. Astoria could feel that pleasant warming charms had been cast to protect them from the chill that surely must be enveloping the city at this time of year. There were fewer guests up here than in the drawing room and it was small wonder why. Only the Dark Lord’s most trusted and long serving Death Eaters and their families were permitted to come onto the Fortress’ main balcony; anyone else was to either stay within or make their way to one of the lower balconies that overlooked the sprawling grey mass of Moscow. Astoria glanced about and saw that the numerous crow cages that hung from the Fortress were devoid of Muggle inhabitants who were often left there to rot and die but today there were only yellowing bones. She
averted her eyes uncomfortably and allowed Vadim to lead her over to the high balustrade that
framed the balcony while Elizabeth and Peter followed suit, settling themselves to the right of them.

“I am glad to see all is in readiness for the festivities today. Your cousin does us all honour Master
Dolohov.” Peter Yaxley stated as he gazed at the streets below, lazily lighting up a cigarette with a
snap of his fingers before pluming vivid blue smoke everywhere.

“To be sure Cadet Yaxley my cousin never misses a thing and he has, ah… excellent taste in all
things.” He looked pointedly in Astoria’s direction and she could feel his eyes running over every
curve of her body, but she ignored him instead pretending to be interested in the preparations that
were taking place far below.

Under the shadow of the towering Fortress and other such looming forbidding buildings, there were
numerous groups of Muggle slave men dashing about. Some had paintbrushes in hand, others had
heavy coils of rope slung over their shoulders or were rolling barrels of the free ale that was
customarily doled out to Half Bloods on these occasions. Astoria barely suppressed a shudder when
she saw the iron stocks that had been erected on the Eastern side of the main avenue. Dirty, starved
and half naked, Muggle women who were either slaves or whores had been locked into the metal
structures by their head and hands, their crimes scrawled upon a grimy plaque that hovered above
them. By the Dark Lord’s decree these ‘disobedient’ slaves were free for the depraved use of any
passing man or beast. This punishment was as humiliating as it was barbaric and served as a warning
to any Muggle woman who refused to tread the path that had been set out for her in this world.
Hardly anyone was paying the women any mind, but Astoria did see two Half Bloods standing a
few feet away pointing and laughing, doubtless deciding whether or not to ‘have a go.’ She tore her
eyes away from this nauseating sight and saw that yet more slaves had appeared. They were hoisting
up flags of the Dark Mark, polishing the Dark Lord’s many statues and sweeping the streets clean
while Half Blood overseers barked out orders from atop unicorn mounts, their wands poised, their
whips coiled at their waists. Astoria was forcibly reminded of Dean Thomas once again when she
glanced over at the spiked black Serpentine Tower that stood threateningly on a hill to the West of
the city, a great stone snake coiled around it from top to bottom. She pushed away the unwelcome
thoughts, knowing how futile they were and looked without really seeing as Half Blood subjects
came wandering out from the directions of the slums to line the streets, but there were few as of yet.
Doubtless the slum brothels and taverns were doing a roaring trade this morn to prepare for the day
that was to follow.

“Some wine I think,” Vadim said after a short pause, tearing his lustful gaze away from Astoria and
glancing about the balcony in search of a Muggle slave. “You! Fetch two goblets of gin for myself
and my comrade and wine for the ladies. Step to it Muggle!” He snapped at a scurrying slave who
jumped with fright in his haste to obey.

Once they had been served their drinks Peter engaged Elizabeth in quiet conversation about the day
ahead as he pointed and gesticulated at the streets below as more trickles of Half Bloods continued to
creep out from dark alleyways and backstreets like curious woodland creatures. Astoria half wished
that Vadim would say at least something to her – even a passing comment about the horrid weather
would do as the stretching silence between them became more and more uncomfortable. He merely stared and stared which prompted her to hasten down her wine quicker than she normally would have done, especially at this early hour.

“My goodness you are beautiful.” Vadim purred softly, finally breaking the silence. He then smacked his lips and grinned in a way that made him resemble Antonin more than ever, making her want to heave. “Even after all those babies you are as exquisite as a maid, just without the… innocence.”

Peter Yaxley abruptly broke off his conversation with Elizabeth and let out a stupid snigger, but Astoria turned her head sharply and chilled him with a look. Elizabeth’s mouth twisted in a mure of distaste, but she knew better than to speak. Astoria did not answer Vadim but finished her wine, gave the tiniest nod so as not to be accused of not acknowledging him and continued to gaze over the balcony. Despite this Vadim seemed to take her response as a slight; his wolfish grin had vanished to replaced by a very dangerous look indeed. He took a step toward her and seized her upper arm in a vice like grip which was hidden by his robes so that no one could see what he was doing.

“You ought to be a little more engaging and a little less vain, my Lady.” He snarled in her ear, “My cousin is not in the best of health and should any ill befall him then you are to wed me next, as I am sure you are well aware of by now.” Astoria’s stomach turned, and she felt her eyes beginning to moisten, not least because Vadim had tightened his grip even more but because she knew he spoke the absolute truth. He always got away with bullying her like this, for she would never be believed and would most like be punished if she ever spoke up. “You are to treat me with the respect I am due, do you understand me woman?” He hissed venomously. Astoria nodded meekly and was about to plead with him under her breath to release her, but they were both prevented from saying more when Rowle’s booming voice rang out across the balcony.

“I shall leave you with the Lady Dolohov and the Lady Yaxley, niece. I believe you are well acquainted already?”

Astoria, glad of the distraction hastily pulled free from Vadim’s clutches and turned around to be faced with three Rowle’s; Clarissa, Thorfinn and Euphemia. Clarissa was looking incredibly nervous but excited, flanked by her uncle and great – great aunt as they drew closer to their group. Unlike wizards, witches were only presented into Pure Blood society once they had been officially betrothed; symbolising the passing from her family’s ownership to her husband to be. Likely, Clarissa had never even set foot in the Dark Lord’s Fortress before and there must be many witches and wizards whom she did not recognise.

How terrifying this must be for the poor girl, Astoria thought sympathetically. Indeed, Clarissa’s entrance on her uncle’s arm had not gone unnoticed, many witches and wizards broke off their conversations to whisper behind their hands or else eyed her boldly from head to heels as though she were some interesting curio.
“Master Dolohov, Cadet Yaxley, my Ladies.” Thorfinn announced when all three were stood before them, nodding at each of them in turn. “May I present my niece Clarissa, the future Lady Selwyn – Avery.”

Clarissa smiled shyly and gave her aunt Euphemia the briefest of glances as though to make sure she was doing things correctly. The elder witch gave a curt nod by way of answer and Clarissa began to nervously perform her courtesies to the four of them, starting with Vadim who was the most senior. Now there was a pretty young maiden to drool over, Vadim had lost interest in Astoria utterly and was now contemplating Clarissa as though she were a little lost sheep that had wandered so unwisely into a dragon’s lair. The look in his eye made Astoria’s flesh crawl as he charmed Clarissa, kissed her hand and made her blush, but she was nevertheless relieved; at least here in front of everyone his ability to cause any harm was nil. Peter Yaxley also had poorly disguised greed in those sly blue eyes of his as he greeted Clarissa, but wisely kept his manner polite and respectful with Thorfinn standing so close by.

“My Lady.” Clarissa said more confidently now as she curtsied for Astoria who was at least a familiar face.

“Good morn to you Mistress Rowle and welcome, you look utterly charming today.” Astoria replied graciously.

The younger witch blushed even more furiously than before, but it was true enough; tall and blonde Clarissa was in a delicate gown of royal blue silk trimmed with white mink with the former colour bringing out her eyes so that they shone like sapphires. Two sets of pearls and pale blue diamonds gleamed at her neck and she wore a slim coronet to match in her hair as a symbol of her betrothal – for only married witches were permitted to wear full tiaras.

After pleasantries had been exchanged, Rowle cleared his throat pointedly. “Come Master Dolohov, Cadet Yaxley. You surely do not want to stay out here with all the witches, do you?” He said, the hint of a sneer playing about his mouth as his green Viper’s cape swirled gently in the breeze. “We are all taking brandy in the Basilisk Chamber, do come join us.”

“At once Commander Rowle, Sir.” Peter Yaxley said eagerly, stepping forward at once to join the elder wizard.

Vadim on the other hand looked reluctant but knowing he had no choice he simply replied, “It would be my great pleasure Commander Rowle.” Though there was no pleasure in those cold, cold eyes. Instead Vadim kissed all their hands, bowed and strode off after Rowle and Peter.
“My Ladies,” Euphemia said coldly, dipping barely an inch as she curtsied. “I trust you shall be able to guide my grand-niece and turn her into a society bride that we can all be proud of. Good day to you.” She inclined her head stiffly, turned and shuffled away to join a group of elderly witches sipping sherry, the black diamonds in her shawl winking insolently in the morning sun.

Clarissa despite all her finery looked utterly petrified as she stood there alone and unsupported before them, her hands moving over one another as though she were washing them in thin air, unsure of what to do or say.

“Come child,” Astoria said with an encouraging smile to put the girl at ease and beckoning her forward, “You needn’t look so worried. Soon enough all this will come naturally to you.”

Clarissa gave an anxious sort of nod and took her place between Astoria and Elizabeth, her bright blue eyes taking in the flurry of activity that was taking place on the streets below with interest, though they widened in fear and shock when she spied the metal stocks containing the Muggle women. Whatever her feelings though, the girl wisely averted her eyes and made no mention of the deplorable scene.

“Indeed,” Elizabeth agreed. She took a goblet of rose wine from a hovering tray and handed it to Clarissa who took it with an uncertain smile. “Just follow our lead as you did in your lessons at the Society and all will be well.”

“But Clarissa was prevented from saying more when a great screeching roar echoed in the sky high above them. The young witch jerked her head upward and gasped, her hand over her mouth.

Small wonder, something else she will have to get used to Astoria thought. Witches like Clarissa scarcely left their family castles and manors or those of their peers until they were betrothed, so naturally sights such as these would come as a wonder to them.

Neither Astoria nor Elizabeth had jumped like Clarissa had, but they both craned their necks upwards all the same. At least two dozen dragons were soaring and twisting in the purple sky above pluming out flames of red, orange, green, blue and even black. There were dragons of every kind and every colour that had been captured from almost every corner of the world to serve the Dark Lord and his army of Dark creatures. Dragons were above all a symbol of power as well as for use in warfare.
“Merlin they are magnificent!” Clarissa gasped as a poisonously green Peruvian Longtooth landed upon a tower not fifty feet away before it let out a huge roar, spreading its great wings as it did so and jetting out acrid yellow smoke from its mouth and nostrils. She gave an excited sort of shiver and turned to Astoria, her blue eyes shining with wonder and awe. “How many does his Lordship have?”

Elizabeth arched a chestnut eyebrow at the question and Clarissa looked wary for a moment as though she were afraid that she had been impudent, but Astoria lightly touched her arm and said gently, “Many and more, but it is not for us to know dear. Come, it is time that we make some introductions.”

Clarissa nodded and kept her place between Elizabeth and Astoria, though she walked half a pace behind them to reflect her lower status being a betrothed woman rather than a married one. The three of them toured the balcony and the drawing rooms, presenting Clarissa to the cream of Pure Blood society; grand old witches bedecked in jewels on the arms of venerable old warlocks whose family names stretched back thousands of years, beautiful haughty young witches who were newly wed to wealthy influential wizards in the Empire and all those in between. Clarissa performed her courtesies unfailingly, her confidence growing with every imperious aristocrat she was presented to and not showing the slightest inkling of intimidation which, she must surely be feeling. However, she did appear to be a little frightened by Marcel de Sade who openly leered at her and kept her hand in a vice like grip when he kissed it, seemingly unwilling to let go much to the irritation of his wife Ediva.

“Stay well away from de Sade… and his wife.” Elizabeth said in the tiniest of whispers to Clarissa as they walked away. “They will bring you naught but trouble.”

The girl nodded still looking shaken, so Astoria sought to change the subject, “Clarissa dear, that over there is Lady Norton, she is well known for hosting small parties and the like. Her husband is Silas and her brother is Masakh Shafiq; both served alongside your uncle and my husband. Oh, and over here we have…”

All the introductions seemed to take an age and Astoria’s throat felt parchment dry after talking so much. It was also tiresome having to constantly repeat herself and explain all the ludicrous medieval rules the Dark Lord insisted upon such as who outranked who and why, not to mention a long list of forbidden behaviours. Much to her relief though, they soon found a spare window seat away from prying ears and eyes.

Elizabeth breathed a deep sigh, sank down onto the velvet and massaged her temples with her thin fingers. “This tiara makes me feel as though I have dragons fighting in my skull.” She complained, adjusting the gaudy Yaxley tiara wrought in the likeness of three platinum Hydra heads burnished in jet and encrusted with rubies and diamonds. “No, that won’t do it… My pardons my Ladies I need to
relieve myself of this cumbersome thing for a few moments before my neck snaps.” Elizabeth turned in a ripple of scarlet silk and strode off in the direction of the powder room.

“Not long to go now, you shall be free to enjoy the day soon enough.” Astoria said with a smile to Clarissa who was also looking rather worn out yet doing her utmost to appear alert and attentive as they settled into the window seat.

The girl gave a start but quickly recovered herself, “As you say my Lady. Has – has Frederick arrived yet, do you know?” She flushed pink and looked away abashedly.

“No as yet, he is most likely in the Basilisk chamber with your uncle and my Lord husband.” She gently touched the younger witch’s arm, “I am sure he will come to you as soon as he arrives.” Clarissa looked up and nodded, looking slightly crestfallen and Astoria’s heart ached for the poor innocent creature. This was but the first in a long line of disappointments for the poor girl and Frederick Selwyn – Avery did not deserve all the sweet affection she seemed to harbour for him. Astoria promptly changed the subject and they spoke at length, sipping wine as they took in the room. Too soon though the time was ripe to get back to the tedium. “I think we will introduce you to the Lord and Lady Justiciar of Austria next child, come let us go.” Dutifully Clarissa got to her feet, making sure that Astoria stood first and once again falling in half a step behind her as they made their way into a parlour decorated in blood red velvet and elaborate silver gilt mirrors.

“Ah there is the Austrian Justiciar and his wife, do you see? That warlock in purple damask next to the witch with the long blonde hair wearing the amethysts, I did hear that they are coming to your wedding, so it is only right that you –”

But Astoria stopped dead and her heart seemed to have stopped too, for when they had drawn closer to the Lord and Lady Justiciar of Austria a group of wizards that were in their path parted to reveal Draco standing in their midst, all of them chuckling at some jape. Astoria felt winded; it was as though she had been punched in the stomach and her head felt curiously light. She had not come face to face with Draco since that awful day in the corridor. When Draco’s grey eyes flitted in her direction his smile vanished as did those of the wizards surrounding him; like roses withering in a winter frost. Astoria folded her arms raised her chin defiantly as though to remind them who she was and who she was married to. If she were to pass any of these wizards alone along the stairs or in the corridors, she would be required to sweetly greet them and curtsy but today on this most formal of occasions she held the same rank as her husband; she was not required to even speak to them and they had to defer to her. Sure enough, one by one the wizards dipped their heads in submission and murmured:

“My Lady.”

She gave a curt nod in reply, recovering herself after her little play at power and at last finding her
voice. “Come child,” She said in a wooden voice, turning to Clarissa to avoid looking at Draco. “We ought to head to the balcony. The procession will be coming by soon and I’m sure your betrothed will be arriving any time now and will want you by his side. I am sure the Justiciar will understand and besides, there is no one else of any great importance here just now.” Draco’s face hardened at her last words and Astoria felt a surge of contemptuous satisfaction.

_I can be spiteful too Draco, how does it feel?_

“As you say my lady.” Clarissa replied nervously, clearly sensing the coolness in the air and shooting Draco and his companions a thoroughly mistrustful look before hastily averting her eyes.

Despite her poised demeanour, blood was thundering in Astoria’s ears. She wanted to seize the drinks tray from the nearest waiting Muggle and hurl it at Draco Malfoy; to shout every poisonous, horrid thought that now polluted her mind when she thought of him, to scream at him for hurting her so badly and without any just cause. However, ever the Lady she kept her face a mask of cold courtesy, refusing to betray the feelings within. Icy as a winter breeze Astoria swept past Draco and his group of fools as though they were nothing more than pieces of furniture with Clarissa mirroring her when it became clear they were not to be spoken to. She could feel his eyes upon her back as she strode away, the girl hot on her heels. But she hardened her heart and pressed her lips together, refusing to be drawn in and unwilling to forgive him for his cruelty.

When Astoria and Clarissa stepped out onto the balcony once again a flurry of sound hit their ears and served as a welcome distraction to Astoria’s raging thoughts. The girl did not dare mention the exchange in the parlour and she was relieved as she probably would have shouted or cried, or both. The crowds of Half Bloods below were considerably larger now and they lined the streets from East to West as far as the eye could see. The free ale was clearly flowing thick and fast to keep them contented and many were waving flags depicting the Dark Mark while they cheered drunkenly.

_I wonder if they remember what it is like to be truly happy?_ Astoria thought dully as she sipped on a fresh goblet of rose wine while Clarissa copied her every move watching her in an almost worshipful fashion.

They continued to talk politely to one another with Astoria questioning Clarissa on what was planned for her wedding which the girl was only too pleased to gush about as the crowds below grew ever more raucous with every minute that ticked by. She was just about to suggest that they go in search of Clarissa’s betrothed when Astoria felt a strong arm coiling about her waist which made her insides squirm.

“There you are my love, having fun with this pretty little rose, are we?” Antonin asked, smirking down at her and smelling like a winery.
Clarissa turned scarlet at his words and turned more scarlet still when her husband to be, Frederick Selwyn – Avery stepped out from behind Antonin and promptly kissed her hand, a hungry sort of grin warping his face.

“Sweet Lady,” Frederick murmured softly. He gave a clever flick of his wand and produced a silver rose which he handed to Clarissa who fought to stifle her excited giggles. “I am counting the days until you are to be my wife, I can scarcely sleep at night so plagued I am by thoughts of your beauty.”

Indeed, Astoria thought grimly. I bet you can scarcely wait to defile the poor girl in every manner possible; for the glint in Frederick’s eyes had not passed her notice at his last words.

Smiling disarmingly, Frederick offered Clarissa his arm which she took looking simultaneously thrilled and nervous in equal measures. This was the only kind of contact a bride to be was allowed with her betrothed – when they weren’t behind closed doors at least. To be sure it was not uncommon for a bride to already have a baby in her belly when she walked up the aisle due to the prevalence of pre marital rape and weddings were often hastily brought forward to avoid the embarrassment of a bride ‘showing’ on the big day. Naturally this almost always provoked fury from the bride’s family but once she had been paid for, there was little they could do but to watch her carefully and make sure she was never alone with her betrothed. Indeed, when Astoria stole a quick glance about the place, she saw that Euphemia and her gaggle of old women were watching Frederick like a group of shrivelled hawks.

“How long now, Justiciar?” Frederick asked Antonin, Clarissa now seemingly forgotten though she seemed to be oblivious of that fact as she continued to stare at her betrothed adoringly.

“Not long now young Selwyn, not long.” Antonin replied smugly, and Astoria felt a shudder of loathing as he began to caress her waist absently, drawing her closer to him.

“Ah look my sweet, do you see the Goblins?” Frederick asked Clarissa in honeyed tones. He deliberately leaned forward so that they were almost touching as he pointed down toward the street. The young witch in her eagerness – and naivety – promptly leaned forward, giving Frederick and Antonin a full view down her bodice. Astoria did not miss the wink that her husband tipped the younger wizard who grinned but recovered himself quickly enough. “They are here to deliver the herald my dear, that means that the time is almost upon us, watch carefully now…”

Goblins clad in green and silver livery had appeared out of thin air upon each side of the main avenue in front of the huge crowds. Frederick looked on the point of saying more but before he could do so, the Goblins began to blow into large shiny trumpets adorned with flags of the Dark
Mark. The trumpets were so loud that they drowned out much of the din that rang out through the air and everyone both above and below, fell silent. The only sounds that could be heard after the squawk of the trumpets was the ghostly wail of the wind and the hurried footsteps of Pure Bloods on the marble as they hastened to part before the great double doors that led back into the Fortress. Finally, all was still with every eye upon the large doors, the room beyond them lost in shadow as they waited. There was a distinct chill in the air despite the warming charms and Astoria glanced up to see a dozen or so Dementors swirling high, high above them which could only mean one thing. Sure enough, out of the darkness stepped the Dark Lord, his chalk white skin gleaming out from the gloom, Nagini draped around his shoulders and Bellatrix following reverently in his wake, both looking as strange and terrible as ever. His Lordship took in the scene before him, his face expressionless, his scarlet eyes sweeping blankly over his subjects as everyone began to kneel as one in a great tide, their heads bowed.

As was usual the Dark Lord kept everyone on their knees while he swept past, making toward the edge of the balcony. He stood there for a time, gazing down at the now silent streets below as his long black robes fluttered gently in the breeze. Astoria’s knees had begun to burn and ache from being on the cold hard marble and she was terrified that the heavy tiara atop her head would fall but then –

“You may rise.” Came the high cold voice, so loud and clear that it seemed to come from the deep purple sky as it reverberated all around them.

There was a great deal of puffing, grunting and the rustling of ladies’ skirts as everyone got to their feet and Astoria swallowed hard as Antonin led her to his Lordship’s side so that they were stood to his left. She felt a stab of hatred as Yaxley wormed his way to the front so that he was almost shoulder to shoulder with her as he quaffed wine and brayed loudly with Elizabeth on his arm, looking glum. The noise below had slowly started to creep up again; the streets were absolutely heaving now, and Astoria could hear faint drunken singing mingled in with the shouts and excited laughter. As discreetly as she dared, she chanced a sideways glance past her husband at his Lordship. The Dark Lord was observing his subjects almost as though he were mesmerised as they teemed like so many ants. His large white hands were resting on the marble balustrade of the balcony and Astoria rather felt that she was intruding on a private moment; as if she, Antonin and the rest of the Pure Blood coterie that surrounded him did not exist as he continued to stare with those pitiless eyes. It was Nagini that brought his Lordship back to the present however. The huge snake raised her diamond patterned head and hissed in an agitated sort of way as her orange eyes rolled and bulged. The Dark Lord delicately stroked her head with a long white finger before turning to Antonin.

“All is in readiness, Dolohov?” He asked sharply.

“Yes, my Lord.” Antonin replied with a respectful bow of his head while Astoria averted her eyes completely.
“Good.” The Dark Lord turned back to the mass of wizards below and gave a carless wave of his wand. “Loyal subjects!” He screeched so as to drown out all other sound and everyone fell silent once again. “With each passing day my glorious Empire grows stronger and today I shall provide proof of that strength. From the mountains of Russia to the seas of Europe to the sands of Arabia we wizards rule eternally, just as nature intended!”

At these words there was a tremendous amount of cheering and clapping both on the balcony and far below with many calling out the Dark Lord’s name and praising him to the very skies. Astoria saw the Dark Lord’s serpentine features twist with a chilling sort of pleasure as he allowed the cheers to wash over him, raising his thin arms high into the air as though to embrace it all. Finally, after some minutes he held up a large white hand and the silence fell once again.

“Alas my friends, though we have achieved much, there is still far more to be had. In the Americas from North to South they plot the undoing of our glorious Empire, our glorious world that we have worked so tirelessly to build.” There were many boos from the crowd with much muttering from the Pure Bloods and Astoria saw Silas spit over the edge of the balcony in disgust. “But soon my friends, very soon, we shall have even more territory to call our own! May I present one of my most faithful servants fresh from his tour of Argentina, Walden McNair!”

There was a great roar from the crowd as the Dark Lord slashed his wand through the air so violently that Nagini went tumbling from his shoulders, hissing angrily with many witches and wizards leaping hastily out of her path. When Astoria lowered her skirts after she was satisfied that the snake had slithered well away, she looked up to see that a great cloud of purple smoke had appeared upon the main avenue far away to the East. She could see nothing as yet, but she heard the snorting and stamping of unicorns, triumphant yells and the unmistakable groaning and creaking of wood. Then suddenly out of the smoke burst McNair, mounted on a huge black unicorn stallion with countless other riders pounding in his wake. There was an eruption of sound as the riders charged up and down the street, wands raised as the air was rent with great bangs and flashes of light from their celebratory spells.

Eventually McNair reined up his mount to a halt and waved to the surrounding crowds who continued to cheer and wave their flags back at him. Astoria saw McNair reach into his robes to draw out his wand which he then pointed at his throat.

“My Lord!” McNair bellowed over the tide of noise, his voice magically magnified. “It gives me great pleasure to inform you and your loyal subjects that your Death Eaters had a successful campaign.” The Pure Bloods on the balcony clapped and shrilled gleefully at his words, behaving almost as common as the crowds below. “We do this gladly, for you and for the glory of our Empire my Lord. It is my dearest hope that we can deliver this country into your hands before the year’s end. So, without further ado I give you, the riches of Argentina!”

There was another tidal wave of sound both above and below as there was another great eruption of
purple smoke. As it began to clear Astoria saw that enormous Abraxan stallions were pulling great wooden carts which were overflowing with gold coins, fantastical coloured jewels and bizarre looking Dark artefacts. This procession of carts and wanes seemed to stretch on forever all the way up the street and were flanked by mounted Half Blood guards who trotted alongside lumbering security Trolls to protect the ill gotten goods.

*How much blood had been spilled across Argentina to achieve this?* Astoria thought grimly as she spied a ruby bigger than a man’s head glittering in the weak sun atop a pile of sapphires and emeralds.

“Such plunder!” Astoria heard Yaxley exclaim from her left over all the noise, “I daresay Treasurer Malfoy will have his work cut out for him with this lot.”

Antonin laughed derisively beside her and Astoria tried to ignore the twist of pain and fury she felt at the sound of Draco’s family name casually thrown out like that. However, it did strike her as passing queer as to why Lucius, one of the chief Treasurer’s for the Empire was not front and centre of the balcony rubbing his hands together at the prospect of so much gold, his grey eyes alight with avarice.

It was not only treasure and riches featured in the procession, McNair and his forces had brought back beasts as well, doubtless for the Dark Lord to use in his experimentations or else train them to fight in his monstrous army. Tropical birds that stood six feet tall with cruel curved beaks squawked and beat their wings in cages, giant red tigers with curved yellow fangs roared in fury as they were jostled about in the carts and a giant yellow snake coiled about in a sparkling protective orb that floated eerily through the air above it all.

The Dark Lord had not moved or spoken since McNair’s pronouncement nor the start of the procession. His serpentine features were twisted in a grotesque sort of frozen smile; he did not even blink he merely stared down at all the riches that had been brought here before him, riches that had been seized upon the blood and suffering of others. The red eyes seemed to gleam with depraved pleasure, the slit pupils contracting.

Astoria was distracted from this unsettling sight when she heard Yaxley’s excited breathing behind her and Antonin. Dutifully she stepped aside so that he could speak with her husband, his brutal face alive with savage triumph. “This procession was just what those filthy commoners needed, the ignorant fools.” He whispered smugly to Antonin “A perfect distraction indeed, well done old friend.”

“They are simple creatures and easily pleased,” Antonin replied smoothly, “I knew it would not take much to placate them.”
Astoria inwardly rolled her eyes, it had been painfully obvious that this was her husband’s plan from the beginning. After the chaos of Dean Thomas’ appearance in the Justiciar’s Court and the subsequent fights it had caused among the Half Blood population, Antonin had decided to put on this farce of a military procession to coincide with McNair’s arrival from South America. She knew what was going on here, this procession was intended to trumpet the wealth and power of the Dark Order to remind them all who ruled here and get the Half Bloods as drunk as possible on all the free ale – drunkards had no time to stage rebellions and occasions such as these served as an escape from their lives of drudgery and poverty. Even she had to admit that Antonin’s scheme seemed to have worked as she gazed down below. She saw one wizard perched on the shoulders of another, the flag of the Dark Mark tied around him like a cape as he and his companion bellowed a song drunkenly, their tankards overflowing. A score of shouting wizards were crowded around the stocks where the slave women were trapped with many taking turns to couple with the weeping inhabitants. Some wizards were sat upon the floor playing cards or dicing with one another while others embraced and sang, cheering as the procession continued to roll past. There were screams of delight as some of McNair’s thugs rode free from the procession and started to throw fistfuls of gold into the crowd. Astoria could see the mad jostling below as the Half Bloods scrambled to get the precious coins – it was more money than most of them could ever dream of having seeing, as much of the tender in the slums was either silver Sickles or bronze Knuts.


Very clever, she thought dryly, very clever and cruel; give them but a sniff of luxury and they will grab it with both hands. The procession was now coming to a close and thousands of Half Bloods came pouring onto the main avenue from either side of the street to fill the empty space, teeming together like one great entity.

Astoria was distracted from the scene as there was suddenly a great upswing of cheering, whooping and clapping on the balcony. She turned around to see that McNair had come striding through the grim metal doors that led out onto the balcony, his mouth twisted into a satisfied smirk under his thin silver moustache. His wife, a beautiful young witch named Isabelle Lestrange was on his arm, relishing in the attention and praise her husband was receiving as she tossed her raven black curls. However, McNair promptly disentangled himself from her grasp and went striding toward the Dark Lord before taking a knee on the marble.

“My Lord.” He murmured softly before producing a large ornate sceptre carved with laughing demonic faces, holding it up subserviently for his Lordship’s inspection. The thing looked very old and heavy, it was as black as jet and topped with a sinisterly glowing green emerald. “A gift from our, ah… friend in the Aconcagua mountains. He tells me he awaits your arrival eagerly, so you might liberate Argentina as you have liberated so much of the world and sends this gift as a token of his fealty.”

Wordlessly the Dark Lord held out a large white hand. Bellatrix hurried over to take the proffered sceptre from McNair and handed it to him with a bow before walking backwards, her eyes to the ground. The Dark Lord held the object very close up to his deathly white face, his red eyes narrowed as he inspected it. Everyone on the balcony watched with bated breath, their expressions both eager and curious. Finally, he gave a wave of his wand and the sceptre vanished. Giving no explanation
for his behaviour, his Lordship finally deigned to address McNair.

“Did you speak truly McNair?” Asked the cold, cruel voice. “Will Argentina truly be mine within, what was it you said… a year?” There was a mocking tone to his voice and Astoria scented danger; all it would take would be one wrong word, one ill timed move and McNair could very well find himself being Cruciated upon the floor rather than being given a hero’s welcome.

McNair clearly knew he was walking on cracked ice for he quickly glanced upwards at his Master, just as quickly averted his eyes and blustered, “I swear to you my Lord, should you grant me the wands I shall burn the forests of Argentina to the ground and bring you the Minister’s head. I swear it!”

There were more raucous cheers and clapping with many raising their glasses and drinking heartily but Bellatrix slashed her wand through the air angrily. There was a loud BANG, a green firecracker burst from her wand tip and the noise abated at once.

“Very well McNair, very well.” The Dark Lord said musingly as though there had been no interruption, “I shall hold you to that promise, Lord Voldemort thanks you for your service. You may rise.”

“Thank you, my Lord, Thank you.” McNair murmured as he rose, the relief on his face plain to see as wizards and their ladies crowded about him excitedly, eager to hear about his bloody Argentinian campaign.

The Dark Lord gave an odd jerk of his veined, hairless head and swept from the balcony back to the Fortress within, Bellatrix and several other Death Eaters scurrying in his wake. After his Lordship had gone the tension eased somewhat and the bubble of drunken chatter and laughter soon returned. Thankfully Antonin was far too interested in what McNair had to say to pay Astoria any mind, so he left her with Elizabeth and Clarissa as they continued to survey the ever more raucous crowd below while they continued to sip their wine. With so many drunken wizards in one place duels and fights had broken out and were only getting worse. There were flashes of light and clouds of coloured smoke flying about below while the enormous security Trolls waded through the crowds, waving their clubs threateningly and roaring their displeasure. The sound above and below was utterly deafening, and one had to almost shout to be heard. Astoria’s head was now pounding from the weight of the tiara and was starting to feel unwell; she had drunk too much and eaten too little and her stomach was roiling. All she wanted to do was go home and be with her children. It was a nice thought but a pointless one, so she continued to stand there with her rictus grin firmly in place and making polite conversation when required. Astoria had allowed Elizabeth to take over with Clarissa and listened vaguely as she pointed out various landmarks all over Moscow.

“You cannot see it from here, but the Purification Institute is over the other side of that hill there, do
you see child? Durmstrang is a little further away just outside the city before you get to the mountain pass, I am sure my Lord husband would be delighted to –"

But Elizabeth’s words were cut off by an almighty, terrible CRASH! as though thousands of pieces of china had been flung to the floor all at once. This was followed by another sound, a sound unlike any Astoria had ever heard before; it stretched on and on like a sort of scream but worse, a thousand times worse. It was like the whining of ancient rusted hinges, like the shriek of a dying beast, like the thunder of the vengeful sea. The ground below them shook in time with the noise and many witches and wizards fell to the floor screaming, looking shocked and confused. Elizabeth clutched the side of the balcony for support, her mouth agape while Astoria grabbed Clarissa’s arm as she was flung forward toward the edge. Then there was a sinister thudding sound like rainfall, though the raindrops in this case sounded as though they were made of lead as an explosion sounded to the East of the city and a tall tower fell with a SMASH.

Finally, the terrible wailing noise had faded to nothing. The place where the fallen tower had stood was smoking faintly and there was a ringing silence on the balcony, everyone looking dumbstruck. Half a heartbeat later Fadila Norton let out a terrified, bloodcurdling scream. Her shriek seemed to have awoken everyone else from their blind shock for Elizabeth clapped her hands to her mouth and muffled a squeal of horror, Clarissa’s face had become so bloodless that she looked as though she might faint and Astoria realised that her goblet had smashed upon the floor when she looked down at her violently trembling hands, red stains spattered halfway up her cream gown. She felt dizzy, sick, terrified; the ghastly taste of salt was swimming about her mouth like some unwelcome tonic. She felt as though she was outside of her own body and felt oddly dazed as she surveyed the unravelling chaos as though she were not really there at all, frozen by fear. Wizards were shouting, most of the witches were screaming and crying hysterically holding onto one another, the scene was one of complete pandemonium as another screeching groan rent the air. The crowds below were jostling each other so violently that they looked like some fierce tidal wave, but whether they were fighting or fleeing Astoria could not tell.

The Dark Lord came striding out from the Fortress within, his red eyes wide with shock, his white face twisted with fury and was that… fear? “Death Eaters! With me now! Norton, sound the dragon horn!” He screamed over the cacophony of noise as he rose up into the air, wand raised.

Astoria only got the briefest glimpse of Antonin as he turned on the spot and vanished at once along with Rowle, Travers and countless others as they too disappeared into thin air with innumerable pops to serve their Master, leaving behind their wives who wept and screamed. As his comrades continued to disappear all around him, Silas gave a wave of his wand and produced an ancient looking black horn barded with gold carvings. Still looking dazed as though he had been struck across his disfigured face, Silas promptly blew long and deep into the thing which emitted a terrible bass tone, his mismatched eyes bulging from the effort. It was deep, gong like and ominous almost wiping out all other noise and the dragons reacted at once. They let out high pitched screeches that seemed to tear Astoria’s eardrums and began streaking off towards the East where she could now hear faint explosions, their powerful wings propelling them through the air.
“What do we do!? What do we do!?” Elizabeth shrieked at Astoria, shaking her by the shoulders as though to wake her from her numb shock. “Astoria answer me! What do we do!?” Her voice was becoming increasingly shrill and hysterical as tears spilled from her grey eyes.

Astoria opened her mouth to speak but no words came; there was a faint ringing in her ears as she continued to stare at Elizabeth who was now desperately shaking her like a rag doll. Adelaide had come running over from somewhere and was also shouting but she could not make sense of her words as the other witch’s mouth opened and closed frantically.

It has finally happened just as Dean promised; they have come for us all of us, they have come for their vengeance. Will it be me trapped in one of those crow cages before the day is done? Or will they simply strike off my head and put it on a pike like my husband has done to so many others?

Hellish imaginings of what might happen to her swirled around Astoria’s mind as Elizabeth and Adelaide continued to scream in her face. She was then dimly aware of a faint pop to her left followed by yells of fright and shock. As her eyes rolled sluggishly to the spot, she saw that a short squat figure had appeared in the middle of the balcony over the Dark Mark, masked and hooded. A stubby hand reached up toward the face to tear off the Death Eaters mask to reveal Alecto Carrow, her iron grey hair scraped back into a severe bun, her expression hard and angry.

“My Ladies!” Alecto barked over the din which quelled somewhat, though there was still uncontrollable weeping and snivelling in the background. “It appears that there is an attack upon the city by the Dark Order’s enemies. I have been sent here to fetch you all and keep you safe.” Her mouth twisted in distaste at the notion; Alecto was one of the few witches who had permission to serve in the army and because of this regarded herself far above other females. Doubtless she would have preferred to be out there slaughtering the Dark Lord’s enemies rather than playing Nursemaid to a gaggle of terrified witches. “Do as you are bid, and you shall come to no harm. I have no time to answer stupid questions, his Lordship is in urgent need of my wand, now follow me.” She raised the wand in question with one of those stunted hands and held it high over her head. The wand tip promptly began to glow green and without another word she turned sharply and marched back into the Fortress, her black cape swirling. At once the witches began to push and shove at one another, all genteel etiquette forgotten as they scrambled to follow the green glow that guided them.

Alecto’s presence had finally brought Astoria back to her senses now that there was some sort of plan, some sort of action going forward. What was more, there were others that needed her help; she was presently trying to support a terrified Clarissa who kept tripping up, half blinded by her tears.

“My Lady, oh my Lady what is going to happen to us?” The girl choked, keeping a vice like grip upon Astoria’s hand. Over the tumult she could hear Elizabeth and Adelaide close behind them whispering frantically to one another.
“The Dark Lord is surrounded by the best wizards in the land, your uncle Thorfinn included, they will protect us child.” She lied, trying to keep her voice as calm as possible as they rushed down the dark passageway, half a hundred frightened female voices reverberating off the walls.

There was another great *SMASH* and a splintering creak like an enormous tree being felled as the witches poured out into the drawing room in a great gush of many coloured silks and velvets. Clarissa threw her arms around Astoria screaming worse than ever and she patted the younger witch’s hair gently, vainly trying to soothe her. Though her head had cleared somewhat Astoria was still in a state of horrified shock herself and she dimly wondered why she was not screaming and crying like many of the others. But there again she had been in situations such as this before when she had been a Death Eater – most of the witches present had never even duelled, let alone step out on a battlefield or any such place.

“Silence! Silence!” Alecto screamed over the fresh outbreak of weeping and wailing, “Enough of this nonsense, follow me and do exactly as I tell you, now *COME!*” She strode over to the large fireplace in the drawing room, seized a handful of glittering green powder and threw it into the flames. “You first my Lady, it is only fitting.” Alecto said coldly to Astoria, pointing to the emerald green flames that danced before them all. Astoria gently disentangled herself from Clarissa who let out a terrified sob and fell to her knees, her face in her hands. She took a deep breath, stepped into the hearth and heard Alecto shout, “The Justiciar’s Palace!”

They were met in the Great Hall of the Justiciar’s Palace by a dozen Half Blood Guards many of whom were trying to restrain vicious wolves that bayed and howled, provoking more shrieks from the witches. Two heavily armed Trolls were also present as they blinked stupidly at the teeming flurry of chaos that surrounded them and seemingly oblivious to the muffled explosions that were thundering outside the palace walls.

Astoria slunk away to the back of the group of frightened wives, all of whom were crowded round Alecto who looked most displeased as the last few witches came hurrying out of the fireplace. She was still edging away from them all when she bumped into Elizabeth who took her by the arm at once.

“It’s alright,” She said, her voice trembling as she rubbed Astoria’s arm. “Alecto knows what to do, I am sure of it.”

Astoria nodded vaguely as Alecto began shepherding the witches to the western side of the hall in the direction of the Ballroom and Banqueting halls. Many hurried onward without question, but Astoria’s feet seemed to be fused to the floor. She needed to do *something*, something that could not possibly wait... And then out of her haze of terror the realisation of what she needed to do hit her like a tonne of stone; harsh, terrifying and absolute. She couldn’t stay here she simply couldn’t, there was no chance she could go a step further onwards with the others, for there was one urgent need that was paramount above all others despite the madness all around her.
“Come dear, we should leave.” Elizabeth said numbly as she made to follow the other witches. But Astoria shook her head jerkily, took a step backward from her and began to edge away. She saw Elizabeth’s grey eyes widen in fear. “Astoria, come!” She hissed, holding out her hand and glancing warily behind her, but Alecto was still barking out instructions to her guards.

Then the squat figure turned around completely to shout at the Trolls and Astoria took her chance. She whirled round and ran. She ran faster than she had ever run in her life, ignoring Elizabeth’s yells, the gasps of shock from her peers and Alecto’s outraged screeches.

“My Lady!? My Lady!? What do you imagine you are doing? Get back here! Adley, Whittington! Get after the Justiciar’s wife and bring her to me!”

Due to Astoria’s rank Alecto did not dare restrain her with magic, so she continued to plunge ahead heedlessly while the very bricks of the palace shook and groaned as pockets of dust and sand trailed sporadically from the ceilings and walls. She was dimly aware of heavy footfalls pounding after her but it did not matter; the yells, the threats and the pursuing guards were utterly immaterial, there was only one thing in the entire world mattered just now:

The children, I must get to my children, Astoria thought feverishly as great carved doors magically burst open at her approach. With a deft flick of her wand, she sealed a doorway that she had just passed through and heard two heavy thuds that must have been Adley and Whittington slam against the hard oak as Alecto’s shrieking grew fainter and fainter.

Astoria tore through the palace, a thousand terrifying thoughts plaguing her mind as her feet pounded upon the marble, her long skirts flying as she held them up over her feet. As she raced past tall arched windows, she caught glimpses of explosions erupting all over the city as dragons wheeled and arched in the sky spraying flame in every direction, painting the world red and orange.

If there is a hell, surely this is what it must look like.

Astoria’s chest began to ache and burn as she flew up staircases big and small and careered down corridors, panting hard. At long last she finally reached her family apartments, clutching a stitch in her side as needle sharp pain cut through her cruelly. She fell forward through the door such was her haste to get inside and as she struggled to her feet, she could already hear her children crying as the horrendous bangs and crashes continued to fall. Astoria had run to the nursery first but instead found her children huddled upon her bed, all of them sobbing hysterically. Her sweet twins Alexander and Konstantin were clutching one another with a desperate strength, their eyes shut tight as they trembled, tears coursing down their faces. Anastasia, Aires and Nikolai had pressed themselves against Leo who had a screaming Fedor bundled in his arms as he too cried and cried. The sight of
them huddled there so helplessly was more than she could bear. Astoria burst into tears as she rushed toward her children and flung herself onto the bed, terror twisting at her heart like the blade of a dagger.

“Mama!” They all screamed as she tried to embrace them all in her arms, her whole body shaking as she showered them with hugs and kisses as she continued to weep.

“Are you alright? Are you hurt my loves?” Astoria asked frantically, her voice sounding wild and crazed as she checked over each of her babies to make sure they were whole and unharmed. They were completely alone and there was not a Muggle slave or Nursemaid to be found.

“Mama what is happening?” Leo asked over the wailing and crying of the others. His voice was trembling with fear making him sound far younger than his eight years as big fat tears rolled from his lilac eyes while baby Fedor continued to scream.

“Muggles are coming to kill us! We’re going to die!” Anastasia shrilled hysterically as she hurled herself into Astoria’s arms. “How will they kill us Mama? Will they have guns?” She felt utterly helpless and at a loss for what to say as she stared down into those tear filled lavender eyes which were huge with fear; nothing she did or said could make it alright.

This is the worst feeling in all the world. Telling the ones you love most that all will be well, even though you know that to be a lie… Merlin have mercy, what will become of us?

“No one is going to die.” Astoria lied, trying and failing to keep the break out of her voice as she eased Fedor out of Leo’s embrace and held him close. “Leo darling you have done so well helping your brothers and sister and the baby, thankyou my love.” She gently touched his cheek to give what comfort she could, and Leo nodded numbly as he wiped the tears from his pale frightened face. She then addressed the rest of her children as she continued to rock her wailing baby in her arms, trying to keep her voice as gentle as possible. “I need you to come with me, there are guards to keep us safe, but they are not here just now so we needs must find them. Mama needs you to be especially good, so I can look after you all… can you – can you do that for me?”

Anastasia, Leo and the twins nodded mutely but Aires and Nikolai who were but two and three continued to sniffle as their tiny bodies shook like leaves, not understanding what was going on. Astoria was forced to hand a howling Fedor back to Leo as neither of them would move and both wanted to be held, but she was not near strong enough to do so. Anastasia her wonderful little girl, helped Astoria coax her younger brothers off the bed, but the twins were too frightened to do anything other than to clutch tightly at her skirts, screaming and pressing their tear stained faces into the silk. Finally, all of her children were off the bed and Fedor was back in her arms while they all held one another’s hands tightly, still trembling.
“Alright my loves, now we have to –”

But her next words were cut off by an almighty *CRASH* that rocked the very floors beneath them and sent several ornaments flying off shelves and dressers to smash upon the floor. Lightening quick, Astoria repelled the sharp shards of glass and china to keep her children from harm, but the damage was done. A moment ago, they had been ready to leave her bedchamber but now they all dissolved into tears, collapsing onto the floor in terror. Horrified, Astoria fell to her knees and vainly attempted to get them up while cradling the baby haphazardly in one arm. If they stayed here, then they may very well be crushed to death if the palace did not hold. She had tried to be strong for her little ones, but the tears made themselves known again all the same. The burning fright that seemed to have ignited her whole being searing through her hotter than ever, making her horribly aware of how much danger they were in.

“Please get up!” She begged, now sobbing as hard as her babies, “Please my darlings! *Please get up!*”

She tugged helplessly at one of Alexander’s wrists as he kicked and screamed, but it was no use. Then there was a great *BANG* followed by the sounds of splintering wood and shattered hinges as great clouds of black smoke billowed everywhere. Everyone within screamed hysterically, though none louder than Astoria as she clung to her baby for dear life. As the smoke from the doorway cleared, she instinctively flung herself over her children to shield them from the surging tide of masked and hooded Half Blood guards that had come surging into the room.

Chapter End Notes

The rift between Astoria and Draco will be resolved but not any time soon sadly. As I've said previously, I wanted to take their relationship in a different direction 1. so they will eventually understand each other better and 2. because I was getting rather bored with the same dynamic and 3. because this further isolates Astoria which will be very important later on in the story. As for the story itself I'm glad to finally take it in a different direction and that will continue to happen as I round this off.
XXXIX. - Wrath of the Phoenix

Chapter Summary

Many thanks for the patience for this chapter, sorry it took so long however chapter 40 is also finished and being edited now so I hope to have that up by the weekend as well.

Same disclaimer applies.
Warning: graphic imagery and disturbing themes.

Thanks,
S x

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Astoria paced about the Justiciar’s Ballroom as though she were a caged animal, her thoughts half crazed with terror. She had tried to sit down and be still, but she found it impossible to do so and was in stark contrast to Elizabeth who was pinned to her seat occasionally sipping from a goblet of Firewhiskey, her body in a stiff sort of catlike alertness as though she was ready to bolt at any moment. While Astoria had fled all the Pure Blood Death Eater wives and their children had been herded into the palace Ballroom by Alecto after the madness above had broken out. However, she had now been firmly put in her place after she and her babes had been brusquely escorted from their apartments by Alecto’s henchmen who had thoroughly terrified them all, especially the smallest ones while Alecto herself scornfully grumbled about ‘Mother’s madness.’

If she were a Mother herself then she might understand my fears, Astoria thought angrily as she continued to pace back and forth.

No one was permitted to leave the Ballroom or attempt to do so, not that they could anyway as they had been sealed in by Death Eaters who had used powerful Dark magic to prevent anyone from coming in – or out. A gaggle of Muggle slaves had also been dragged down to serve their needs; they came and went silently from connecting antechambers to bring in food and wine. The Ballroom had been chosen for the place of protection due to its gargantuan size but seeing as the birth rate among Pure Bloods was now staggeringly high, the place was uncomfortably crowded with children and babes of every age along with their frightened Mothers. A long dining table had been set up which was laden with the food, drink and colourful flowers brought in by the Muggles, but no one paid it any mind. Instead witches were huddled together in small groups whispering frantically to one another or else hovering concernedly over their children.

Small wonder, do they expect us to feast and act as if all is well when our very lives could be at stake? Astoria thought scathingly as she glanced over to where all her children slept. They truly view
For the umpteenth time Astoria’s lilac eyes swept the Ballroom, taking in the scene. A heavily pregnant Linnea Rowle was surrounded by relatives and other expectant Mothers as she sobbed into a scrap of lace while an anxious looking Healer stood over her whispering urgently in the ear of Euphemia as they both shot her covert looks. Hestia Carrow – Rookwood had isolated herself into a corner scowling with her arms folded while her two little boys huddled at her feet, silent and scared. Doubtless like her aunt Alecto she would rather be out fighting but three years past after the birth of their first child her husband Augustus had forbidden her from serving in the army ever again. Fadila Norton was in a crumpled heap upon the floor, wailing uncontrollably after drinking half a flagon of wine and Yaxley’s mistress Veliane Ayim and other such ‘ladies’ had cosseted themselves at the foot of the great staircase that led up to the balcony surrounded by their bastard children. They were casting anxious looks about the place as though they were frightened that they would be asked to leave but they were ignored by all.

As there were so many little ones present, Astoria had suggested that they set up beds along the walls of the ballroom so that they could calm down and get some rest. The notion had been well received with many witches sharing calming draughts among one another and sending Muggle slaves to fetch hot cocoa to soothe their frightened children. Though she was no child, Astoria had commanded a Muggle Nursemaid to give Clarissa Rowle a cup of dream wine and put her to bed as the girl had been so hysterical. She envied the girl in her unknowing sleep but thankfully a silencing charm had been cast about the Ballroom so those who remained awake could not hear the raging battle outside. The thick velvet curtains that stretched up to the ceiling had also been drawn so many of the children went to sleep without incident without any need for dream wine. Adelaide had needed considerable help however. In part due to the harrowing birth she had to endure to bring three lives into the world, Adelaide had not bonded with her babes in the same fierce the way most Mothers did and found them difficult to control as they grew. Her three identical little boys had been incredibly agitated, and it had taken the combined efforts of Astoria, Elizabeth and two Nursemaids to get them to settle while Adelaide herself remained close to tears, such was her frustration and fear.

“You should try and get some rest yourself.” Astoria murmured to Adelaide, lightly touching her arm.

“Yes… yes I suppose so.” Adelaide replied vaguely, sweeping a lock of blonde hair out of her tired eyes. “My thanks for all your help.” She gave a strained sort of smile and glided off to some Yaxley cousins who had joined the Rowles surrounding Linnea.

Astoria watched Adelaide go, her fear ravaged mind tinged with sadness as she thought of the vivacious, hopeful young witch Adelaide had once been; all that had been shattered when she had wed Travers. She shoved these thoughts away with irritation knowing how futile they were, especially now when the very world they all lived in hung in the balance.
The hours ticked on and on into the night as Muggle slaves began lighting candles and a slender Veela was brought in to play sweet, soft music on the harp while a paltry few witches picked at the food, mainly to keep themselves busy. Indeed, Astoria herself finally caved in to Elizabeth’s offer of a goblet of Firewhiskey and had to admit that it did help a little to calm her shattered nerves, though it could not stop her pacing and worrying. When she checked upon her children once more, Astoria picked up her slumbering baby Fedor feeling an urgent need to have him close to her and carefully made her way back to where Elizabeth sat near the head of the table. It was past time she sat down properly; her back had a dull sort of ache from standing for too long and every step she took she felt as though daggers were digging cruelly into her thighs. Astoria rocked her baby boy and hummed under her breath to keep herself from bursting into tears, wondering if he or any of her other children would ever get the chance to grow up.

“What do you suppose is happening?” Elizabeth whispered after a long silence as she toyed absently with her goblet.

“We cannot know.” Astoria replied truthfully, “All we can do is hope.” She did not know what was worse; being faced with whatever or whomever was out there blasting the city to pieces or the agonising waiting here, never knowing if an enemy was about to smash the door down and kill them all.

“How dismal the pair of you are.” Came a cold imperious voice from the other side of the table.

They both looked up to be faced with Euphemia Rowle, one of her claw like hands grasping the back of one of the mahogany chairs as she drew it out and a golden wine goblet clutched in the other. The Rowle matriarch did not look the least bit frightened and seemed as at ease as though she were padding about her bedchamber. Unlike the rest of the witches who were still clad in all their finery which they had fled in from the Fortress, Euphemia had instead changed into a loose silky green robe and a thick silvery fox fur stole which was swathed about her bony shoulders, gleaming in unison with the silver of her hair. Astoria studied her closely and saw that her thin lips were stained from red wine and her cold blue eyes were over bright from drinking too much of it.

“Say what you mean my Lady.” Astoria stated coolly, swathing Fedor more snugly in his blanket while Elizabeth glared over at the elder witch.

“Our men are magnificent fighters.” Euphemia proclaimed, raising her wine goblet as though to toast them, “I daresay you should both have a little more faith in your Lord husbands, they have faced far worse than this I am sure. We may lose a few hundred Half Bloods but what does it matter? That is what they are there for is it not? To lay down their lives so that the most righteous in society might live?” She cackled and took a great swig of wine before dabbing her lips with a silk handkerchief.

“That is so my Lady.” Astoria said cautiously, “But surely you can see that the situation is a grave
Euphemia merely shrugged. “The Dark Lord is the greatest sorcerer in the world and always will be. There may be those that wish to challenge him as witnessed tonight but, in the end, no one can truly match his powers.” Her cold eyes roved over all the frightened Mothers and children contemptuously and hardened when they fell upon Linnea who was still considerably distressed. “Tears.” Euphemia said scornfully, ‘The woman’s weapon supposedly but what are they serving my good niece just now? It is obvious that she also lacks faith in our wonderful Thorfinn… I never approved of him marrying her you know, but of course it had to be done to bind Sweden to the cause. The girl cannot do anything right, three daughters in five years I ask you!? We are all losing hope for an heir for our dear Thorfinn, poor lad.” She shook her head in disgust before glaring over at Linnea again, her eyes full of venom. “If that stupid girl doesn’t pull herself together and soon she’ll end up birthing that baby on the Ballroom floor, what a sight that will be for all of us, hm?”

Astoria was unsurprised at Euphemia’s cruel and remorseless attitude toward an oversensitive witch who was carrying a child, but it enraged her all the same. She pitied poor Linnea should she end up delivering her baby tonight in such terror and with her wicked good – aunt present who was unlikely to be anything but a hindrance. Indeed, to Astoria’s eternal rancour Euphemia had been present for the births of all her own babies conceived in the Empire bar Aires who had been so eager to come forth he had ended up being born in the palace drawing room. With the others though she had had to endure Euphemia’s scathing criticism and unhelpful suggestions all while being in horrendous pain. She recalled how the elderly witch had branded her screaming ‘excessive and childish’ when she been torn to red ribbons both inside and out while birthing Nikolai. There was not one drop of kindness or compassion in Euphemia Rowle.

“There’s nothing more frightening than the impending birth of another baby in the best of circumstances.” Astoria said, forcing her voice to politeness despite her raging thoughts, “And to have all that happened today would push any expectant Mother over the edge… that is perfectly understandable, wouldn’t you say so?”

“If she knew as much as I do about how many times the Empire has been threatened, she would probably die from shock.” Euphemia replied remorselessly with a superior sort of sniff and throwing her head back disdainfully, “Faith Lady Dolohov, faith. All of you young witches lack it considerably it seems. Just you wait until the dawn and our beloved men emerge victorious.”

Euphemia’s arrogant and dismissive manner was making Astoria very angry and so it seemed Elizabeth who could not seem to hold her tongue any longer. “Forgive my Lady” She said in acid dripped sarcasm, “I must have forgotten the last instance when the Empire was ‘threatened,’ the city was half blown apart and we had to flee for our lives, do remind me when that was again?”

The thin smile twisting Euphemia’s lips vanished, and her withered cheeks flushed with fury. “You insolent mare, how dare you speak to me thus? May I remind you my Lady that I am both your elder
and half Yaxley on my Mother’s side, your Lord husband will hear of this!”

“Tell him!” Elizabeth shot back defiantly as she pushed herself to her feet, swaying slightly. “And as you seem to know all why do you not gaze into a crystal ball and tell us what is to come you foolish old crone!?”

Both their voices were becoming shriller and shriller and had drawn the attention of many in the Ballroom who broke off their conversations abruptly and looked on, their expressions nervous. Several babies awoke wailing and there was much muttering from the surrounding witches which steadily began to grow louder. Indeed, though his eyes remained closed Fedor was starting to squirm agitatedly in Astoria’s arms and she was just about to angrily cut into Elizabeth and Euphemia’s quarrel when her baby started to squall loudly.

“It is alright my darling boy,” She murmured, forcing her voice to softness even though rage was thundering through her like a stampeding hoard of Hippogriffs. Astoria turned away sharply and handed Fedor to a Nursemaid who quickly hurried away to where the rest of her children were as the anxious muttering continued to bubble more insistently, threatening to come to a boil.

“–You are a disobedient, ill mannered little roach!” Screeched Euphemia at the top of her lungs. She had also gotten to her feet, though she had to clutch the side of the table for support such was her drunkenness, “Just you wait until your Father hears–”

“Be quiet!” Astoria snapped angrily, cutting through Euphemia’s diatribe and Elizabeth smirked, raising her chin in triumph, “You are upsetting the children, look!” She gestured to the room which echoed with the cries of frightened children and babies as their Mothers tried to console them.

Euphemia rounded on her like a fire breathing dragon, “I see Dolohov still needs to teach you manners my Lady. You think because of those looks that you are above the rest of us, do you?” She gave a nasty sneer, “Well looks fade my dear, what are you six and twenty now? It will not be very long until that so called beauty deserts you forever. Your Mother Irina was just the same, she was nothing more than a brainless tart who did not know her place.”

Astoria’s wand hand twitched for an instant and she almost cursed Euphemia right then and there when she heard those words, but she relented and was about to give a blistering retort in answer when Elizabeth did it for her.

“Apologise to Tori you bitter, dried up old cunt!” Elizabeth screamed at the elder witch, drawing out her wand and pointing it at Euphemia’s face as red sparks flew from the tip while the other witch merely laughed derisively.
“Beth please! She isn’t worth it, she really isn’t I–”

But Astoria’s words were drowned by an almighty BOOM that rattled the goblets and cutlery on the table while the chandeliers above swung alarmingly. There was an outbreak of hysterical screaming and crying as Mothers and children alike held one another, terrified.

Astoria’s stomach twisted in fear and she wrenched herself around to stare, horrified at the doors that led into the Ballroom for the great booming noise sounded as though it were just outside. The looming redwood doors carved with dragons and snakes then began to shake alarmingly as though a pair of giant hands had a hold of them and were roughly rattling them as though desperate to get in and the hysteria increased in pitch. She glanced back at Euphemia and saw that the elder witch looked as though she had been struck across the face as she stared blankly ahead, her wine goblet in pieces at her feet as she continued to sway ever so slightly.

Someone must do something, Astoria thought frantically as her heart slammed against her ribs and she drew out her wand with shaking hands.

She raised her wand above her head and let out several purple firecrackers which cut though all the wailing and shrieking. The booming noise was gradually fading away into a vague sort of wail, and the doors had finally stopped shaking but Astoria thought the could hear faint bangs, crashes and shouts from the other side. She pushed away the thought and turned her attention back to the Ballroom; every eye was upon her now, each face desperate for reassurance, hope.

“How can I ask them this when they have performed little more than pretty charms for their entire lives?” Astoria heard herself say through her dry, shaking lips. “The only way to protect ourselves and our children from whatever is out there is to enchant a powerful forcefield around the upper floor and pray that it holds. One wand will not be enough though… I will need – I will need some help.” She paused, her eyes roving over the pale, frightened faces and she felt a sinking sense of doom but also a stab of rage. By the Empire depriving the witches the right to learn advanced magic, they had rendered them just as weak and defenceless as the children they so desperately wanted to protect.

They all stared at her, the faint noises of battle from beyond punctuating the silence but for the sniffling of small children and Astoria’s heart raced even harder, panic rising in her like icy water. But then there was movement and Elizabeth came striding over to where she stood her wand raised, and her face set grimly. Adelaide followed immediately afterward looking frightened but determined and then came Hestia Carrow – Rookwood, Drisella Selwyn – Mulciber and to her surprise, Veliane
Ayim. Astoria was heartened; each witch who had come forward had previously served in the army and the combined power of their wands ought to be enough for what she had in mind.

“Her?” Elizabeth said with revulsion as she glared at Veliane, her grey eyes full of poison, but Astoria had neither the time nor the patience to play politics over Yaxley’s Mistress.

“She was one of the warriors once hand picked by Prince Gyasi to take Europe Beth, we need her.” Elizabeth’s mouth twisted in fury, but she said nothing as Veliane slipped into their small group of six and Astoria addressed the room once again, her expression solemn. With a swift swoop of relief that things had not gotten any uglier between the pair Astoria addressed the witches once again, “Everyone please get upstairs as quickly as you can, we do not have much time.”

There was a great flurry of movement as witches gathered their skirts and made their way up the staircase, some cradling young babies while others had their hands full of what little possessions they had brought with them as weeping infants trailed in their wake clutching stuffed toys and dolls.

“Mama what’s happening!?” Astoria heard her daughter scream over all the din. She whirled around to see Anastasia being carried away by an elderly Nursemaid, her little face red blotchy and tear stained as she stared at her over the maid’s shoulder above the great sea of women and children. “Mama I’m scared!”

“Stay with Clarissa and Nurse!” Astoria shouted desperately back at her daughter, willing herself not to cry as well. “Mama will see you soon!” Through her panic she felt a rush of warm gratitude when she saw Clarissa despite her terror, helping her youngest two babes up the stairs while the twins followed after them, holding hands and hurried along by Leo. Astoria could not see her baby boy though, she could only hear Fedor’s desperate cries over the din and it was all she could do not to turn tail and run to him.

No, I am their Mother, they need me, and I must protect them whatever may come. I will not hide and cower like a child.

When the last pair of heels disappeared around the top corner of the lavish staircase, Astoria turned back to the others. “Is everyone ready?” She asked breathlessly and they nodded silently. “Whatever protective or repelling charm comes to you perform it even if it seems trivial, we must protect the children at all costs. Thank you all and good luck.”

As one Astoria’s little group of five nodded their heads, raised their wands and pointed them at the upper balcony, murmuring incantations they had not used for years as innumerable jets of light flew upwards to begin forming the shield:
“…Protego.”

“…Protego maxima.”

“…Cingo Tutum.”

“…Intego Securus.”

“…Servo Incolumnis.”

On and on the spells came and Astoria could hear Veliane chanting something foreign under her breath while purple plumes drifted dreamily from her wand. Before long there was a blue, opaque floating forcefield that surrounded the upper floor to protect their precious babies who lay behind it.

Without warning Hestia directed her wand toward the balcony and fired out a hex. As soon as the jet of orange light hit the serenely drifting shield it bounced off immediately and collided with a blown glass urn sitting upon the fireplace, shattering it instantly.

“There, that should do it.” Hestia declared triumphantly, a twisted smile warping her pale face, “All we need to do now is –”

CRASH!

What sounded like an enormous explosion obliterated Hestia’s voice and the doors began to rattle once again, so fiercely that Astoria could actually see them heaving back and forth from the force of the blast. There was another great shuddering CRACK followed by a loud BANG and the huge metal hinges began to whine as though in protest as the unknown force beyond pummelled the doors mercilessly. They all stood there rooted to the spot and clutching their wands, too terrified to even move as the booms and crashes returned with a furious vengeance, sounding mere feet away now.

“Merlin have mercy!” Drisella screamed backing away from the doors, her wand hand raised and trembling.
There was another loud *BANG!* A guttural groan of pain and then an ominous fizzing sound which grew louder and louder before doors finally burst open in a spray of thick grey smoke and splintered wood. As Astoria lowered her arms from shielding herself from the blast, she saw with a thrill of ice cold terror that several dark shapes had come dashing into the room with shouts of triumph – and it looked as though they were all armed.

“We are in! We’ve got them!” Came an unfamiliar wizard’s voice from behind the smoke, his large dark shadow quivering excitedly. “We needn’t wait for the others we –”

But the wizard’s voice was cut off for before Astoria could do so much as blink a jet of green light came flying over her head from behind her and struck the dark shape who briefly let out a cry of pain before crumpling to the floor. She quickly turned her head to see that Hestia had struck the wizard dead, her expression cold and furious.

There was an answering bellow of fury from the companions of the unknown dead wizard and someone else yelled, “*Scourgify!*” The smoke cleared at once and Astoria felt her stomach drop to the floor while Elizabeth made a convulsive movement and Adelaide stifled a squeal of fear.

They were faced with five wizards who were pointing their wands directly at each of their faces, their expressions filled with vicious triumph. These wizards were nothing like the Death Eaters in their uniform black robes, they were clad in both tattered robes and Muggle attire and had but one detail in common. Around each of their right arms they wore a band of red fabric which depicted a golden phoenix in the centre rising from orange flames:

*She knew that phoenix.*

Astoria and her fellows outnumbered the wizards by just one which did not give her any solace. These wizards must be powerfully magical to have battled hard through Death Eaters, enchantments and Merlin knew what else to breach the inner palace itself. Indeed, the wizards showed signs of the raging conflict outside; they were bruised, bumped and cut while their garb had been stained with soot and blood. When the wizard in the middle saw that their opponents were six young witches clad in their finest gowns, he gave a roar of laughter letting his wand drop slightly as the others held steady, though they did not attempt to strike just yet. Astoria rather thought she recognised something in that laugh, but she could not place the wizard as his head was shaved and his face was gaunt, scarred and covered with grime. The wizard’s pale blue eyes fell upon her then and his mouth twisted into a mocking smile as he took three steps toward her, his stare unblinking.

When he finally spoke though Astoria immediately knew who he was, and she felt as though her insides had turned to stone. “Astoria Greengrass.” Murmured the slow, gravelly Irish drawl of Seamus Finnigan as she stared back at him in disbelief, trying to puzzle out the features she had once known in his now unrecognisable face. Seamus paused before letting out a short nasty laugh, “Oh
I’m sorry, forgive me it’s Dolohov now isn’t it? It’s been Dolohov for quite a while has it not m’ Lady?” He then lowered his voice to barely a whisper, “Did you know that you’re famous? Or at least your bastard husband is, perhaps notorious would be a better word for it… no, no reviled is probably ‘bout right. Everyone in the real world knows your names, everyone knows what you have done.”

“Dolohov’s whore!” Snarled a wizard standing directly behind Seamus, his jaw clenched and his dark eyes burning with hatred.

Astoria felt another unpleasant jolt of recognition when her eyes briefly darted toward the wizard who had insulted her and saw that it was none other than another former schoolmate who was named Jordan - Lee Jordan. She recalled in the early days of the war how the older wizard had been one of the many fugitives marked for execution on the Dark Lord’s ‘list’ due to his closeness to the Blood Traitor Weasley family but clearly, he had managed to evade capture. Shaking off the thought Astoria continued to glare back at Seamus her wand raised, refusing to allow herself to be distracted; one wrong move or lapse in concentration and everything would dissolve into bloody slaughter.

Seamus finally took his eyes off her, sweeping up and down their small line of defence and smirking. “Elizabeth Nott and Adelaide Yaxley; well, well, well, who would have thought we would ever meet again like this? And Hestia Carrow, was that you who killed one of my men?” He gave a mirthless chuckle that was chilling as fury danced in his eyes. “Ah, Drisella Selwyn wed to a Mulciber now I hear? It almost feels like yesterday since we were passing one another in the corridors at school, how time flies hm?” None of them answered but followed Astoria’s lead and looked back at him steadily as his eyes fell on Veliane Ayim, “And you Ms Ayim, it seems these days you content yourself with being Corban Yaxley’s whore. Bit of a come down from being an elite foreign recruit for Lord Voldemort is it not?” They all flinched violently at the sound of the name while Seamus and his companions chuckled derisively, “Scared of hearing your own Master’s name, are you? Well not to worry, for it won’t be very long until he is gone; a thousand of your men are dead already.” Seamus’ eyes flicked upward to the balcony and the pale blue forcefield that surrounded it, “Your children are up there aren’t they?” He said softly, his gaze once again fixed on Astoria, “I know you have children, we have been told you have a few.” His nasty sneer broadened then, “Well more than a few I think you’ll agree. Yield peacefully to us now and your precious Death Eater bastards just might be spared from the full wrath of the phoenix.”

At his words Elizabeth gave a snarl of rage, raised her wand and lunged forward but Astoria threw back an arm to stop her, “No, don’t Beth!”

“Wise move m’ Lady.” Seamus breathed softly, his wand pointing directly at Elizabeth’s face as he cocked his head to one side, “Now stop this nonsense at once, you do not have a hope of–”

“How did you escape?” Astoria cut in coldly across him, taking control of the conversation before anyone else did something foolish. She understood Elizabeth’s fury though; there was nothing more
she wanted more than to strike Seamus Finnigan dead when he had so casually threatened her children, but she knew she would most like follow him to the grave from the four curses that would surely hit her should she act.

Something behind Seamus' deadened eyes stirred and for a moment she did not think he was going to answer but when he did his voice was flat, expressionless. “My Mother did the sensible thing and took me back to Ireland when the battle at Hogwarts was lost. However, it was not very long until Death Eaters came upon our shores once London had fallen as well and I had no choice but to flee.” He paused for a moment and Astoria saw rage and pain flash in his eyes. “They came... in the black of night and my - my Mother was defiled in every which way before she was murdered by Selwyn, Travers and that delightful husband of yours. She sacrificed herself so that I could make my escape to Greenland taking with me only my wand, the clothes on my back and a solemn vow to avenge her death, whatever may come. There in that icy wasteland I scratched a living off rocks eating seaweed and seagull eggs to survive along with all the other wretched souls who were languishing there. I then made my way into Canada where I pleaded to see the Minister for Magic to warn him of the great danger the Dark Order posed but I was shunned and ignored, I was told that Voldemort was ‘Britain’s problem’ and that we had defeated him once before after all. For years as the Dark Order grew in strength I lived on the very fringes of society; I begged, I stole, I did every other unthinkable thing you can imagine in order to survive… That was until she found me and plucked me from the gutter, our leader and saviour Hermione Gra –”

“Enough Seamus!” Bellowed a tall burly dark haired wizard on the far left, his wand arm trembling as though he were desperate to curse them all into a thousand pieces. “Enough with the bloody sermon! We were ordered to take them all and quickly!”

Jordan and the others added their shouts of agreement and the ghost of a smile flitted across Seamus’ ravaged face as he glanced back at his comrades.

“Just so Vance, but our orders were that these darling Death Eater wives were to be given the choice as to whether they will come quietly or no.” He turned back to Astoria, “So m’ Lady, what shall it be? Think very carefully now.”

Astoria stared back at Seamus her wand still raised, her chest rising and falling uncontrollably without her permission. The tension in the room was so thick it could have been slashed with a sword, it was as though they all stood beneath a great dam that was about to explode as the water built itself up higher and higher, threatening to crush them all in an instant. For a split second the world seemed to balance itself on a dagger’s edge and Astoria’s breath caught in her throat as they all stood there opposite one another, wands raised as they waited. But a young scrawny boy of a wizard no more than seventeen who was standing behind Seamus evidently could not wait any longer. Without warning a jet of yellow light burst from his wand which smashed into a carved mirror on the other side of the room, shattering the glass to dust.
“CREEVEY!” Seamus bellowed, whirling around in fury but the rest of his words were drowned from the bangs and rushing sounds of spells as the fight broke out in a sort of chaotic explosion.

Astoria briefly saw Drisella shriek something before slashing her wand violently through the air and then hastily ducking downward from a jet of red light that burst in reply from Seamus’ wand. His spell hit a delicate glass statue and Drisella was knocked over before promptly rolling away out of sight as the needle like pieces shattered all over the place. It had been years since Astoria had fought but the need to protect her children had awoken something fierce, savage and primal within her – and so it seemed the others too. Before she even realised what she was doing she was bringing her wand about in a deadly arc to strike at the wizard nearest to her and he was promptly slammed into the opposite wall before falling to the floor in a tangle of arms and legs. Seamus looked shocked for a moment, but this was short lived, his expression was quickly replaced by a furious grimace as he fired out hexes everywhere. They bounced off the ceilings and floors, tore through tables and chairs and one even hit a chandelier which came crashing to the ground in a great spray of crystal and gold as sparkling shards scattered in all directions. Still reeling from the ferocity of her own magic, Astoria launched herself behind a sideboard and her fellows followed suit, hiding behind whatever bit of furniture they could. The air was thick with coloured smoke and she briefly caught a glimpse of Hestia roughly dragging Drisella behind a large urn crafted from dragon scales as the latter bled heavily from the shoulder. Still more spells sailed over their heads to bombard the room as plaster, stone and dust rained down upon them and Astoria conjured a swift shield charm to prevent herself from being injured by the falling debris. Then all of a sudden, the spells stopped. She chanced a glance around the edge of the sideboard and saw that Seamus had held up a fist for his men to halt in their attack.

“Had enough have you, you snake loving slatterns!?” He shouted as the air smoked and crackled, “We all know you and your little parlour friends have not been in combat for many years m’ Lady, you have no hope of defeating us! This is your last chance to yield, what say you!”

“What do we do we do?” Elizabeth hissed at Astoria as she came crawling over to her through the rubble, covered in white dust from all the shattered porcelain while Seamus continued to shout.

“Kill Finnigan.” Astoria replied grimly, her lips hardly moving and her voice scarcely above a whisper as stone continued to tumble and crash upon the floor. “He was chosen to lead so it follows that he must be the most skilful of them all. I could not possibly summon Avada Kedavra but if we are able to bring him down elsewhere, we may just have a chance of picking off the others. Hestia could do the deed, she killed that one who came in first and she has the most recent experience in the field... hopefully her wand will make all the difference.”

“I’m so scared Tori, it’s been s - so long.” Whispered Elizabeth in a trembling voice, her grey eyes huge and over bright.

“I know, so am I.” Astoria replied truthfully, and she briefly grasped one of Elizabeth’s shaking
hands in her own. “But we can’t let them get to the children we just can’t.” Still looking terrified Elizabeth gave a resigned nod nonetheless and pursed her lips in an attempt to stop them trembling.

“–What say you!” Seamus screamed into the terrified silence, the only other sounds that could be heard were that of his crunching footsteps as he feverishly paced amongst the ruins of the ballroom.

“All right are you ready?” Astoria whispered to Elizabeth, “With me now… One - two - three!”

They both leapt out from behind the sideboard and screamed, “Sectumsempra!”

Before he had time to react slashes opened upon Seamus’ chest and face in fountains of blood that gushed everywhere. He let out a scream of pain while Jordan lurched forward with a roar of rage, shoving Seamus roughly aside out of harm’s way and raising his wand. Another wizard lunged toward Elizabeth and at once began to press her hard with jinxes as she stumbled backwards, struggling to keep up with the speed and ferocity of his attack but Astoria saw a flash of flying blonde hair as Adelaide went streaking toward them to aid her good – sister.

“Incarcer–” Jordan started to shout, his wand now pointing straight at Astoria, but he suddenly stumbled with a grunt of pain when he was hit in the shoulder by a flash of white light.

Jordan pivoted in wordless fury to be faced with Veliane Ayim who taunted him in her foreign tongue, daring him to come closer as she crooked a finger with one hand and held her wand high above her head with another. Snarling, he pounded toward her his wand rising and falling as the pair began to duel, jets of light erupting between them.

Astoria pointed her wand at the big burly wizard named Vance who was now shielding Seamus with his large frame, wand raised as the former lay upon the floor bleeding from a dozen cuts.

“Expulso!” She shouted but Vance reacted at once and parried her spell so that it went careering into the roaring fireplace which promptly exploded into one huge fireball, the deadly flecks of smouldering flame soaring through the air to land on the velvet curtains. The fire began to lick up the dark velvet in a sinister finger which grew larger and wider by the second and before Astoria knew it, the curtains were nothing but a wall of yellow and orange fire from floor to ceiling, the heat threatening to melt her skin. Vance gasped and reeled backward in shock from the blaze and she took advantage of his momentary distraction by aiming a hex at him to try and get to Seamus but her spell was rendered ineffective once again as it tore through a shield charm, only this time it was someone else who had acted.
“Protego! You keep back you Death Eater whore!”

Astoria wheeled about to be faced with the slight, scrawny wizard who had let fly first causing the outbreak of the fight and whom she had heard Seamus call ‘Creevey.’

“I had hoped for Lady Travers!” The boy shouted at her over the roaring of the flames as they continued to spread. He took aim with another jinx, but this time Astoria was ready and sent the spell straight back at him so that it grazed his cheek leaving an angry red wheel there. The scrawny wizard gave a hiss of pain as he stumbled and almost fell but he kept on weaving and ducking as she rained down curses. “It was her scumbag husband who killed my brother, but I shall have to make do with you!” He yelled over the now deafening noise in the Ballroom.

As Astoria blocked parried and swerved, understanding suddenly formed in her mind about who this young wizard was as she vaguely began to puzzle at his angry yells. She recalled Travers jesting about how he had struck down an unarmed Mudblood boy at the Battle of Hogwarts, a boy named Colin Creevey.

“It was easier than swatting a fly!” Travers’ voice seemed to jeer in her head.

Astoria was not aware that this Colin boy had a brother but there could be no question that this was he as he desperately tried to hex her, the sweat pouring down both of their faces as the flames above intensified, spreading to the ceiling and devouring the colourful moving mural mercilessly. Slash – parry – hex – jinx, they fought on and on amongst the hungry flames, neither being able to land a finishing blow. The Creevey boy was undoubtedly skilful for his age but it irked Astoria to think that just a few years ago she would have been able to finish him in moments. Indeed, her long absence from the battlefield was beginning to show, she was starting to grow tired already and her wand arm was beginning to ache, but she continued to hammer her opponent as best she could, the thought of her defenceless children behind the shield above them at the forefront of her mind.

“Impedimenta!” Creevey screeched just as a huge clap of fiery lightening burst over their heads, deluging them both with scorching pieces of debris. Astoria shrieked as the blazing white hot shards burned though her gown to reach her skin while Creevey screwed up his eyes from the molten ash and staggered sideways, causing his aim to go awry.

Even so, Astoria had but an instant to get out of the way as Creevey’s spell came streaking toward her in a ball of blue light. She flung herself to the side to land with a painful thud on the wreckage strewn floor and promptly started to scramble backward away from both Creevey and the fire. Astoria tried to struggle to her feet, but the hem of her gown was caught on a jagged shard of wood and she was savagely dragged back down, her wand flying out of her hand as the crushing heat from the flames pressed in on her. She snatched the fabric and tore it with all her might until it broke free but before she could act any further Creevey was on her again. He was darting through the rubble,
wand raised, a triumphant grin upon his soot blackened face and Astoria knew there was no way she could react in time, even as she groped hopelessly upon the floor for her own wand.

“Stupef-” Creevey bellowed, his wand pointing straight at her face but both he and his spell were cut off as a colossal blazing beam came crashing to the floor between them with a great shuddering SMASH!

The floor roiled and trembled, Creevey disappeared from view behind a great barrier of fire and Astoria was knocked backwards her head hitting the floor with a crunch as boiling air broke over her like the breath of some hellish monster. The Ballroom felt like a furnace, her eyes began to sting and she started to cough as acrid black smoke began to plume out everywhere while she frantically searched for her wand amongst all the broken china, wood and glass. Finally, when she was practically gasping for breath her fingers closed around her trusted Aspen wand that was her only hope.

“S-Scourgify!” Astoria choked as she pressed herself against the wall as the cracks, shouts and bangs of duelling continued to echo all around her and the smoke slowly began to recede though the fire continued to rage. “Aguamenti maxima!” She gasped, and a huge jet of cool water sprayed all over the flaming beam so that it was sodden and blackened, though her spell had not reached the curtains or ceiling which continued to burn somewhat sluggishly.

Soaking wet and covered in soot and blood, Astoria crept closer to the fallen beam and tentatively peeked over the other side, her wand poised to strike for any sign of Creevey. She jumped at the sound of a pained moan and directed her wand at a pile of splintered wood that seemed to be stirring feebly. One flick of her wrist vanished the mess of timber and Astoria looked away in horror at what was beneath. Creevey’s leg was stuck beneath the heavy beam, a huge lake of dark blood slowly widening beneath it. His other leg had been spared but it stuck out at an odd angle facing away from his body and a shard of yellowish bone was poking through the flesh of his thigh. His wand had been smashed to smithereens and his wand arm had not fared much better; it was a mangled horror of flesh, blood and bone hardly resembling a human arm at all as though it had been savaged by some hungry beast. The boy gave another moan of pain as he attempted to move but all he could muster was to cough up a little blood, his eyes staring vaguely at the ceiling as they rolled dully in their sockets.

Astoria supposed she ought to put him out of his misery. She raised her wand, her fingers twitching a little as she drew breath to speak. Then she paused. She knew the words, she knew what to do but she found that she simply could not. Instead she let out a short, sharp cry and stumbled backwards trembling violently feeling as though she may be sick. It had been so long since she had seen such horrific sights of battle, and all this was too much to bear. In her haste to get away she fell into the jagged mess upon the ground which sliced her skin cruelly as she scrambled back toward the wall, desperate to feel something solid and secure to stop the shaking. Close to tears Astoria pressed herself against the wall and drew her knees up to chest as she cowered there in her soot stained tattered gown seemingly invisible to the others in the room as they continued to fight. Seamus was still covered in blood but seemed to have been Healed in part and was holding off attacks from both
Adelaide and Drisella as he duelled the pair of them at once, his expression contemptuous. Hestia was battling with Vance and she seemed to be holding her own very well – they were fighting so ferociously that the floor beneath them began to heat and crack as they each ducked dived and swerved beneath the cacophony of spells. However, Veliane looked as though she were tiring from Lee Jordan’s blistering attack; she was dodging most of his spells rather than responding in kind and when she did manage to block or retaliate, she was very slow. Astoria wrenched herself to her feet at once intending to help but she was stopped in her tracks when Elizabeth came flying out of nowhere, wand raised.

“Get down!” She screamed, her eyes wide with shock as they fixed on a point behind Astoria’s back.

But Astoria instinctively turned and in that split second, she saw the wizard who she had sent slamming into the wall earlier staggering toward her and covered in blood, his wand also raised. There was no time to react and it was with a stab of horror when she saw the wizard bring down his wand in a slash as he screeched the words:

“Avada Kedavra!”

A blast of green light came erupting out of the wizard’s wand and as it came hurtling toward her Astoria rather thought she saw her life flash before her eyes as the sound of speeding death rushed in her ears and she prepared herself for the unending black oblivion. Only it never came. The killing curse had passed so close to her that it had almost brushed her cheek, causing her hair to blow in the air. The spell hit the opposite wall with an almighty BOOM near to where Vance and Hestia were duelling and the pair of them were lost in a cloud of thick dust and an avalanche of stone so that only their dancing shadows could be seen through the haze. Astoria was still rooted to the spot by shock, her lips slightly parted and her wand held loosely in her hand – she looked as though she had been Stupefied, yet in her mind she was grimly aware of how close to death she had been. Her heart was beating so hard she was surprised that she could not see it trying to escape her chest. She gazed down vaguely at Elizabeth and saw that her poor friend was curled up and sobbing upon the floor having wet herself in fear and covered in grazes from head to toe. The wizard who had fired the curse was laughing hard, his vulgar gaping mouth showing two rows of crooked yellow teeth. The sight of him standing there laughing at her mockingly when she had been but a whisker away from losing her life and leaving her children Motherless filled Astoria with a rage so potent, she did not even need to think.

“Necto Strangularis!” She screamed with all her might, the magic rising up within her like a tidal wave as pointed her wand at the wizard who was still laughing maniacally at her, his whole body shaking from mirth. His laugh was quickly stifled however when the long thin iron bind that had come flying from her wand began to sinuously twirl itself around his thick neck.

The wizard spluttered, choked and wheezed, his wand falling from his hand as his fingers tried to pry
away the cruel iron that was spinning itself tighter and tighter, cutting off his airway. Astoria felt no
remorse as the wizard fell to his knees continuing to gasp for air, his red face slowly turning to blue
while she continued to stare at him steadily, right in the eyes as the light slowly receded from them.
In less than a minute the bind had spun itself so tight that it was beginning to cut into the wizard’s
flesh. Fingers of red blood ran slowly down his neck to sink into his filthy robes while more came
spattering from his mouth and he fought in vain to break free from the ligature which had also taken
hold of his left hand that had become trapped beneath it as it too discoloured and bled. The wizard's
blue face began to slowly blacken from the lack of air making the whites of his eyes stand out
grotesquely as they bulged while he continued to struggle and gag. Finally, the bind had grown too
tight to withstand flesh, blood and bone any longer. There was a sickening squelching, crunching
sound and the wizard’s head was sliced clean off his shoulders to roll upon the floor along with a
few of his fingers. His torso quivered in mid air for half a heartbeat before it too fell to the ground
with a **thud** as blood spurted from severed neck and his feet twitched feebly.

*It was just, he tried to kill me.* Astoria thought as she looked upon the butchered remains of her
adversary with a grim sort of triumph.

There was then a roar of rage from behind her, “Fenwick!? Fenwick!? Fenwick no, no!” Seamus
was running toward them, vaulting over broken furniture with Adelaide hot on his heels while
Drisella collapsed against a wall, clutching her shoulder and sliding to the floor as it continued to
bleed more profusely than ever. He came skidding to a halt in a spray of dust and grit, staring down
at his decapitated comrade before he looked up at Astoria, his face filled with the deepest loathing
and the vilest contempt. “You bitch you killed Fenwick! I’ll kill you, I’ll **KILL YOU! CRUCIO!**” In
his blind rage Seamus missed her by a few good feet but he did not seem to care as his spell
exploded as it hit the floor, leaving a great crater in its wake. He then began to advance on her, his
wand clutched in his bloody hand with murder in his eyes. “Vance! Jordan!” Seamus shouted
without looking round, “Change of plans, we are not going to take them anymore, we’re going to
**KILL** them! Every last one, their brats too!”

“You can try!” Adelaide said in a trembling yet defiant voice, her wand raised having finally caught
up with Seamus while Elizabeth wrenched herself to her feet and followed suit her face bruised, and
tear stained.

Seamus looked as though he were about to reply scathingly but they were all distracted by a scream.
At once everyone jerked their heads upwards to see Veliane sailing across the room before she
smashed onto a table top which broke in two and she promptly disappeared from view, swallowed
up by splintered wood. Her attacker, Jordan was grinning as he blasted rubble out of his way as he
charged toward where they all stood, his wand poised to strike. Vance was still trying to fend off
Hestia as they continued to duel one another furiously but as Hestia lurched aside to avoid one of his
hexes, she did so an instant too late. The flash of silver light from Vance’s wand hit her in the thigh
and she fell to the floor stifling a scream of pain as her wand went flying out of her hand. Astoria
wanted to do something, but she was powerless to act as she was cut off by Seamus and Jordan who
held their wands on her as they waited for their comrade.
Jordan briefly glanced across the room and smirked, “Go on Vance, finish the whore!” He shouted before his eyes snapped straight back to Astoria, Elizabeth and Adelaide while Drisella lay forgotten and wounded in her corner.

Vance had a terrible grin upon his bloody face as he advanced upon Hestia who was scrambling away from him on the floor and clutching her bleeding leg but still looking defiant. “After I have killed you, I’m going to send that pretty head back to your husband Rookwood,” He sneered, his eyes alight with savagery, “Enjoy your last moments on this Earth my Lady.” Vance raised his wand high above his head, “Avada –”

But at that precise moment there was a great thundering BANG! on the Eastern side of the hall that made the entire palace shake and a cold blast of icy evening air came rushing inside the sweltering Ballroom. Heavy bricks and twisted steel went soaring through the air amidst a torrent of roaring green flames and Astoria had to clutch a half ruined plinth for support as the force threatened to knock her over. Distracted, Vance spun around so that his aim toward Hestia went awry and the jet of green light went careering into the ceiling instead, smashing a hole in the roof which made way for a torrent of dark rainfall from the skies above. Half dazed Astoria wiped the grit from her eyes and saw that there was a huge gaping hole in the side of the Ballroom where one of the tall windows had been. The green flames were licking the outer edges of the hole as black acrid smoke continued to pour into the room and she could distantly hear what sounded like a giant roaring its displeasure in the black night beyond over the hammering of the rain. Then she heard a flurry of movement and as the smoke began to clear she saw at least a score of black hooded figures surging through the ravaged wall launching themselves over broken wood and stone their wands raised, and their capes sodden. Astoria gave a cry of relief that no one could hear, and she thought she might collapse – for the first time in her life she was grateful to see an approaching hoard of armed Death Eaters.

James Clearwater at their head, his black robes ripped and torn; blood was pouring down the side of his left temple and he was very pale, yet his eyes were focused and intent as he shouted out orders. "Subdue the intruders and do not harm the women!"

Seamus and Jordan spun around on the spot at the sound of his voice and let out bellows of fury when they saw what they now had to face but when Seamus’ eyes fell upon James, rage twisted his features making him look nothing short of insane. “Clearwater!” He spat venomously, “You fucking traitor, I’ll have you!” Astoria instinctively threw herself to the floor as spells began to erupt over her head while Seamus continued to scream out obscenities. "Traitor! Traitor! Traitor! Half Blood fucking TRAITOR!"

Then all of a sudden with a lurch of fear she felt strong arms gasp her under her own and she screamed as she was dragged inexorably backwards over the rubble. “Unhand me! Unhand me!” Astoria shouted, kicking wildly as she attempted to bend her wand arm toward her unknown captor to try and curse him.
“Fear not my Lady,” Came a gruff voice she vaguely recognised, “It is I, Bulstrode, we have come to keep you safe.”

“Did we win!? Astoria shouted at Jeremy Bulstrode over the cacophony, her voice hysterical, “Bulstrode please tell me, did we win!? Please answer me I beg you!”

But Bulstrode did not answer and Astoria immediately went limp, her moment of relief eclipsing in an instant as she allowed him to drag her away while she vaguely took in the scene before her. Seamus, Jordan and Vance all had their backs to one another and were attempting to fight off the oncoming tide of Death Eaters as explosions of light lit up the destroyed ballroom from floor to ceiling. Bulstrode eventually lay Astoria down by the wall near an alcove where Elizabeth and Adelaide were holding one another trembling. Hestia was slumped against the wall, her eyes closed and her breathing shallow as blood pumped from her wounded thigh while Drisella and Veliane appeared to be completely unconscious as they lolled over one another.

“That’s the last one Flint.” Bulstrode called over his shoulder as he drew out his wand.

“Very good Bulstrode, now let us make an end to this!” Came Marcus Flint’s answering voice.

At once Astoria and her fellows were surrounded by half a dozen Death Eaters who enclosed them all in a tight half moon circle, their backs to them so they were facing the room, their wands raised. Her view was blocked by the long black cloaks of her protectors so she could not see what was going on, but the shouting and cursing continued along with the bangs and crashes while smoke filled the air above.

“STUN THEM!” Bellowed Flint’s voice as the rushing and popping sounds of spells increased, the room glowed red and the floor shook even harder from the force of all the magic. “I want them brought in alive do you hear me!? You three, get in there after Clearwater, NOW! Do not let them escape!” Astoria heard walls being blasted apart and the crunching footfalls of running wizards as they hastened to obey. There was then a loud BANG followed by clouds of thick blue billowing smoke and several heavy thuds as shrieking wizards went sailing through the air to land hard on the ground. “I want an Anti Disapparition Jinx cast over the entire palace!” Flint roared through the blue haze, “You are to find them at all costs! Go! GO NOW!”

At once the half moon circle of Death Eaters surrounding Astoria and her companions broke and they were gone with a swish of their cloaks as they plunged into the murky blue, shouting. Astoria realised that she was still shaking violently, she put her head in her hands and tried to breathe but she could not, she was so frightened and had not a clue what was happening. Finally, the tears made themselves known; all the terror and pain she had harboured since the city had been struck came pouring out as she wept harder and louder than she had done in a very long time. She could distantly hear Elizabeth calling her name as she gasped for air between her sobs, but she had not the strength
nor the inclination to answer as terrible imaginings of what may be yet to come chased their way across her mind.

Astoria’s eyes fluttered as she awoke, and it took her a moment to remember why she was so miserable and frightened. Then everything that had happened the previous day and night came rushing up to meet her like some vividly grotesque nightmare as though she had just had cold water thrown in her face. Her limbs were trembling, her heart was thumping horribly in her chest and her stomach felt as though it were filled with jumping frogs. She screwed up her eyes in pain as a shard of morning sunlight that had managed to sneak through the tattered and burned curtains sliced across the room, half blinding her. As she was blinking the world back into clarity a large dark shape loomed over her and at once she sat bolt upright, her wand in her hand as she looked about wildly.

“My Lady, my Lady! It is I, Clearwater!” Said James Clearwater as he straightened and removed his Death Eater mask before raising his hands in submission.

Astoria breathed a sigh of relief and let her wand arm fall limp to her side before tenderly brushing a sleeping Anastasia’s hair with her slender fingers. Her children were sprawled all around her asleep on the enlarged bed she had collapsed upon when she had been brought upstairs after the carnage below. She remembered little of what had happened after the duelling other than flashes of Rathburne tending to her wounds and Leo’s frightened face while she thrashed about and shrieked on the bed. To be sure, all the blood and soot was gone from her skin, someone had gotten her out of her ruined gown and put her in a silk purple robe instead. Astoria glanced to the right of the bed to check all was well with her baby Fedor, but he too was still in oblivious slumber cocooned in his wicker basket. She looked up at James and thought he looked as though he had aged ten years in one evening with his sunken eyes, greyish skin and unshaven face.

“What is it Clearwater? What has happened?” Astoria croaked, her throat dry and parched as she gazed about the silent balcony; most of the occupants were either still sleeping or watching over their children.

Indeed, Elizabeth was sat dozing upright in a chair, her youngest still cradled in her arms, her other children huddled at her feet while Hestia lay huddled in a woolen blanket upon the floor so that her two small ones could have the bed rather than her. Veliane was gently rocking back and forth in a rocking chair next to the bed where her and Corban’s illegitimate children snored gently as knitting needles flashed and chinked in the air crafting mittens. Adelaide meanwhile was all but lost beneath a tangle of arms and legs where her three little boys had piled on top of her and Drisella had her baby girl cushioned in the crevice of her arm as she rested upon a chaise, the babe rising and falling in unison with her chest as she slept.

“Your husband requests your presence in the Justiciar's apartments at once my Lady.” He replied quietly, his eyes averted.
“Very – very well,” Astoria replied in bewilderment before asking the question that had been burning within her since she had opened her eyes. “What happened Clearwater? Surely my husband’s summons must mean that all is safe in the palace now? That we have won?”

“Yes we – we won.” James said in a flat dead voice, turning his face completely away from her now. There is something very, very wrong here but what? She thought, her pulse quickening and her dread mounting.

“You don’t sound very victorious, what is it that you are not saying? Tell it all James please, I’m – I’m so frightened.” She lightly touched his arm by way of a gentle coaxing but he flinched away violently as though she had clawed him with her nails.

“Finnigan, Jordan and Vance escaped.” He burst out bitterly, still not looking at her though his words made Astoria feel as though she had been punched in the stomach, “We did all we could but all three used an *Obturo* hex against us and they just - they just got away, damn them. And you are to refer to me as Clearwater my Lady, not my true name.” James added abruptly, his voice betraying a hint of panic.

“And the city? Our forces?” She forced herself to ask as snakes slithered in her insides and ignoring James' rebuke, insignificant as it was compared to these grave tidings.

“It – we – I don’t really –” He was stumbling over his words as though trying to grope for the right ones to say, as though he were trying to cushion some terrible blow but then he rose abruptly, tucking his Death Eater mask out of sight. “I am to take you there at once by Lady, we cannot keep the Justiciar waiting. Here, take this it will not serve for you to walk about the palace so underdressed.” James drew his long black cloak off his broad shoulders with a flourish and handed it to her.

“My thanks,” Astoria replied quietly though fear still gripped her. “And the children?”

James gave a curt nod before turning around and beckoning over three Half Blood Guards who were sat in corner playing a quiet game of cards. They sprang to their feet at once, seized a nearby Nursemaid roughly by the arm and dragged her over to where they both stood.

“You are to escort the Justiciar’s heirs straight to his apartments, not the family quarters as they are
not safe at present.” He commanded, “Nurse, you are to take charge of the babe.” They all dipped their heads to show they understood before moving toward the bed to pick up each one of her slumbering children who stirred but thankfully did not wake. The guards were strong burly wizards and easily carried two each while the Nursemaid held the baby basket. “All is in readiness, let us go.” James said, trying and failing to keep his voice calm and steady as he squared his shoulders and stepped toward the staircase.

Their journey through the crumbling, demolished Ballroom was a rather easy one as huge piles of rubble had been piled up the walls so that there was a clear pathway right down the middle and they passed through unimpeded for the most part. Even so it was very unsettling not only due to the eerie silence that seemed to hang thick and heavy about them, but the floor was still marred with brown red smears of blood and the dust from destruction of the elaborate room was so thick it came up to their ankles, muffling their footfalls. When their party came to the ruined redwood doors James pointed his wand at them so that they swung open with a creak. When she saw what was behind them Astoria stifled a cry of shock and stumbled backwards, her eyes wide and horrified.

“Have no fear my Lady.” James said firmly, yet his touch was gentle as he gave her a little nudge forward, “Nothing will harm you now.”

Astoria gave a vague nod, but she continued to stare open mouthed at the monstrous sight before her as she edged past. The gigantic corpse of a beheaded Troll was sprawled across the threshold, its thick grey skin covered in a thousand cuts and a great river of dried blood snaking up the corridor from the stump of its thick neck. She was just wondering where the Troll’s head was when she was faced with the hideous thing as they made their way into the Great Hall. The head had been impaled upon a giant Erumpent horn that Antonin had mounted on the wall some years ago. Someone had carved out the Troll’s eyes so that there were naught but bloody sockets left and its yellow teeth had been smashed to smithereens in its lopsided mouth which was still agape from its dying cries. Astoria tore her eyes away shuddering and gazed upon the absolute ruination that had been wrought upon the rest of the palace. Great black cracks that were feet wide had opened in the ceilings, walls and floors and part of the roof was missing. The costly gilded statues that had adorned the halls had been smashed to sparkling dust and the rich tapestries and artworks that had hung upon the walls lay slashed and burned upon the floor. As they made their way further inside, she saw that one of the tallest towers on the western façade had been completely destroyed and had collapsed onto one of the courtyards in a great heap of stone, crushing the green gardens beneath. When Astoria and her companions came to the grand butterfly staircase at the end of the Grand Salon, they had to ascend on the right hand side as the left had been blasted away leaving nothing but a few ragged pieces of wood that barely clung on from the dangerous drop at the top of the landing. The remaining stairway creaked alarmingly under their footfalls and Astoria grew frightened but James reassured her that it would hold having strengthened it himself with a powerful charm.

The corridors upstairs had suffered less than the rest of the palace below, but it was evident that there had been intruders here. Muddy boot prints tracked up and down the cream and gold carpet, there were pale spaces upon the walls where paintings and other valuables had been looted while some of the grand ornate furniture had been smashed into little more than kindling. Astoria felt unwell as she sidestepped a dark red stain surrounded by a pattern of scarlet handprints and briefly glanced back at
her children in the arms of the guards just to make sure that they were still fast asleep. To her great relief they all continued to doze peacefully, and she continued to walk silently beside James as they went up staircases and through snaking passageways; the grimness of the situation weighing heavier upon her with every step she took. They had just come to the main landing on the third floor which was almost untouched but for the occasional hex marks on the walls and a few upturned chairs when Astoria stopped dead. She stood there as still as a statue, staring and gaping through the glass of the French doors that led out onto a balcony overlooking the city.

“My Lady, are you quite well?” James asked as he halted and looked over his shoulder. When Astoria did not answer his eyes darted in the direction that she was gazing in and his mouth tightened, “Come now, you should not pay that any mind my Lady. Here, take my arm you must—”

But Astoria dodged James' waiting arm and quick as a flash the French doors burst open as she ran at them, feeling as though her heart were in her mouth. When she burst forth onto the balcony the acrid smoke that hung in the air almost choked her, but she continued to run until she came to the very edge of the balustrade, ignoring James' shouts. As Astoria gazed at what was below, she felt her knees give way and barely noticed the sharp pains shooting through her legs as she landed on the marble with a hard *thud*. The scene before her was one of utter devastation. The Eastern side of the city had been almost flattened to the ground, the once tall grand buildings that had towered into the sky were now reduced to ragged staircases hanging precariously from crumbling walls. The only structure that seemed to be wholly intact was what looked like a manor in the far distance, but it was ablaze; orange flames were dancing in the shattered windows contrasting sharply with its blackened façade as clouds of thick grey smoke pumped ferociously into the air. Two dead dragons lay in the centre of the destruction, their tattered wings spread wide from their bodies, their fierce yellow eyes staring sightlessly into nothingness. The massive corpse of a dead giant lay not twenty feet away from the felled beasts face down in the rubble, its thick skin oozing black blood while a murder of crows circled above *cawing* ominously while still more landed upon the giant to feast upon its decaying flesh. Astoria’s eyes swept over the rest of the city and saw while many structures still stood, they had been left scarred and smoking by the vicious assault and relentless dragonfire. The immaculately paved streets below were now lost from view because they were so choked with corpses that had begun to bloat and blue, the sickly sweet smell of rotting flesh drifting on the morning air and invading her nose even from this great height. Astoria gagged and wretched, fighting back the bile that was insistently creeping up her throat as she covered her mouth and nose. She then saw with a fresh stab of terror and revulsion that what she thought were piles of smoking stones were in fact piles and piles of still more corpses stacked ten feet into the air, the noxious gasses from their putrid flesh drifting in dark tendrils almost serenely into the sky.

*How many are Death Eaters?* She wondered with dread, remembering Seamus’ taunting words about the crushing losses they had suffered.

But her thoughts were swiftly extinguished, for it was then that Astoria distantly realised that someone was screaming and screaming at the top of their lungs. When she felt a sharp rush of pain like a thousand needles raking her scalp, she realised that the screaming was coming from her own mouth. She was ripping at her own hair and screeching like a banshee such was her terror at all of it; this horrific scene, the terror of almost losing her life Merlin knew how many times and the rank,
morbid fear she felt for her poor innocent children. James had lied to her, this was no victory at all, this was as Seamus had promised – this was the wrath of the phoenix. Astoria felt as though she were dead already; no matter what anyone told her she knew only ill would come of all this, she felt in her very bones. The tears burned as they cascaded down her face and the salt taste was sharp when they found her lips as she continued to stare out at the smoking ruins of the city gibbering and weeping, wondering what was to become of them all.

Astoria gave a small squeal through her sobs when she suddenly felt strong hands grasp her by the shoulders, jolting her out of her horrified stupor. “My Lady, my Lady please stop.” Came James Clearwater’s voice in her ear – she had not even heard him come up behind her such was her distress. “Don’t look, please don’t look my Lady it will do you naught but ill.” She took a deep shuddering breath, trying to stifle her frightened tears yet feeling oddly reassured in the Half Blood’s strong grasp as her racing heart began to slow just a fraction. “We should go back within my Lady you need to rest, you have been through a terrible ordeal,” He urged her softly.

She nodded vaguely but did not answer and allowed James to gently lift her to her feet. A tidal wave of dizziness hit her then and the world span sickeningly as she struggled to rise and still continued to sway dangerously once she was stood. Lightening quick James seized her this time by the arms to keep her from falling and she held on tight bunching her hands in the black cloth of his robes as her whole body continued to quiver, cold sweat pouring down her face.

“My thanks,” She muttered, still feeling dazed.

“I need no thanks my Lady, it is my duty.”

There was a strained silence before Astoria looked up into James’ weary face which swam oddly through her misty gaze, yet when her eyes briefly met his he averted them at once but from deference or embarrassment she could not say.

“You – you told me we won C – Clearwater,” She whispered finally finding her words, her voice shaking, “You told me that we had – had victory, but all I see… all I see is death.”

There was another short pause and James finally looked back at her. “Yes, we have victory my Lady.” He said very quietly under his breath barely moving his lips to avoid the other guards overhearing who were doubtless listening eagerly at the door. “The Dark Lord himself acknowledges it, but this is the price we had to pay for that victory.” He said, jerking his head briefly in the direction of the city, “Now please my Lady, I have a duty to take you to your husband.”

The mention of Antonin sent a swooping rush of terror flooding through Astoria and she began to
shake again despite James’ firm grasp. She looked at him for a moment before she felt her face crumple as she dissolved into tears and sank to the floor again, her whole body shaking with her terrified sobs that she could not seem to stop. The tears continued to fall thick and fast for what seemed like an age and like a madwoman she shrieked and beat her fists upon the ground wanting nothing more to escape from this hellish nightmare while Clearwater stood on helplessly. She was finally brought back to her senses when she felt a light touch on her shoulder followed by the sweet, scared voice of her firstborn child.

“Mother? Please do not cry Mother, please do not be sad… I – I will help you.”

Astoria jerked her head upwards and looked about feverishly to be faced with Leo standing over her, his face frightened but determined as he held out a small hand. The tears welled up in her eyes even more then and Astoria felt ashamed; she was the Mother here and she ought to act like it in such an uncertain and frightening time. She pushed herself to her feet and embraced Leo in her arms at once, holding him tight to her.

“I’m so sorry my love,” She choked, her eyes still streaming. “I’m so sorry, Mother's just - Mother's just so worried!” For a moment she thought she would start weeping uncontrollably again but Leo gave her hand a small squeeze and she felt stronger for it; a poignant reminder that she could not fall into despair when seven defenceless little people needed her now more than ever. Fighting back the painful lump that seemed to fill her throat Astoria finally found her words as she looked down at her son, “Thank you my darling thank you for your help, Mother's fine now. Come, let us go.”

The relief was palpable on James’ face as Astoria roughly wiped away her tears and led Leo purposefully back through the French doors with her head held high. Their journey took longer than it should have done as her other children had also awoken from their slumber and were naturally confused and afraid. Thus, it was up to Astoria to gently soothe their fears and take charge of baby Fedor who only had not the strength to cry in earnest, he merely whimpered feebly as Astoria cradled him in her arms while navigating her way up staircases and through twisting corridors. At last though they came to the Justiciar’s apartments at the top and centre of the entire palace. These were Antonin’s private quarters where he conducted Empire business, held court with his favoured Death Eater cronies and where he bedded his preferred whores should he be disinclined to make the short journey to Moscow's many brothels. Astoria was usually forbidden from coming up here unless invited to do so by her husband and the times when she had visited had been few and far between. The prospect made her nervous, frightened even and she watched with apprehension as James marched up to the double doors and gave three smart raps on the polished wood which was painted with an intricate working of the Dolohov family crest.

“Enter.” Antonin’s voice rang out coldly and Astoria had to work hard to stop her knees from giving out from underneath her feeling a thrill of trepidation as she followed James Clearwater inside as the elaborate doors swung open.
The first sight that greeted them was Antonin sprawled in a great velvet armchair with Rathburne hovering over him. Her husband was covered in cuts, bruises and grazes, his face even paler than usual which was rather at odds with the dark circles under his eyes and the shadow of stubble flecked with white that covered his jaw and chin. His chair was facing away from a great fireplace wrought in the shape of a dragon's mouth which was presently cold and devoid of flames. The empty hearth only added to the frosty, threatening atmosphere of the room despite it being sumptuously decorated in black velvet, green silk and ornate silver gilding. The walls were covered with frightening paintings featuring Dark wizards slaughtering Muggles and beasts alike, demonic African voodoo masks glowed malevolently either side a black unseeing mirror and perhaps worst of all - a horribly lifelike, pale marble bust of the Dark Lord glared down at them all from atop the fireplace, his scarlet eyes crafted from glittering rubies. Antonin was plainly garbed having dispensed with his robes; instead he was clad in breeches and a torn silk shirt which exposed a deep red slash in his chest that Rathburne was fussing over, dabbing the raw flesh with green potion and murmuring incantations. Astoria's eyes were then drawn to the delicate silver table set to her husband's right where there stood a large bottle of Firewhiskey that appeared to be half empty already. This only served to increase her nervousness tenfold. Marcus Flint was also present, he was stood before Antonin with a long roll of parchment that almost touched the floor and it looked as though the spidery black writing upon the yellowish surface was compiled into some sort of list.

“Oh, it’s you Clearwater,” Antonin grunted, shrugging off Rathburne as the bloody wound on his chest slowly began to close leaving an angry red scar in its wake. The old Healer sprang away from Antonin as though stung and promptly scurried to the nearest corner next to a Muggle slave who stood there, mute and expressionless.

James nodded stiffly and gave a deep bow. “Your wife and heirs, just as you requested Justiciar.”

Antonin glanced sharply at Astoria and the children for a moment before turning back to James. “Just so. Flint here was just giving me the tally of last night’s dead, it’s all rather bothersome.” He was trying to sound bored and disdainful, but Astoria could see the poorly disguised anger in his face, he was furious that the Dark Order had been struck so badly and that the Resistance had had the temerity to break into his palace and steal his things - half of which he had stolen from others, to be sure.

“As you say Justiciar,” James replied at once though his expression was unreadable, “A necessary sacrifice for the glory of our Empire.”

“Indeed. You have my leave to go now Clearwater.”

“Very good Sir.” He gave another bow, turned on his heel and strode from the room along with the other three guards who had accompanied them.
Astoria’s eyes darted toward James briefly and she felt an odd sort of pang in her chest as he disappeared from the room. His presence meant safety, reassurance. Indeed, as soon as her eyes met Antonin’s she knew at once there was something very, very wrong and her insides gave an unpleasant twist. There was a half smile upon his face, but his blue eyes were full of rage and she felt as though she had been thrown into an ice cold lake as she stood there, willing herself not to start shaking. Fedor was still bundled in her arms but the rest of her children were huddled upon a handsome brocade sofa where the guards had placed them, holding one another for comfort and quivering ever so slightly as though they too could sense her fright. Antonin opened his mouth to speak but that exact moment Fedor gave a pitiful wail and began to cry nosily. Astoria felt another jolt of fear and began to rock her baby frantically to try and soothe him – she knew how much her husband hated it when babies cried.

“Shh! It’s alright my love, it’s alright!” She whispered in a trembling voice, “Mother’s here my darling I –”

But she was cut off by Antonin’s furious snarl of rage, “Nurse!” He barked over at the Nursemaid who was also stood by the wall, clutching Fedor’s empty baby basket. The Muggle woman jumped as did Astoria and the children while the baby began to wail louder than ever from his shout. “Get that squalling thing out of my sight at once!”

The Nursemaid hastened over to Astoria and held out her arms expectantly, all the while keeping her face turned away. It was all she could do not to burst into tears as she handed her distressed baby over to the slave and it was utterly heart wrenching as he cried harder still when he could no longer sense her touch.

“Feed him, won’t you?” Astoria called desperately to the Nursemaid as she all but fled from the room as Fedor continued to howl.

“Silence.” Antonin said coldly and she could not help but shrink back away from him, terrified. He glanced over his shoulder and gave Rathburne and the other Muggle slave the most cursory of looks before saying, “You two can get out as well. I need to have words with my Lady wife.”

There was no stopping it now, Astoria began shaking like a leaf from head to toe as Rathburne and the slave slipped away, and Antonin pushed himself heavily to his feet continuing to eye her wrathfully. She heard a muffled sob and looked down to see that Leo had his arms wrapped tight around Anastasia who was now weeping into his chest.

Astoria averted her eyes hastily, her gaze to the floor. “Have I displeased my Lord husband?” She asked quietly, bracing herself.
“I hear you have been busy,” Antonin replied ignoring her question, his voice still ice cold. “Very busy indeed, fancy yourself a dueller now do you?” His last words were laced with mockery but his anger at her daring to pick up a wand to defend herself could not have been plainer. “You will never do that again; do you understand me? Duelling is for wizards and wizards alone,” He said, more coldly still. Astoria nodded her head feverishly to show she understood, her terror robbing her of her words. “I have tried again and again to teach you to obey your betters, but it seems you cannot get that into that empty little head of yours, can you?” She looked up sharply in spite of herself, confused as Antonin continued to glare at her. “Alecto told me what you did.” He hissed into the silence and suddenly she knew where all this bile had come from. At once Astoria instinctively backed away from where the children were as Antonin advanced on her menacingly, his fists clenched and his jaw set. “She told me you ran from her after she had given you an express command. How dare you disobey a Death Eater, who do you think you are hm!?”

Astoria averted her eyes again, she was trembling like a doe; her breathing came in short sharp breaths and she could not bring herself to answer. But knowing she had to say something she tried, her words coming out in a jumbled, trembling mess. “I – I, you – I did not m – mean any harm husband, I–”

“Shut up! You look at me when I am talking to you, you insolent bitch!” Antonin growled at her, grabbing her arm and backing her up against the wall so that he loomed above her. “You see this boy?” He called tauntingly over to Leo and shaking her roughly as she stifled a whimper, “This is what you must do when a witch disobeys you.”

Leo did not answer but stared back at his Father with his mouth slightly agape and trembling, his lilac eyes wide, horrified and shining with tears. However, the sight of Antonin putting his hands on their beloved Mama was too much for her other children; Anastasia began to scream, and the smaller ones burst into terrified sobs. Rage flashed in her husband’s eyes and Astoria felt a thrill of horror when he whirled around to face her defenceless babies.

“No!” She screamed, starting forward to put herself between them. But Antonin’s hand shot out as quick as lightening to grab her by the throat, pinning her with ease against the wall.

“You stay where you are.” He snarled in a deadly voice before turning his head toward the children, “Shut up!” Antonin roared at them as he continued to hold her in a vice like grip, “Shut up!” They were all huddled more closely than ever in their trembling little heap, quaking from his rage and Astoria felt as though her heart were ripping in two. Her children were mere feet away and she was utterly powerless to do anything to protect them but then - “Get out of my sight you little urchins! GET OUT!”

Mercifully, they did. The twins sprang to their feet and fled from the room whimpering, closely followed by Anastasia who was half blinded by tears while silent tears splashed down Leo’s face in turn as he struggled to shepherd away the smaller two as quickly as he could as they continued to
scream and not wanting to leave at all, their arms outstretched toward Astoria. Through her terror she felt a brief wave of relief – now that Antonin had her all to himself to torment, he was unlikely to turn his rage upon them now they were safely out of sight. That relief was shattered however when she heard the hysterical sobs from the adjoining room; they had fled but not far enough it seemed.

*Run my darlings!* She thought frantically as she gazed into her husband’s livid face, *run as far away as you can!*

They didn’t though. She knew that Leo especially would be unwilling to leave her, and it was pure torture having to listen to their distress and not being able to comfort them. Her vague thoughts were violently interrupted when Antonin slammed a fist into the wall just inches from her face. He then tore his grip away just as viciously as he had grabbed her and Astoria slid down the wall to land in a crumpled heap upon the floor, gasping for air and clutching her throat which felt like it was aflame. She had barely an instant before she saw the slap come flying toward her face and when it hit, she felt her lip split and her head snapped back against the hard wall. Then came another. And another. And another. She did not make a sound other than to stifle her shrieks of pain, not wanting to distress her terrified children any further but Antonin seemed determined to beat a reaction out of her. Panting he dragged her to her feet and slammed her into the wall repeatedly until there was a horrible *crunch* and a searing pain shot through her right shoulder. The scream burst from Astoria’s lips without her permission and she began to sob from the pain. As she did so she heard her innocent little daughter begin to shriek uncontrollably over the cries of the others mixed in with Leo’s frightened voice who was desperately trying to calm them down.

“What will it take for you to learn your place?” Antonin demanded, ignoring the increase in noise from the other room as he threw her contemptuously to the floor yet again. “You are a witch.” He declared savagely, before – *SLAP!* “And you will do as commanded by your betters.” Another *SLAP!*

Astoria nodded her head shakily, blood dribbling from her lip as she feebly pushed herself back away from him on the floor. “I – I understand m-my L-lord p-please, please forgive me!”

“I did not give you leave to speak!” He screamed at her, “You truly are a stupid, stupid whore!”

Astoria sobbed harder than ever feeling horribly trapped and scared as he advanced on her, tugging at the laces of his breeches. She knew what was coming. Her husband may be aging with a bad leg, but he was still far bigger and far stronger than she and he was about to prove that in the most brutal manner possible. Antonin hauled her off the floor and slammed her onto a marble topped table prompting her to screech in pain when the hard surface kissed her. Savagely he began to rip the robe from her body while she continued to scream at the top of her lungs, loathing herself for not staying silent as she had promised herself yet unable to hold it in. He had not attacked her like this since the night of Fedor’s birth and this brought every horrifying detail back in scorching clarity. She lay there on the table, her whole body pulsing with pain. Trembling and half naked, the blood poured from her
mouth and nose oozing sickeningly down her chin. Astoria was then dimly aware of her husband’s rough breathing while he fumbled with his manhood and she let out a wail when he roughly pulled her legs apart. Before she knew it the large mushroom head of his member was pressing against her entrance and as he slid himself up inside her he let out a ragged laugh that made her want to vomit. He panted and moaned while he ground into her and took one of her nipples in his mouth in a horrible travesty of lovemaking while she continued to weep. Antonin eventually grew bored of the sport and pulled out of her with wet pop as his manhood sprung free, wet and glistening. Creamy white seed was seeping slowly from his tip and he wore an expression of deepest satisfaction upon that cruel, cruel face.

“Remember this next time you see fit to defy those who are above you.” He crooned in her ear before shoving her off the table.

Astoria landed on soft carpet, but she landed on her right shoulder which she suspected had been broken and let out a yelp as the bones ground over one another painfully. She felt a wave of fire from her legs and upwards as Antonin grabbed her ankles and dragged her towards him as the carpet burned her skin cruelly. He roughly grabbed her by the hips before yanking her backwards so that she was impaled on his engorged shaft and promptly began to mercilessly ride her like an animal. Astoria felt that this went on for an age and had become so weak by now that her hands had given way beneath her so that she merely slumped on her forearms. This did not amuse Antonin who slid a muscular arm underneath her and grabbed her by the throat so that her back was pressed up against him as he continued to thrust away. At this her eyes flew open and she felt a desperate urge to pry away those iron fingers but then she saw something that made her heart stop and her breath catch in her throat. The door to the adjoining room where the children had fled was slightly ajar. With a cold thrill of dread that seemed to envelop her heart Astoria could see that through the tiny sliver of space there was a single tear filled lilac eye staring back at her.

Leo.

The utter horror that clouded her mind was so poisonous, so malignant, so vile that it made what was happening to her seem like nothing compared to what her poor baby was having to witness right now. She had always tried to protect her children from Antonin’s violence, had always put on a brave face even when she was black and blue all over but today, today she had failed. Powerless to do anything Astoria merely let out a wailing scream. It was a scream of rage, pain, fear and hatred which stretched on and on as she felt her heart breaking into a million pieces for her poor innocent child who did not deserve any of this brutality. However, her screaming only seemed to excite her husband even more as he increased the pace of his thrusting and groaned louder than ever.

“Do not dismay my Lady.” Antonin panted gleefully in her ear, “With any luck after I have finished teaching you a lesson, you shall have another baby soon.”
alone than she did at these times when he tried to rape a child into her. There was nothing she could do, nothing. When she looked up at the door again Leo’s eye was gone, and she felt a fleeting moment of relief. It was perhaps because of that relief that caused her to faint moments later, immediately swallowing her into blackness and oblivion.

Chapter End Notes

As I’ve said previously the roles/relationships of characters in this story are changing and I really enjoyed having Astoria and the other former female Death Eaters taking back a bit of power (despite the unfortunate consequences for Astoria).

The final scene(s) were really tough to write but I have never shied away from uncomfortable subjects in this fic and what happened is unfortunately a harsh reality of domestic violence especially when there are children involved.

I briefly touched upon Astoria's mental health issues (mainly PTSD from all the abuse) which will also be developed further

Seamus will be a recurring character later on in the story as will others from the Resistance as things begin to shift.

I know some people will be disappointed that it's not 100% over for the Death Eaters (yet!) but it should be noted that they have suffered huge losses and half of the city is in ruins which puts them in a very weakened position which will be followed up in the next chapter... I also want to point out that the battles and such toward the end of this fic will not just be a case of good vs evil, they will be far more morally complex than that with a lot of 'cat and mouse' which will be reflected in the eventual consequences of all this. I guess my point is Empires don't tend to fall in a day, it usually takes more than one attack combined with stupid decisions from those in charge.

Always interested to hear feedback,

S x
Chapter Summary

This chapter is set in the aftermath of the attack on the city/Astoria's rape and the effects they have on both her and the Empire. I originally had this written as something else but I changed my mind and moved some things around which is the reason for the delay in posting. What happens at the end of this chapter makes it so worth it and I hope everyone enjoys.

I will try and update faster next time!

Thanks,

S x

Same disclaimer applies
Warning: graphic content

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Antonin had truly outdone himself on this occasion. It had taken three days of bedrest, six different potions and Rathburne’s constant remonstrations before Astoria was restored back to health – in her body at least, her mind not so much. The tally was thus: one broken shoulder, three cracked ribs, one shattered cheekbone, terrible bruising to all her innards and innumerable tears ‘down below’ from where she had been used so roughly. The nightmares that would plague Astoria’s dreams since Antonin’s vicious attack would all be horribly vivid, nearly always involving Antonin himself and would often find her jolted out of sleep in the black of night covered in cold sweat and trembling. Some years ago, she had told herself that eventually she would get used to being thrown about like a rag doll; it had happened countless times after all – but she never did. In fact, Astoria’s extreme fear of her husband and her ability to recover from his maulings were only getting worse. To be sure all her wounds were long healed by now, but this latest beating had reignited a grim reality for her, one that had continually lurked at the back of her mind since the beginning of their marriage and now swirled around it every day and night:

One day he may very well end up killing me whether he intends to or not, such is his wanton savagery.

It was a terrifying prospect and Astoria would often cry with fear whenever she dwelt on it too long because of what it would mean for the only beings she had ever lived for, her precious children. Indeed, her poor babes had been left scarred both by the vicious attack on the city and of course having to witness Antonin’s monstrous behaviour toward her on that awful day. Leo had been very quiet and withdrawn and would barely touch his food despite her gentle urgings for him to eat. The twins would bicker and disobey even more than usual, Aires and Nikolai would cry at the smallest of
things and whenever it was time for her to go to bed Anastasia would scream hysterically and cling onto Astoria, not wanting to be apart from her. Despite his young age, Fedor seemed affected too; he would not take her breast as often as before and whenever he was placed in the arms of anyone other than his Mother he would shudder and whimper alarmingly or else spend the entire night howling at the top of his lungs, nothing could comfort him.

*Bad enough they are having to endure all this horror, how would they ever cope with losing me forever and being left to their Father’s mercy?*

Astoria shivered violently as cold fingers walked up her spine and she tightly clasped her hands together to stop them from shaking as she continued to wait behind her chair in the dining chamber. She was clad in a gown of black silk and lace which was unadorned but for some embroidered flora on the sleeves and a glittering brooch in the likeness of the Dark Mark which rested just under her cleavage. For the last two moon’s turns since the city had been under siege Astoria had donned black garb each day at Antonin’s command as a mark of respect for the two thousand and counting Death Eater forces that had perished in the attack. She glanced in the mirror which was mounted on the opposite wall and patted her hair a little before fiddling with the rope of black pearls that hung about her neck as she continued to take everything in nervously.

*Something is different today, I can feel it.*

The table as usual was set for two with the gaudy serpentine silverware but today instead of the wine that usually sat on the table there was also an elaborately carved silver bucket studded with jewels that was hovering gently by the edge. The bucket was filled to the brim with luminescent ice and a golden bottle of *Avery’s Champagne* nestled negligently between the shards.

Astoria puzzled at that as she stared at the floating bucket. *Are we celebrating something?* She thought scornfully. Indeed, she had never felt less like celebrating in her entire life – most days now would find her in a constant state of worry and no more than a heartbeat away from bursting into floods of tears because she was so frightened.

Astoria’s eyes then darted toward the arched window on the Western side of the room and just as quickly looked away again when she saw coils of black smoke snaking eerily past the stained glass. She shuddered again, privately scolding herself for allowing her gaze to wander thus – these days looking out of the window was an unpleasant reminder of the carnage and destruction that had befallen the city which for the most part still remained half a smoking ruin. Astoria’s eyes now fixed upon the carved door, inwardly trying to brace herself as she heard the creaking of wood accompanied by the sounds of heavy footfalls. Half a heartbeat later a Muggle slave came swiftly through the door and held it open as he stood up straight, looking neither left nor right as Antonin came lumbering in his wake, his expression smug as he ogled her. As soon as their eyes met Astoria felt the rictus grin appear on her face almost by reflex even though all she wanted to do was run from the room screaming. Antonin looked to be in a very good mood this afternoon which could either be
very good or very bad – there was just no puzzling out her twisted husband sometimes and how me might behave. It took every ounce of determination Astoria possessed to keep that smile on her face as she curtsied for her husband before he took her hand and kissed it gently.

“My Lady despite these sombre shades you are a vision as ever.” Antonin said softly, his stupid smirk still playing about his lips while his cold eyes studied her critically. “I am so glad you were able to join me this afternoon.”

“You are most kind to say so my love.” Astoria replied meekly, privately thinking how ludicrous his words were as though she had had a choice in joining him for luncheon or not.

Once the last members of the Resistance had been driven from Moscow Pure Bloods and Half Bloods alike had been confined to their homes as per the Dark Lord’s own decree unless explicitly commanded otherwise. Apparition and Floo travel were banned and the Empire’s subjects had to endure Rowle and his gang of Viper thugs bursting into their homes at any given time to brusquely question them to ensure that they were not traitors. Day and night, everyone remained indoors and just to make sure none disobeyed a curfew had also been put in place. At nightfall the bell from the Serpentine tower would ring seven times and anyone found not to be in their appropriate place by the last toll would be killed – no exceptions. Thus, Astoria now had to suffer Antonin’s company almost every day dining with him morning, noon and night and was only granted relief when he had been summoned by his Lordship several times to aid in the rebuilding and strengthening of the magical bonds around the city.

“Please allow me,” Antonin murmured, lightly brushing her cheek before pulling out her chair for her and motioning for her to sit which she did at once, though now anger coursed through her as well as fear.

Astoria hated it when Antonin would do this: when he would play the perfect gentleman as if he had not beaten her bloody just weeks ago as if nothing untoward had taken place at all, as if forcibly raping her to get her with child was normal. The whole act reeked of mockery and she suspected he did it to reinforce his power over her – just in case by now she had not yet gotten it into her empty little woman’s head that she was at his mercy, or lack of.

*He is utterly without remorse or shame* Astoria thought contemptuously as Antonin settled himself opposite her, still smiling sinisterly and she wondered with trepidation what cruel trick he had in store for her.

“Muggle,” Antonin called lazily, still staring at her. “Serve myself and the Lady and be quick about it.”
The Muggle who had continued to stand sentry at the door jumped into action at once and hurried from the room and just as quickly returned. He was clutching two large trays that were balanced precariously over both of his forearms which were laden with ornate silver serving dishes wafting down rich scents of freshly prepared food. Astoria watched him nervously, praying that the Muggle would not drop anything – for both their sakes. Mistakes and slip ups were a surefire way to enrage her husband but thankfully the Muggle kept his composure as he laid out crisp greens, roasted potatoes, boats of steaming gravy and a large covered dish that he placed right in the middle. Usually when she and Antonin dined together, they would be attended by at least six slaves, but the battle had changed all that. In addition to the Death Eater forces that had been wiped out by the attack, Muggle slaves had also been killed in droves while others had taken their chance and fled or had instead foolishly revolted against their Masters to exact their revenge after years of cruel treatment. For the latter group of Muggles, the punishment was a Troll’s axe followed by their heads on spears. Thus their population was diminished even further with the result being that Muggle slaves were now few and far between. Indeed, Astoria did not ever recall being served by this particular Muggle and as the man leaned over to fill her goblet with iced fruit water, she saw that he looked far older than she had first thought, and his grey slaves’ robes hung off his frame like ship sails such was his emaciation.

“I must apologise to my Lady for serving her such plain fare once again.” Antonin said in a horribly sugary voice as the Muggle continued to work in silence, deftly placing delicate salt and pepper dishes between them before reaching into the hovering ice bucket and drawing out the champagne to work loose the cork. “I had hoped to serve you something a little more… special today but alas it was not to be, there is little choice in the larder I fear.”

“I am grateful for anything my Lord husband provides me with,” Astoria replied at once, yet her insides wilted with shame when she thought of the half starved Muggle that was serving them who had probably eaten nothing but stale bread and water all day – if he was lucky.

“Well soon my darling wife will be able to nibble on whatever takes her fancy. Avery tells me that the crops and farmland will have regenerated in a month or so after that common rabble burned it all to ash. It was he who was kind enough to send us a bottle of the vintage.” He said, languidly gesturing at the hovering ice bucket.

Antonin was trying to sound cool and collected but she could hear the fury in his voice beneath his would be calm demeanour. The Resistance’s attack was a source of great humiliation for her husband and he would spend some nights in a drink fuelled rage smashing everything he could such was his helpless fury at it all despite their ‘victory.’

“That is – that is good to know my Lord, I thank you and Master Avery of course.” Astoria said nervously, not meeting his eye.

She was spared having to say any more when the Muggle drew away the silver top of the covered
dish with a flourish to reveal a whole plump goose beneath, its long neck curving around its body as though asleep as it rested on a bed of bay leaves and sliced pears.

“Leave us Muggle.” Antonin said with a dismissive flick of his wrist, still not looking at the man before reaching for a goblet of his customary vodka with squeezed lemons. The Muggle gave a stiff bow and silently retreated to the servant’s door, not daring to turn his back on them. The door gave a small click and the Muggle was gone leaving Astoria alone with Antonin as her heart began to throb nervously. Still smiling slightly Antonin drew out his wand, gave it a small flick and the silverware that had been left by the Muggle began to carve up the goose making faint clinking sounds as the knives sliced through the tender flesh.

“Alone at last,” Antonin said softly into the silence, reaching across the table to take Astoria’s hand in his own. She gave him a small secret smile in return though it was an enormous effort not to wrench her hand away in revulsion and her flesh prickled horribly all over. He did not seem to require an answer for he pressed on, “You will be pleased to know my darling that the Dark Lord has declared that the curfew is at an end.” In spite of herself Astoria looked up and stared at him in disbelief, thinking of the decaying and burned out buildings that crumbled mere feet away from them outside. Antonin seemed to take her look as one of surprise and said smugly, “Oh yes my dear his Lordship is confident that we have weeded out every last verminous, traitorous rat and his experimentations used for the protection of the city have today proved fruitful. There is no need to worry your pretty little head any longer, you may rest easy my Lady.”

I will never rest easy you drunken fool. Astoria thought viciously but what she said was, “His Lordship truly is the greatest sorcerer in the world, no one can withstand him. Nor any of his faithful servants,” She added hastily.

“Just so,” Antonin replied, his mouth twisting in amusement and his cold eyes glittering malevolently, “What did I tell you? I will always be there to protect my dearest sweetling and when I get my chance, I shall bring you the head of Seamus Finnegan my dear.”

Astoria’s fork fell onto the table with a clatter, tears welled up in her eyes and she began to shake violently at the mention of the name. Seamus Finnigan and his fellow escapees had also been much in her troubled thoughts of late and she felt cold with dread that they were still out there somewhere most like plotting bloody revenge. Now at every creak of a floorboard, every odd noise outside the door her mind flew into a terrified panic, imagining that Seamus and his thugs were about to burst in and kill her just as they had tried to in the Ballroom. The memory of that night when she had had to fight for her life stabbed at her like the blade of a dagger and made her want to scream whenever it wandered into her thoughts late at night.

“For – forgive me m – my Lord,” Astoria spluttered, groping for words as she continued to shake like a leaf now doubly frightened that Antonin would be angry at her blunder, “Please, please forgive me, I am but a foolish woman I did not mean—”
“It is quite alright my love, no one will hurt you” Antonin interrupted in a sickly honeyed tone that almost made her cringe as he gently caressed her delicate hand with his calloused fingers. “Such a scared little thing, aren’t you? None of those filthy Half Bloods or Mudblood scum will ever trouble you again, that is a promise my dear.” Astoria nodded shakily and as she darted a scared look up at her husband’s face, she saw with a lurch of disgust that he seemed to be deriving immense enjoyment from seeing her so frightened and upset.

This is how he likes me best; a soft, frightened, helpless woman.

“Shh now my love, a few bubbles to calm the nerves, I think. This is supposed to be a celebration after all, a most joyous day for our Empire.”

Antonin picked up his wand again and gave it a sharp flick so that two crystal champagne flutes appeared at once, floating gently just above the table. He then pointed his wand at the champagne bottle which levitated slowly into the air and began to fill the glasses sinuously with a gentle fizzing sound as the bubbles rushed and foamed.

“Now come here my love,” He said in a dangerously soft voice as he crooked a finger at her and Astoria got up out of her seat and strode round the table before sitting in his lap. With a jolt of fear, she immediately felt that her husband was aroused and did her best not to flinch as he slid an arm around her waist while his other hand rested on her upper thigh suggestively. Antonin then snapped his fingers so that the two flutes came gliding over to them and they remained hovering and poised in mid air, waiting. “Drink.” He commanded, watching her intently. Obediently Astoria put the slim flute to her lips and drank the pale gold bubbling liquid before letting out a long deep breath in spite of herself as warmth enveloped her chest and her racing heart began to slow. “There, that is much better is it not?” Antonin crowed, his eyes still fixed on her.

“Very much so, I thank my husband for his kind gesture.” She replied before taking another sip as the sweet and sharp flavours of the Avery vintage danced upon her tongue.

“And how else will you thank me my Lady for keeping you safe?” He asked as he gave her waist a suggestive squeeze, his voice now hoarse with arousal. Without even pausing to think Astoria set her flute aside at once and kissed Antonin full on the mouth even though her stomach was churning from the smell of vodka fumes and stale tobacco. “Well, that is a start.” He said silkily when they broke apart, smacking his lips obscenely as a hungry gleam lit up his eyes.

“I will do whatever my Lord pleases,” Astoria whispered in her best attempt to sound sultry.
Antonin’s smirk broadened as he twirled her golden hair about his fingers, still gazing at her. “Well it would please your Lord to be pleasured with that pretty little mouth of yours, right here and now.”

Again, not daring to hesitate for even a second Astoria smiled for him and ran her hand suggestively up his chest while trying not to grit her teeth in disgust. “Then my Lord shall get his wish.” She whispered quietly. And, hardening her resolve for the inevitable Astoria drank the last of her champagne down in one, slid from Antonin’s lap down onto her knees… and bent to her task.

The weak sun was settling lower and lower amidst the swirl of purple clouds and the smoking grey backdrop of the scarred Moscow skyline. Dressed to the nines in fur, velvet and sapphires Astoria waited nervously in the Great Hall, alone. The Hall had been restored to its former splendour and was quite unlike the ruined, crumbling, blood stained carnage she had been confronted with the last time she had been down here. Paintings once again hung proudly from the walls, carved statues stood tall and imperious and a rich colourful mural that stretched dramatically across the ceiling above her had been reimposed in minute detail. A towering carved and jade grandfather clock was ticking gently in the silence while its numerous golden hands swept and twisted about its polished face. Astoria took a deep breath as the largest hand inched closer and closer to six and she continued to wait.

*It is almost time,* she thought as her heart thudded slowly and uncomfortably in her chest and her hands moved nervously over one another. She had been so nervous at the prospect of leaving her apartments for the first time in the nine weeks since the attack that she had drunk three large goblets of very strong elf made wine and was now beginning to regret it as she began to feel increasingly tense and light headed.

Then Astoria heard the *creak* of a recently repaired floorboard and she whirled around, her pulse racing in panic but almost immediately she let out a breath of air in relief when she saw who it was.

“My Lady,” James Clearwater said quietly, striding purposefully toward her from behind the staircase, his arm outstretched. “Forgive me, I did not mean to startle you.”

“That is – that is quite alright Clearwater.” She replied breathlessly, “My mind was – was a million leagues away.”

James inclined his head stiffly and she tentatively took his arm though she could have sworn that he shifted ever so slightly at her touch. “To the courtyard then,” He said in his ever formal tone and they both made their way to a concealed door on the Eastern side of the hall which led down a passageway to the main courtyard.
They were silent as they made their way down the gloomy passageway whose walls were completely bare with only every other fire sconce lit. Astoria was stealing nervous glances at the Half Blood, trying to catch his eye but he continued to look determinedly ahead, his face set. After a few more moments of silence she eventually threw caution to the winds, thinking that she may not ever get another chance to say what she wanted to say.

“Clearwater,” She said quietly, and James gave a funny sort of jerk of his head to show that he was listening, still refusing to look at her but she pressed on regardless. “I wanted to thank you for – for saving the lives of myself and my children on the night of the siege. Without your intervention all would have been lost, I owe you a blood debt Sir.” He still said nothing so she pressed on, heedless. “And – and afterward, out on the balcony you were – you were very good to me and for that I thank you as well.”

There was a long pause. “You owe me nothing my Lady, I was merely doing my duty.” James replied in a tired, heavy voice.

Astoria could not help but feel a little dispirited by his somewhat cold response; he had treated her so gently, almost kindly after the battle and she had hoped to see a little glimmer of that now at a time when she was still so frightened and worried. Pushing the thought to the back of her mind where it belonged, she continued to trail silently alongside James until they reached an arched door at the end of the passageway. When it swung open at their approach Astoria shivered at the kiss of cool air that greeted them despite being swathed in a stole of silver wolf fur. Moments later she was still shaking, and it was not just because of the cold.

“Are you alright?” James asked quietly and she was aware of his eyes upon her, but she did not meet his gaze.

Astoria nodded shakily though her stomach roiled in fear and she held on to James’ arm with a desperate grip. “Yes, yes thank you Clearwater I am just – just nervous. Tonight – tonight will be the first time I have left the Palace since – since that awful day at the Fortress.” Her speech was awkward and stunted and she could barely get her words out.

“It’s alright,” James said softly, and his sudden change of voice gave Astoria pause in her panic. “The city is well protected my Lady, no one can get at you or your family I swear it.” He reached over and gently rested his gloved hand over hers which was still pincered around his arm.

Astoria flinched a little at the touch and stared at him, her heart banging in her chest as a myriad of feelings came crashing down over her all at once. James quickly retracted his hand, looking both afraid and embarrassed and he turned his face away. “Forgive me my Lady,” He said, his voice immediately returning to that stiff formal tone, “Shall we – shall we take our leave?”
She nodded by way of answer and allowed him to lead her into a dark hallway which was dominated by a pair of gilded French doors at the far end that had been flung open to give a full view of the courtyard beyond under the murky purple sky. Astoria wanted to speak, wanted to reassure James that she was not upset or angry with him, but she simply could not for she had been struck dumb by that small act. When James had touched her, she had felt an odd kind of shivery tingle sweep over her body; it was not unpleasant – quite the opposite in fact. It was the same feeling she had gotten when the Durmstrang boy who had taken her maidenhood had touched her for the first time, the same feeling when she and Draco had shared their first kiss. It both frightened and excited her. Astoria was still wrestling with all her might to quash the confusing feelings over James as he led her closer toward the French doors when her frenzied thoughts were suddenly brought to an abrupt halt. A handsome green unicorn drawn carriage had just trotted into view, gilt in silver and pulled by four magnificent stallions that were as black as jet – the Justiciar’s Carriage. Astoria’s insides twisted and she took a sharp intake of breath at the sight of it. She felt James’ eyes flicker toward her for half a heartbeat but did not dare return the look now that the carriage was mere feet away.

When they emerged into the black marble courtyard Astoria felt an ice cold chill that could not possibly be from the weather as it was far too early. Instinctively she jerked up her head and sure enough, four Dementors were swirling overhead seeming utterly at ease as they twisted and twirled themselves into sinuous shapes underneath the darkening sky; the purple meeting the orange as the sun sank lower and lower.

“Your guard.” James so quietly that he barely moved his lips. “Just as a precaution.” He too then turned his eyes skywards and called, “I am here to bring the Justiciar’s wife to him at his own request for their engagement this evening.”

One of the Dementors paused in its dreamy twirling and promptly glided down toward them. Astoria could not help but shrink back a little when she heard its terrible rattling breath as it drew closer and closer and willed herself not to get sucked in by its terrible crushing power of despair. When the creature was hovering before them it seemed to consider them both for a moment and she felt her pulse quicken.

Could it sense deception? Did it know that something highly inappropriate had transpired between them? Could it sense the feelings of both desire and fear that were raging in her at this very moment?

She gazed back into the shadowy hood fearing the worst but a moment later the Dementor gave a nod and drew out a scabbed, rotting hand to point in the direction of the carriage.

“Very good.” James said stiffly and without preamble he released Astoria and pointed his wand at
the carriage door which swung open at once.

The interior of the carriage was lost in shadow, but Astoria knew Antonin was in there waiting for her. There was a distinct smell of burning tobacco coming from within as tendrils of vivid blue smoke crept out of the open door and she could sense his very presence, unable to shake the feeling of his shrewd eyes fixed upon her. Resisting the urge to shudder Astoria stared back into the gloom and fixed a gentle smile upon her face so as not to appear overzealous while James marched past the Dementor and over to the open door. His boots clicked smartly on the polished marble while the unicorns swished their tails and snorted and stamped impatiently, clearly both ill at ease from the Dementors and eager to leave the palace after being confined to the stables for so long. James assumed his position standing poker straight by the carriage door with a gloved hand outstretched which Astoria took as her cue to go. She nervously made her way toward the carriage and still not daring to look at him, she grasped James’ hand and hoisted herself inside.

“There she is, a beauty in blue. You look utterly ravishing my Lady.” Antonin purred. He was slumped in his seat extinguishing his foul cigarette in a levitating ashtray while Astoria smoothed her skirts and settled herself beside him in the plush velvet interior. He was clad in dress robes of midnight blue to match her own gown and wore a delighted, triumphant expression on his twisted face looking incredibly sinister in the half darkness. “A very good eve to you my Lady,” As was usual his eyes devoured her as they roved over every curve and piece of exposed flesh, his gaze lingering over her bosom. Antonin tore his eyes away to stare out of the open door and called languidly, “Clearwater you are to be our tail for the night, Flint is indisposed.”

“Very good Justiciar.” James’ voice called back, and Astoria got a glimpse of him hoisting himself over a broom his Death Eater mask now covering his face as the door swung shut with a snap.

There was a painful silence as Antonin continued to gaze hungrily at her and Astoria could almost see his twisted mind at work, doubtless imagining with depraved enjoyment what he was going to do to her later in their chambers.

“My Lady is well this evening?” He asked in a silky voice that made the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end.

“Very much so my love, I thank you for your kind words.” Astoria replied softly, trying to ignore the fear that stirred within her as Antonin reached over and took her soft delicate hand in one of his own considerably larger ones. It was an enormous effort not to pull away and claw him across the face as he raised her hand to his lips and began to kiss it softly.

“To be sure, you are positively glowing on this most wonderful of evenings, could it be that you are going to give me another sweet babe soon? What a wonderous way that would be to put all this nonsense of battle behind us.”
“I – I cannot yet know, it is too early as of yet.” Astoria said nervously, her fright mounting even further. This was always a volatile matter with Antonin, and he had been furious when her moonblood had arrived not long after he had raped her. “But I will give my Lord the heirs he desires, I’ll – I’ll be with child soon, I swear it husband,” She finished in a rush and hoping this would quell his temper.

“Oh, I know you will,” Antonin said in a dangerously soft voice followed by a noise that was somewhere between a chuckle and a snarl which made her stomach turn over. “You would not want to disobey me now, would you?”

“No, never.” She said breathlessly, her eyes fixed on him pleadingly as she willed herself not to break down and weep, terrified that he was about to rip off her dress and take her on the carriage floor as he had done so many times before to punish her for ’disobeying’ him.

Astoria waited on tenterhooks, bracing herself for the explosion of fury but Antonin merely gave a chilling little laugh. “I shall have Rathburne check you in a week or so… just to make sure.” His eyes gave a horrible sort of gleam at the prospect before they flicked downward to glance at his watch and he grunted in surprise. “Time is short, it is best that we took our leave.” He reached up, banged three times on the roof with a large fist and barked, “Away at once!” And like clockwork the well trained unicorns set off at a brisk trot as dusk settled about the palace.

Seeing the destruction from the Resistance’s attack up close was more unpleasant than Astoria could have ever imagined as their carriage rolled through the defaced city. She avoided Antonin’s eye instead preferring to stare out of the window and not even daring to allow her thoughts to drift to James who was flying mere feet away, frightened that her husband would somehow be able to smell out the forbidden feelings that were bubbling just below her surface. The air was silent and gloomy and even though there were hovering lanterns every few feet or so to illuminate the streets, everything that the light did not touch was lost in near darkness. Security Trolls lumbered up and down the ravaged streets clutching clubs, their massive shadows stretching over piles of rubble and disintegrating walls. In addition to the four that had accompanied them, hundreds more Dementors swirled above making the air so cold that Astoria’s breath came out in white mist despite the warming charms within the carriage. Black ugly scorch marks from dragon fire arced up the once pristine avenues and in the shadow of a collapsed building there was a pile of burning corpses which were watched over by a group of cloaked and hooded figures, the orange flames dancing sinisterly through the murk. She knew that many Death Eaters were still dying from their wounds, many of them Half Bloods which explained why they were being disposed of in this manner – for only Pure Bloods were entitled to a fallen hero’s burial. Astoria could just about make out the Serpentine Tower which seemed to have escaped unscathed from the turmoil as it stood on its lonely dark hill. She rather thought that its torture cells were now likely full to bursting with captured Resistance members who had been unable to flee when the Death Eaters had regained control of the city. She shivered and drew her furs around her more tightly, shifting uneasily in her seat.
“There’s nothing to fear my Lady.” Antonin crooned apparently amused at her obvious discomfort as they passed a blackened and smouldering slum. “The Dark Lord has summoned forces from all corners of the Empire to rebuild the city and all will be as it was before, just wait and see my dear.”

Astoria did her best not to purse her lips as she surveyed their grim surroundings and Antonin slyly slipped his fingers through her own, giving her hand a squeeze. She was not feeling at all encouraged by her husband’s words, quite the reverse. In fact, she was forcibly reminded of the destruction that the Death Eaters had wrought upon Paris when they had conquered the city all those years ago and wondered – not for the first time – what the true consequences of this attack would be.

“That is good to know my Lord, I await that day eagerly.” She said quietly, tearing her eyes away from the horror beyond and she felt her face working painfully as she smiled for Antonin.

One could be forgiven if they thought that the Western side of Moscow had not been subject to an attack at all. Buildings now loomed threateningly above their carriage, many statues still stood as well as the numerous Pure Blood Manors, proud in their defiance even if a little battered from the assault dealt to them by the sparse number of Resistance forces that managed to penetrate this far into the city. Many of the green squares that had been burned to the ground had been restored as small saplings started to grow again and exotic flowers began to bud. Though she could not see them, Astoria could make out the sounds of softly splashing fountains and when she squinted as hard as she could when the last daylight left the horizon, she saw the shadow of a dragon banking serenely through the sky. This illusion of serenity was even more pronounced when she and Antonin arrived at their destination which seemed all but untouched by the fighting.

*How very typical,* Astoria thought grimly as they began their approach toward the imposing structure and she inwardly steeled herself for the night ahead.

Thorfinn Rowle’s Moscow residence was a grand one, a looming monstrosity of carved green and grey marble, its many turrets towering into the dark sky with the largest one lost in cloud so that the flags of both the Family Arms and the Dark Mark that constantly flew there could not be seen. Just as they had infested the city, Dementors were everywhere and Astoria turned her face away from the window as the carriage continued to rumble down the long avenue towards Rowle’s imperious palace.

Just two days after the Dark Lord had declared that the strict curfew was at an end the House of Rowle had seized upon the chance to announce the engagement party of Clarissa Rowle and Frederick Selwyn - Avery which was what brought Astoria and her husband here tonight. She had been unsurprised when the lustrous purple and gold invitations had arrived at her apartments. Doubtless the Rowles had been incredibly frustrated that the nuptials had been unable to take place due to the curfew, but Astoria also knew that this so called party was a perfect excuse to finally revel in the Resistance’s defeat which they had been unable to openly do so until now. Though she had attended countless ones like it she hated evenings like these. Bad enough that the dead were barely in
their graves and the city was partly destroyed it was exhausting trying to be ‘perfect’ all the time not to mention the excessive food and wine, the mindless chitter chatter and gossip – she found it all suffocating.

Astoria’s musings were brought to an end when their carriage promptly came to an abrupt stop once they had passed through the towering wrought iron gates that framed the palace courtyard. Antonin stepped out awkwardly hindered by his leg and held out a hand expectantly, a sinister smile twisting his thin mouth.

“Come my Lady, we cannot delay.” He said softly.

Astoria nodded and gave him a small smile before carefully placing a delicate slippered foot onto the carriage footplate while holding up her skirts to make sure she did not trip as she grasped Antonin’s proffered hand. It was difficult balancing act and it was not until she had two feet firmly upon the ground that she was able to take in her surroundings properly. She glanced nervously upward at the Dementors again and also spied James; a lone figure flying toward the Eastern side of the palace and looking no bigger than a bird. Astoria hastily averted her gaze which then fell upon upon the shimmering tourmaline paved steps that led up to the palace. When she saw who was waiting at the foot of those steps she felt as though someone had shoved a dagger in her bowels.

“Ah Fenrir back from Estonia, are we?” Antonin called over to the large hulking shadow that lurked beneath a blazing fire torch which was hovering a few feet in the air to illuminate the steps.

Sure enough, Fenrir Greyback stepped fully into the dim orange light that bathed the courtyard and it took all of Astoria’s resolve not to turn tail and flee. Even though it had been years since she had been made to suffer his presence, the sight and sound of Greyback made her flesh crawl with revulsion. Greyback was clad in his characteristic heavy leather hob nail boots and faded black Death Eater robes which always looked too tight. The whiskers on his face had faded to grey as had his matted greasy hair which had thinned considerably even though it was longer than she had ever seen it. His maniacal brown toothed grin was just the same however as were those feverish, ravenous amber eyes that glared out from his ravaged face like two open sores.

“Indeed Justiciar, the Dark Lord commanded me to return and I was not about to pass up the opportunity to feast on the flesh of the Resistance.” Fenrir called back in his blood chilling rasp as Astoria and Antonin drew ever closer to him. “His Lordship gave me twenty prisoners to infect upon the next full moon, I can scarcely wait.” He looked positively delighted at the notion and could not resist licking his peeling lips with hungry anticipation.

“To be sure.” Antonin replied with an unpleasant smile, though his eyes studied the Werewolf both disdainfully and shrewdly when they were stood before him. “His Lordship gave me twenty prisoners to infect upon the next full moon, I can scarcely wait.” He looked positively delighted at the notion and could not resist licking his peeling lips with hungry anticipation.
Greyback’s demented grin flickered for a fraction of a second and Astoria saw a flash of anger in his amber eyes, but he recovered almost instantly. “I am awaiting Bulstrode Justiciar, he is bringing in some slaves to serve at the banquet tonight.” The words had barely left Greyback’s mouth when suddenly there was a faint pop that came from somewhere to the right and he whirled around at once, poised on the balls of his feet as though ready to pounce. “Ah, here he is now.” He squinted into the darkness beyond, doubtless using his superior twilight vision as a Werewolf to see what Astoria could not though she did hear the faint chinking of metal chains and the sound of shuffling footfalls. “Bulstrode! Come show the fresh meat to the Lord Justiciar!” Greyback shouted, his voice sounding eager and excited as it echoed in the courtyard.

The chinking and shuffling noises grew louder and louder until the huge heavy set figure of Jeremy Bulstrode came looming out of the darkness and Astoria inwardly recoiled. He was leading at least a dozen Muggles by a long chain, all of them bound to it with iron manacles around their wrists. This sight was especially unpleasant to look upon as many were children with only three adults among them.

“So many small ones.” Antonin said lazily as his cold eyes roved pitilessly over the Muggles and many averted their eyes as they would have been told to do when being inspected by a Pure Blood. His gaze then flicked up sharply to fix on Greyback and Jeremy. “You do not have anything older other than the back three?”

Jeremy and Greyback exchanged a brief glance before he replied, “No unfortunately not Justiciar, the parents of some of these brats put up quite a fight and we had no choice but to kill them. If need be, we can request slaves from elsewhere in due course – Spain would be a good option perhaps we…”

Astoria let Jeremy’s disdainful words wash over her, after all she was not permitted to comment upon this wizarding matter so instead, she forced herself to look upon the slaves with polite interest as was expected of her.

So young, she thought sadly, forcibly reminded of her own little ones at home.
Like Antonin the Muggles looked away from her as she studied them, but one boy in particular held her gaze steadily. Astoria could not say why but there was something oddly familiar about the boy; he had red hair and blue eyes and looked a lot healthier than many of the others who were half starved, though he did have a half healed cut on his cheek. She continued to stare at the boy, puzzling at why he seemed to stand out to her more than the others. The way he was looking at her also made her feel that he knew her somehow as if they had met before. That was impossible of course as up until recently this boy would have been a free Muggle in unconquered territory with a life and a family. Unsettled, Astoria tore her gaze away and continued to stand mute and meek by her husband while the wizards continued to talk.

After some moments Greyback peered down at his watch and said, “Bulstrode, we have to get this lot scrubbed up, clean and ready to serve at table before more guests arrive.”

Jeremy gave the slaves a bored, appraising look before giving a jerk of his head. “Just so Fenrir.” He replied before turning back to Astoria and Antonin, “I wish you both a charming evening.”

Antonin gave him a cold smile, “To be sure, after all that nonsense with the Resistance I am sure Thorfinn will want to make this an eve to remember. Oh, and Bulstrode, make sure you take the slaves through the back or he’ll have your head.” He finished nastily as they both turned to make their way up the tourmaline steps into the palace.

The Grand Hall of the Rowles was a cavernous monstrosity built from pale gold stone with a large domed ceiling that seemed to stretch on forever giving a curious echo to the babble of talk that swirled below. The Lord’s throne looked to be made from solid gold and encrusted with rubies, flanked by two imperious statues of long dead relations frozen in heraldic poses. Above the throne hung the family crest, tall proud and glittering featuring a green snake sprouting from between the petals of a purple lily which was artfully worked around an elaborate “R” on a bronze shield with the family words emblazoned below: ‘Neque Deditioem’ – ‘Never Surrender.’ There were a considerable number of guests present at least one hundred in all as they drank and laughed; their relief and excitement at finally being allowed outside of their homes since the siege palpable. However, all parted and dipped in submission as Antonin led Astoria by the hand to where Thorfinn was stood by the throne surrounded by his kin under a great cloud of cigar smoke. They were all chuckling at some unknown jape and Thorfinn broke off his conversation and set his brandy balloon on a silver tray held dutifully by a Muggle slave as they drew close.

“Good evening old boy, I believe congratulations are in order not only for your sweet niece but for you as well eh?” Antonin declared loudly as he embraced Thorfinn. He then allowed himself a bark of laughter and the surrounding Rowles chuckled at his words. “Well done to you, at last, at last.”

“You are too kind Antonin.” Thorfinn replied smoothly as they broke apart, a knowing smirk upon his face. “Better late than never I suppose hm?”
They both chortled together like schoolboys before Thorfinn turned his deep blue eyes on Astoria.

*They are precisely the same shade as Clarissa’s* she thought vaguely as she curtsied for him and allowed him to kiss her hand.

However beautiful the famed blue eyes of the House of Rowle were though, Thorfinn’s were shrewd, greedy, *vain* – devoid of any warmth or kindness. Astoria knew why he was looking especially pleased with himself this evenfall and it was certainly not due to his niece’s impending nuptials. Thorfinn had finally gotten what he had craved for so long, for two days after the attack on Moscow his wife Linnea had given birth to their first ever baby boy. Magnus Damocles Rowle had immediately surpassed his three elder sisters in the line of succession and was now the heir to the family fortune – aged just nine weeks old.

“Commander Rowle.” Astoria said, soft and polite.

“My Lady it is a pleasure to look upon you as always.” Thorfinn proclaimed graciously as he let go of her hand. “You will want my Linnea to talk nonsense with I suppose hm?” He asked mockingly while Antonin smirked and inclined his head in permission. Thorfinn craned his neck about the room peering about though there was little need due to his immense height. “Linnea!? Linnea!?” He snapped aggressively, an alarmingly abrupt change from his smooth cordial tone moments before. “Get over here at once and greet our guests!”

Tall, slender, beautiful and not looking at all like she had given birth to her fourth baby just nine weeks ago Linnea Rowle came gliding across the room in flowing lilac silk, her silvery hair sparkling, her aquamarine eyes averted from her husband’s face as she dipped graciously for him, Antonin and Astoria in turn.

“You are most welcome to my Lord husband’s home my Lord and Lady Justiciar.” She murmured softly, still not daring to look up.

“Yes, yes very good wife,” Thorfinn said impatiently. “I command you to amuse the Lady Dolohov for the nonce and I shall call you if I have need of you.” His tone was still brusque and harsh and Astoria saw Linnea flinch ever so slightly when her husband drew her in by the waist and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

“Run along then my dear.” Antonin said, tightly grasping Astoria’s arm at his last word – a threatening reminder to behave herself and make no trouble before he too planted a kiss on her cheek.
and slyly patted her on the backside.

Neither Astoria nor Linnea wasted any time in putting as much distance between their husbands and themselves as possible and soon found a quiet corner on the other side of the hall where they could talk freely.

Astoria was just about to congratulate Linnea on the birth of her son when the other witch took both of her hands in her own and kissed them. “I wanted to thank you.” She whispered quietly, her aqua eyes a little glassy. “For all you did in the Ballroom on that terrible night, for protecting us all. I feel certain we would have all been dead had it not been for the actions of yourself, Elizabeth and the others. The men will say it is their victory, but we Mothers know the part you played thank you, thank you sweet Astoria, my children are alive because of you.”

“You are most kind.” Astoria replied in a low voice due to the large painful lump that had suddenly lodged itself in her throat.

She did not know why Linnea’s words had made her feel thus; perhaps it was gratitude at finally having some recognition for what she had endured that evening, perhaps it brought back the raw memories of that night which had still not abated or perhaps it was a fraction of both. In any case Astoria felt that she would soon burst into tears if she did not pull herself together and finally found her tongue which felt clumsy and awkward in her mouth when she spoke.

“I did what I had to, I’m sure you would have done the same if you could. Of course, I am glad that it is all over now but–” Astoria paused and looked nervously about the bustling hall to see if they were being overheard but all the other guests were captivated in their vapid conversations and paid them no mind.

“What is it?” Linnea asked gently.

“I am afraid – I am afraid they will come back.” Astoria whispered as quietly as she could her voice laced with terror, yet she also felt a momentary swoop of relief perhaps because she had finally put into words the biggest fear that had tormented her day and night since the so called 'victory' had been proclaimed.

Linnea’s eyes widened in shock and fear and she blinked several times before saying in a rush, “Come now dear what a thing to say, there is naught to be feared any longer they have been reinforcing the magical bonds for weeks now.” The younger witch lightly touched her arm as though to reinforce her words. “I saw it for myself earlier this morn I swear it, even dragons cannot bypass the bonds. As the sun was rising, I observed one flying above our Western fields and when it got too
close to the boundary where the forest begins it was instantly repelled and the beast flew away roaring and billowing flame.”

“Yes, I – I suppose that is something.” Astoria said truthfully for she could not deny that Linnea’s story was reassuring.

“Where is all this worry stemming from? Are you - are you expecting again?” Linnea asked very seriously.

“No.” Astoria said with such a firm sense of finality that Linnea looked slightly taken aback and she hastened to soften her tone, “My apologies Nea I am just so – just so… tired. You have the right of it I should stop worrying, if the bonds can stop a dragon then they can stop just about anything.” She made an effort to smile at Linnea who returned the gesture at once and gave her a reassuring pat on the hand.

“There, that is better is it not?” She said in a brighter voice, “Some champagne will cure what ails you I am sure.” Linnea beckoned over a Muggle who came hurrying toward them at once armed with a silver tray laden with fizzing champagne flutes while a bottle floated dreamily through the air after him.

“Congratulations on your little boy.” Astoria finally said without preamble, raising her champagne flute to the other witch who could not help but flush with pride as they toasted.

“You are most kind,” Linnea replied with a warm smile – the first truly happy smile Astoria had seen on her face in what seemed like forever. “How is your Fedor? He must be what, almost half a year by now?”

“Yes, by the next turn of the moon he shall be half a year old. My eldest shall be nine come December and I can scarcely believe how the time has flown, it seems like only yesterday when he was a tiny little babe.”

Astoria continued to speak with Linnea for a time continuing on the topic of their children and the joys and challenges each of them brought as they watched glittering witches and wizards stream into the hall. They watched as Blaise came strutting in with his wife, Ophelia de Sade as well as the extravagant Price Gyasi who was head to toe in gold with his two wives trailing after him while wizards such as Vadim Dolohov and Rodolphus Lestrange arrived with Veela bedslaves on their arms seeing as neither was wed yet. Astoria was able to leave her nagging fear behind for a little while as the words between her and Linnea flowed thick and fast. Linnea’s relief at finally producing a boy for her husband could not have been plainer and she seemed much happier for it. Astoria was
pleased for her, but she could also sympathise all too well with the extreme fear that the other witch had harboured prior to her babe being born. It was a fear that so uneasily accompanied those feelings of love and fierce protectiveness that Astoria also felt for her unborn babies from the moment she knew she was pregnant. A fear that would not subside until after all the blood, sweat and tears when she saw Rathburne hand Antonin a screaming bundle of new life and say those blessed words: “It’s another boy Master Dolohov.”

_To be sure it is the fear of our husbands that binds us witches so close to one another, _she thought grimly.

Their conversation was brought to an abrupt halt when Elizabeth, Yaxley and his mistress Veliane Ayim arrived in the hall. Elizabeth had a face like thunder and a muscle was twitching in her jaw as Yaxley snarled something in her ear and grasped her arm tightly while Veliane merely smiled on serenely, taking in the room.

“Oh dear,” Linnea murmured anxiously as Elizabeth wrenched free of Yaxley’s grip and appeared to hiss something back before storming over to where they both stood.

Yaxley’s brutal face hardened, he turned brick red and attempted to go after her but Veliane put a gentle hand on his arm, whispered something in his ear and he halted abruptly before whirling around and striding off with her.

“Another one!” Elizabeth snarled under her breath when she reached Astoria and Linnea, her voice choked with rage. “That whore is having another one of my husband’s bastards!”

Astoria and Linnea exchanged looks. It was commonplace for wizards to Father children outside their marriages, even encouraged to sure up the numbers of his Lordship’s army and slaves. Astoria was aware of at least three other babies that had been sired by Antonin, all of them birthed by whores in brothels and doubtless he had sired many more in the Purification Institute. However, like many of his peers Antonin had refused to acknowledge any of them as his legitimate children and as was law they had been packed off to various Institutes around the Empire to be raised elsewhere. Not so Yaxley though. Yaxley’s mistress was a Pure Blood and he treated her like a second wife, showering her with jewels and gifting her a string of lavish apartments on the other side of his Castle where she raised their four – soon to be five bastard children.

“I’m sorry my dear.” Astoria said gently while Linnea beckoned another Muggle slave to bring wine. She knew there was not one ounce of love between Elizabeth and her husband but the stain and humiliation on her pride and family honour enraged her and rightly so.
Elizabeth took down a huge swallow of wine her chest rising and falling as she took in deep, calming breaths. “Bad enough that we live under the same roof but now my dear husband wishes to raise those bastards alongside mine own precious children, it’s an outrage! His sole purpose in life is to shame me, this is just –”

But Elizabeth’s furious diatribe was cut off by a booming gong which reverberated from the walls and large dome of the hall causing everyone to fall silent and turn toward the arched doors. Moments later the husband and wife to be Frederick Selwyn – Avery and Clarissa Rowle stepped through the archway, the former clad in dress robes of green and silver and the latter in a gown of scarlet silk and lace as the room erupted in cheers and applause. Astoria inwardly shuddered, the scarlet a budding bride wore at her engagement party symbolised the scarlet of her maiden’s blood that was to be shed on her impending wedding night – if indeed it had not been shed already. Clarissa’s smile looked very fixed and strained whereas Frederick looked as smug and arrogant as ever as he swaggered into the hall toward Thorfinn and other prominent members of the Rowle family. His Mother, Victoria Avery came strutting in after him dripping in diamonds and on the arm of Walter Selwyn who had taken the place of the groom’s Father as his brother Felix was long in his grave. Both of them looked even more self satisfied and smug than Frederick himself, doubtless due to the staggering bride price of one and a half million Galleons that had found its way to their family coffers. Predictably Emmett Avery, Frederick’s bastard half brother was the last family member to enter the hall alongside his wife as they crept discretely to the back of the group of Rowles, Aversys and Selwyns and silence promptly fell.

“Dearest friends, a very good evening to you all!” Called Thorfinn, raising his hands in welcome and addressing the crowd. “On this most wonderous of evenings the curfew is finally at an end and the Empire is safe once again. To be sure our glorious Empire has had some testing times of late but with the Dark Lord’s prodigious skill and the dedicated service of his most loyal Death Eaters we have overcome.” There were shouts of agreement with many raising their glasses and nodding fervently, “Yes indeed, we have overcome and from those trials we will become greater and stronger than ever before, it is a new beginning my friends!” The Death Eaters whooped, hooted and stamped their feet with many quaffing down wine and shouting for more.

Thorfinn grinned and turned to his niece and Frederick his goblet raised, but before he could utter any further silence suddenly fell and he turned, distracted. For there was someone else who had appeared in the archway and Astoria could almost feel the collective intake of breath from all the guests in the hall. Bellatrix Lestrange stepped forward clad in a gown of deepest blue that contrasted sharply with her snow white skin; on another witch it may have looked sultrily elegant but not so this wearer. The gown had long fluted sleeves that touched the floor and was cut low off Bellatrix’s protruding shoulders giving everyone an unsightly view of those razor sharp collar bones and the top few rungs of her jutting ribcage. Worse still the train of the gown was so long that two dwarves were holding it at the end, their hideous pushed in faces wearing surly expressions as they trailed after their Mistress. Bellatrix swept the hall of nervous faces before turning to Thorfinn, raising her chin high in that characteristic arrogant stance of hers, her thin hair scraped harshly back from her face as the candlelight flickered over her bony features.

“Good eve to you Thorfinn, may I offer my congratulations on finally finding your niece a decent
pure match.” She said into the silence in her thin, jarring voice before turning her eyes on Clarissa who looked terrified but continued to grin fixedly. “Such beauty. But your purpose is a noble one child, remember your duty to your husband, but above all the Dark Lord himself.” Her last words were almost a hiss and the younger witch paled a little but managed to nod back fervently. Bellatrix glanced at Thorfinn before turning to the hall at large, that sea of colour and jewels. “In accordance with the laws set out in our glorious Empire the Dark Lord has given his consent for this Pure Blooded wizard and witch to be wed three days hence. I shall present the scroll with his Lordship’s seal and signature to each family the eve before the wedding. His Lordship deeply regrets that he cannot be present this night, so I am sent in his stead with his full authority.” She paused for a moment, considering but then her gaze fell once again upon Thorfinn and said with a twisted smile, “You may continue, Thorfinn.”

But Thorfinn did not resume his speech at once, instead he began to clap vigorously as Bellatrix descended the steps into the main hall with her dwarf thralls in tow. Like a flock of foolish sheep everyone else joined in, clapping and braying or else shouting out praise for the Dark Lord and his Empire as Bellatrix cut a wide path through them all. She proceeded to take the Lord’s throne for herself before dismissing her dwarves with a contemptuous flick of her wrist.

After all the applause had died down Thorfinn cleared his throat somewhat uncomfortably and said “Madam Lestrange does us great honour, great honour indeed. As I said, this night we shall mark this new beginning of the Empire by celebrating the union of my dearest niece Clarissa and her husband to be, Frederick Selwyn – Avery. Dear friends please join me in congratulating the happy couple and making this eve, an eve to remember!”

“All eve to remember!” Shouted three hundred voices back at him as everyone raised their goblets and drank deep while an unseen orchestra began to play merrily in the background.

“The poor lamb looks terrified.” Linnea murmured under her breath under all the escalating exuberance as she, Elizabeth and Astoria turned to make their way to the banquet hall. “It pains me that I will no longer be able to keep an eye on her now that she is leaving us.”

“Just so,” Elizabeth said bitterly, still glowering. “She should be because she has nothing but fear, pain and misery ahead of her once she is bonded to her husband.”

“Beth please!” Hissed Astoria, “I know you are angry, but you must be careful.”

Elizabeth pursed her lips in fury and Astoria was about to say more when a hand suddenly grasped her upper arm and she felt a shiver of fear. Her suspicions at who had presumed to touch her were confirmed when she looked up to be faced with Vadim who grinned down at her while the others shrank back ever so slightly.
“You are to join your husband at the high table my Lady.” Vadim commanded, his gaze as lecherous as ever. “I am to escort you there at once.”

“As you say Master Dolohov.” Astoria replied, shooting a brief helpless look at the other two witches before she allowed Vadim to lead her away.

The Rowles had spared no expense for the dinner banquet that evenfall and Astoria supposed in a twisted sort of way that they had every reason to do so – Clarissa was marrying into a rich and powerful House, Thorfinn finally had an heir and the Resistance was done and defeated. It seemed that not even the Resistance’s destruction of the vast Avery farmlands could deter the Rowles from celebrating in the traditional lavish fashion to which they were accustomed. Astoria soon learned that the rich and extravagant fare being served up tonight was courtesy of Philippe Rousseau who had brought up supplies from one of his many estates scattered around the Empire for the occasion. Unsurprisingly the glutton had risen to the task with gusto. Green lobsters still in their shells sat on silver platters, steaming joints of roasted meat were mounted on spears, a dozen kind of soups bubbled in ornate pots and succulent silver fish rested on crisp buttered greens. There were pies baked in the likeness of the animal whose meat they contained, mountains of fruit had been carved into impossibly intricate shapes while fresh suckling pigs rested upon elaborate flower displays with apples shoved between their teeth. No matter what the season or circumstance, the Pure Bloods always ate well.

“How do you like the rabbit my Lady?” Asked Clemence Black who was seated to Astoria’s left. Clemence was now a Rowle by marriage, wed to one of Thorfinn’s favourite cousins which allowed her such an honoured place on the high table this night. The girl was but nineteen years old but so far, she had been rather sweet and pleasant to talk to.

“It’s very good.” Astoria replied truthfully. “I believe that is white wine I taste, very good indeed.” She took another sip from her own wine goblet to enhance the taste, allowing herself to relax just a little. Astoria had been repeating the story that Linnea had told her of the dragon being repelled by the new magical bonds over and over in her head to keep herself reassured and found that she felt far less fearful than she had been at the beginning of the eve.

Astoria usually found these banquets tedious, but this eve was not as bad as was usual, firstly because Antonin was too busy talking to Rasputin to pay her any mind which was a small if temporary relief. Secondly Clemence was a new Mother and she bombarded Astoria with questions about babies and childrearing which served as a wonderful distraction from the high false laughter and gossipy conversation that surrounded them. Astoria was happy to answer the girl’s many questions and share her knowledge, though partway through dinner she was reminded with a jolt that Clemence was also a cousin to Draco. Once or twice she had glanced over to where Draco sat at a lower table, but he was always in conversation with either Pansy or his Father. Astoria wondered if he still thought about her at all and then shook herself inwardly feeling vexed with herself.
Of course, he does not think of you not flatteringly anyway... he hates you!

She took another large swallow of wine to hide her grimace from Clemence and tried to listen to what she was saying but it was no good. The hurt Astoria felt from Draco was still as raw as the day they had last spoken and even at a distance the very sight of him clouded her mind with red angry mist. Her furious thoughts were interrupted by a great clanging bell and she looked up with a start and saw a Muggle in the corner ringing the great silver thing with what looked like an enormous effort. Thorfinn had gotten to his feet and as the bell continued to ring the exuberant laughter, loud chatter and occasional drunken shrieks slowly faded to a low rumble before there was silence. Only then did he proceed to speak.

“My dear friends I do hope that you have enjoyed your evening thus far,” His words were answered by lone whoops and cheers from various places all over the banquet hall followed by drunken titters, “But now I must ask you to proceed to the Grand Theatre for this eve’s main event!”

There was a roar of assent at Thorfinn’s last words; wizards banged their fists on the table and stamped their feet, ladies squealed and giggled, and goblets filled with costly Elf made wine were tossed into the air. Astoria glanced up the high table to where Clarissa sat with her intended – there was no mistaking it now, the girl looked utterly miserable while laughter and the happy chatter of well fed guests surrounded her as they all got unsteadily to their feet.

After all the drink and excitement of the banquet it took everyone longer than it ought to due to the drunkenness of the revellers paired with the Apparition ban as they trooped to the other side of the palace to the Grand Theatre. Muggle slaves clutching drinks trays were hurrying in their wake as raucous laughter echoed off the cavernous walls and ceilings which made it sound as though there were a hundred more of them. McNair and Travers were arm in arm singing a crude victory song as they swayed alarmingly, Antonin was slurring in Russian with Rasputin and Silas even did a clumsy sort of cartwheel as though he were some sort performing dwarf to fresh gales of mirth. Frederick however was one of the drunkest of all and had to be helped by the Zabini brothers who were supporting him on each side as he staggered along the corridor.

Two thousand dead and all the destruction and it is like nothing has changed, they simply carry on as they did before, Astoria thought wearily.

“Make sure you’re not like this on your wedding night young Selwyn.” Yaxley said with a smirk before taking a huge swallow of wine and smacking his lips with relish. “You’re going to have a job to do.”

The wizards hooted and jeered as Antonin clapped Frederick hard on the back and shouted “Indeed
“my boy! You have to make sure that pretty little slip of a girl has a big belly before the year’s end!”

“Who is to say I have not had a little taste already? I daresay my heir could arrive early, such a common occurrence that!” Frederick replied thickly, sniggering and stumbling, “What do you say to that my Lords?”

The wizards guffawed with idiotic laughter and Silas went tumbling to the ground, shrieking with mirth but rage rose in Astoria like a snake in long grass when she heard Frederick’s words.

*So that little bastard had indeed raped her then.*

She had suspected it from the moment she had first looked upon Clarissa that eve, something had just looked… wrong. After all it would not have been difficult for Frederick to lure a naïve girl like Clarissa into being alone with him.

“If fortune has smiled upon you and you have sired a little heir young Selwyn, I have a small piece of advice for you!” Yaxley bellowed now swaying drunkenly, groping at the wall for support as they emerged into another cavernous hall that was dominated by a large staircase and a velvet padded lift.

“Oh yes!?” Fredrick screeched back, his heavily bloodshot eyes focussing on Yaxley with some difficulty, “What is that then dear Corban?”

“You make sure that when those nine moons are up you stay well away from your Lady until they hand you the babe, elsewise your ears may very well rupture from all the bloody shrieking, it lasts for bloody days I tell you!” He declared to more coarse laughter. “Some are brave enough to venture in for the end, but I usually go hunting until the owl finds me.”

“Women,” Antonin said with a contemptuous sneer, “The way they wail.”

“–And look away when it comes to the last part,” Silas piped in his reedy voice before giving an exaggerated sort of shudder, his mismatched eyes rolling in their sockets. “I made the mistake of looking when my first was born, what a vile mess! So now you know what to do Freddie; close your eyes, cover your ears or simply *RUN!*” He screeched at the top of his voice.

The wizards all roared and fell about laughing with Frederick himself collapsing into a crumpled heap upon the ground, snorting wine out of his nose and dragging down the Zabinis with him who
cursed loudly. Antonin and Yaxley were soon upon them and were attempting to haul them back to their feet, still shortling. Furious, Astoria sidestepped them disgustedly along with Elizabeth and Clemence as they opted to take the stairs rather than the lift which led into the Grand Theatre.

*If they even had but a little taste of what it is like to bring a child into the world, they would be begging for opium within no time at all,* Astoria thought angrily as she stormed up the steep winding staircase, her hands bunched tightly into the fabric of her gown to stop them from shaking.

When all came pouring into the theatre itself Astoria could not help but be grudgingly impressed. Though she had been here several times before the majesty of the room never failed to take her breath away. They emerged onto a huge half moon balcony that overlooked the vast stage below with the backdrop featuring an enormous flag of the Rowle family crest. The place was floored in thick green carpet to match the walls swathed in the purest silk which was so fine that it sparkled under the glare of an enormous chandelier crafted from actual diamonds which cast ethereal rainbow lights over the lavish surroundings. Rich portraits of every single member of the Rowle family adorned the walls and the ceiling featured a mural of beautiful naked witches entwined with snakes that looked so lifelike Astoria rather thought that she could almost reach out and touch them. Statues of solid gold, silver and amethyst in the likenesses of dragons, sea serpents and other monsters glared down at her with eyes of mother of pearl while priceless dark artefacts from every corner of the world hovered lazily above marble plinths in starry protective orbs. Most impressive of all though were the enormous pillars that framed the great room leading up to the stage and encircling the many rows of seats that sprawled below. Four on each side and at least fifty feet thick they were gilt in silver and jade with impossibly intricate carvings of flowers, magical birds and beasts.

Muggles were scurrying about the balcony as usual filling wine goblets and offering up indulgent canapés. There were comfortable velvet sofas as well as elegant gilt standalone chairs surrounding tea tables, so guests might watch the performance on stage in the utmost splendour and luxury while being waited on hand and foot as opposed to the far more numerous seats down below which were presently vacant. Clarissa and Frederick naturally had the best seats that the theatre boasted; two throne like chairs either side a platter of fruit and wine which hovered gently between them. The former still looked tense and unhappy while the latter sprawled drunkenly on his seat, grinning stupidly. Astoria was pinned next to Antonin in an elaborately carved loveseat and they were flanked Thorfinn and Linnea and Yaxley and Elizabeth respectively. Everyone was once again gossiping happily to one another, the babble of sound increasing by the moment.

Suddenly an angry drunken screech rent the air, cutting through all other sound. “Idiot boy! Idiot boy! How can you be so damnably *STUPID!*?”

There was then the thudding sound of knuckles on flesh promptly followed by a cry of pain. Everyone peered down to the right to see Bellatrix standing over a Muggle who was cowering at her feet like a frightened animal and clutching at his face where she had hit him. Astoria recognized the Muggle as one of the three adults from the group of slaves that had been paraded before her earlier in the courtyard and knew at once what had caused Bellatrix’s apoplectic outburst. The sleeve of her costly gown had a dark red stain on it and there was an upturned goblet upon the floor leaking wine.
She inwardly shivered, Bellatrix’s rage could be a terrible thing she knew and only burned more fiercely when she was filled with drink.

“Give him a taste of the lash!” Travers called from somewhere behind her.

Bellatrix ignored him and advanced on the terrified Muggle as he scrambled away from her until his back was up against the balustrade where he pressed himself, trembling. “I asked you a question Muggle!” She screamed, her voice slurring. And without waiting for an answer she drew her wand with blinding speed and yelled, “**CRUCIO!**”

The Muggle howled in pain as he writhed and twisted upon the floor while in contrast many of the surrounding Pure Bloods began to laugh and clap. Antonin was chuckling softly beside Astoria and she had to work her face furiously to keep it looking cold and unconcerned. Bellatrix kept the Muggle under the spell for an inordinate amount of time, so much so that many of her fellows began calling for more food and wine as they watched the show, amused. When she finally did release the Muggle, he had barely the strength to scream anymore he merely whimpered, and it was plain that he had soiled himself. Bellatrix wrinkled her nose at the smell and began to savagely kick the Muggle all over – so hard that she left an entire slipper print on his face while he cried out in pain.

“Filth! Filth! FILTH! You filthy beast!” She raged, continuing in her savage beating while the hilarity from her surrounding fellows mounted as they urged her on. “**Imperio!**” She panted, pointing her wand at the Muggle so that he rose up in the air and started to perform a grotesque sort of jig, his limbs flopping about horribly as though he were some puppet at a show despite his sobbing. The surrounding Death Eaters and their wives howled louder than ever at the mortifying ‘dance’ and even more so when Bellatrix released the Muggle and he fell once again to the floor in a crumpled heap. She smiled broadly as she gazed at the battered and bleeding Muggle who was twitching at her feet, her mad eyes popping from her skeletal face and gleaming with sadistic pleasure. “A clumsy fool such as yourself will never again have the honour of serving the likes of me, nor anyone else of my kind for that matter.” She crooned down at the Muggle her voice now dangerously soft. Slowly, very slowly she raised her wand to point it directly at the man’s face and Astoria knew what was coming even before Bellatrix drew breath and bellowed, “**AVADA KEDAVRA!**”

A lightning bolt of green light erupted from her wand accompanied by that dreaded rushing sound as the Muggle was lifted high into the air before being blasted over the edge to land with a distant *crash* below. Bellatrix turned back to the cheering and clapping guests, her hollowed face twisted into a terrible grin as she gave them a mocking bow.

“Well struck Bellatrix!” Called Frederick, raising his wine goblet to her.

Astoria once again stole a look at Clarissa to see how she had taken this and was unsurprised to see that the girl’s face was pale and shocked, her blue eyes wide as she stared at the spot where the
Muggle had been moments ago.

_Something else she will have to get used to_ Astoria thought grimly, for the soirees and parties Clarissa previously attended with other unwed girls would not have included depravities such as this; doubtless as the wine flowed there would be more to come this night.

Bellatrix merely smirked in return, but her smile vanished alarmingly when her eyes found another Muggle slave boy who was standing nearest to her and Astoria saw with a start that it was another one of the slaves from the courtyard – the odd red headed slave boy no less who had made her feel so queer.

“You!” Bellatrix snapped at him, jabbing a bony finger straight at his face. The boy flinched but he did not have the same fear in his eyes as the Muggle before him as he stepped forward, his head bowed slightly. “You will serve me for the rest of this eve and serve me well or the same thing will happen to you!” She snarled menacingly as her wand hand twitched ever so slightly, “Do you understand me boy?” Silently the boy nodded still looking at the floor and promptly filled Bellatrix’s goblet with perfect precision.

Thorfinn had gotten to his feet, still looking amused and said, “Yes you did put on a rather good show Bellatrix, but I do believe it is time for me to introduce tonight’s true performance to celebrate the nuptials of my dear niece and our brave Frederick.” There was a smattering of applause and excited murmurs, “Mistress Carrow has very graciously lent me some of the finest creatures you will ever see here to perform for you tonight, all the way from Paris.” Yaxley gave a whoop and banged his fist down on the arm of his chair while Antonin looked like a greedy child who had been promised a bag of treats, eyes gleaming. Thorfinn smirked, “I shan’t be so cruel as to make you wait any longer so without further ado my friends, I give you the famed Veela of Paris!” He waved his wand and at once the candles in the chandeliers dimmed and the heavy purple velvet curtains above the stage opened gracefully.

There were shouts of delight from the wizards and excited gasps and giggles from the witches as twenty beautiful Veela came twirling onto the stage clad in jewels, oils, wisps of silk – and not much else – while violins and flutes sounded together in perfect harmony. Astoria knew Alecto Carrow still ran the highly lucrative Veela brothel in Paris that wizards came from all over the Empire to visit and it was small wonder; each Veela was lither and more beautiful than the last with immaculate hair and skin of every colour. She saw one with plum coloured curls and skin like cream, another looked as though she had been burnished in bronze as her fiery red hair which came down to her waist streamed out behind her as she leapt across the stage. Astoria thought that they all must be Imperioused for the Veela performed impeccably as they performed their provocative dance, twisting themselves into impossible shapes yet still managing to look elegant while gracefully gliding across the stage as though their feet were not touching the ground. The obscene screeching, hooting and shouting from the wizards only got worse as the performance went on and was positively raucous when a pale Veela with blonde waves embraced another olive skinned one with raven black tresses right there on the stage, their lips locking and their slender fingers running through one another’s hair before they moved downwards, exploring the other’s nether portions.
As Astoria rightly suspected the sight of these beautiful scantily clad creatures in this seductive, artful display had gotten Antonin’s blood up so that he groped and fondled her with increasing frequency under the cover of the half darkness.

“I am dying to fuck you my Lady,” He slurred drunkenly in her ear and reeking of vodka.

Astoria’s heart began to race with terror, and she prayed that she would not be dragged into some empty drawing room so her husband could have his way with her as he had done so on numerous occasions in the past when he could no longer contain his lusts. Antonin was breathing hard as he nuzzled her neck, squeezed her breasts and she felt a fresh thrill of horror when he drew her in for a kiss, his hand wandering clumsily over the fabric of her dress as he tried to grab her between the legs. Then suddenly there was a high finishing note from the violins below and the candles in the chandeliers were illuminated to their full light once again to signal the intermission of the performance. Astoria heard a snigger from behind her and briefly glanced back to see Vadim and Silas grinning over at her husband. She felt the blood rushing to her face and knew that she must have gone scarlet but Antonin said nothing. He merely smirked over at the wizards, winked and threw an arm around her shoulders, drawing her in close.

“More wine for myself and the Lady!” Antonin suddenly barked at a Muggle slave standing discretely by the wall. The man jumped to attention at once and strode over to an ornately carved jade table laden with carafes of spirits and wines, but this was apparently not fast enough for her husband. “Get on with it, Muggle!” He roared, drawing out his wand and taking aim at the man’s back. There was a flash of blue light and a squeal of pain as the curse struck the Muggle causing him to sway alarmingly almost losing his feet. Astoria heard Marcel de Sade’s cruel cackle and Bellatrix’s crazed shriek of mirth while Antonin chuckled softly, his heavily bloodshot eyes fixed on the Muggle who was trembling so badly that the goblets on the silver tray were rattling noisily with the wine in danger of spilling over as he walked shakily toward them. “Avert your eyes from my Lady or I shall have you flayed, Muggle!” He snapped aggressively as the Muggle bowed low for them to take their goblets. The Muggle had only glanced nervously at Astoria, but she had looked away at once – ashamed, though those around her would have taken it for disgust. Even after all this time she had never gotten comfortable with Antonin cruelly berating the Muggles like this, especially when the drink was in him. “Now get out of my sight slave, I have no further need of you.” Antonin said with a careless wave of his hand as the man hurried back to his place at the wall, terrified. He turned around to Astoria, smirking to see her reaction and at once she gave him a radiant smile in return and fluttered her lashes as though she appreciated his vile conduct.

Antonin looked as though he were about to speak but Bellatrix’s harsh voice suddenly cracked through the air like a whip, though she was slurring worse than ever now. “A firm hand is what is always needed!” She declared loudly to soft laughter and nods as the red headed slave boy discretely re filled Bellatrix’s wine goblet which was hovering by her elbow. “You saw what I had to do earlier, that is the only thing these filthy Muggles truly understand.”
“Here, here!” Boomed Thorfinn, raising his goblet to her with many more mirroring him.

Bellatrix’s haggard face warped into an awful smile, she seized her goblet and raised it back to Thorfinn. “They are like beasts in this way, they are stupid as beasts after all.” She took a large swig of wine which dribbled down her chin before she sloppily wiped it away, her eyes glinting dangerously again. “One must beat a stallion until he understands, the same rule applies with ignorant Muggles.” She coughed before clearing her throat noisily, taking another gulp of wine and pressing on, “I have my slaves lashed daily whether they have disobeyed me or no lest they forget who rules both this world and their worthless lives.”

“A most prudent measure Bellatrix.” Silas called to her, his mismatched eyes alight with savage pleasure. “I may have to adopt that measure among my own household slaves.”

Bellatrix laughed but her cackle turned into another rasping cough which was far more violent this time, so much so that she banged herself hard upon the chest.

“Slave!” Travers barked at the nearest Muggle, “Fetch some water for Madam Lestrange.”

Astoria had expected to see the same red headed slave boy that had been serving Bellatrix before, but this slave was a fully grown man with thinning brown hair. Her eyes swept the room searching for that distinctive red hair, but the boy appeared to have vanished.

“No!” Bellatrix snarled breathlessly, still wheezing. “I am not a child Travers, I do not require water I –” But before she could say anymore, she dissolved into another fit of coughing that sounded as though it came from deep within her chest. Indeed, Bellatrix was taking in great gulps of air in between her gargling, rasping coughs and she was bent slightly double. Many had broken off their conversations and were now looking over at Bellatrix their expressions uncertain, almost concerned.

The Muggle slave who had been commanded by Travers was clutching a silver ewer of water looking scared and unsure. He briefly glanced at Thorfinn as though to seek permission to continue with his task and Thorfinn nodded curtly. Timid as a field mouse the Muggle poured the water with trembling hands and warily held the tray out toward a spluttering Bellatrix who snatched the goblet and gulped the water down. Moments later however the water came flying from her mouth in a great gushing spray as she coughed and coughed, falling from her seat and clutching at her throat as she continued to gasp and choke. At this one of Prince Gyasi’s wives named Issa let out a shriek, panicked muttering broke out everywhere while Antonin, Thorfinn and many others came boiling to their feet.

“Jenkins!?” Rowle roared over the babble of nervous voices and Issa’s whimpering as Gyasi hissed
A tall stringy Healer who looked to be in his middling fifties appeared at once with a small pop at Thorfinn’s side clutching an old leather case, his eyes widening in shock when he took in the scene before him. “Madam Lestrange is in difficulty Jenkins, rectify this problem at once.” He commanded brusquely, but Astoria saw that he looked distinctly uneasy as Jenkins hurried over to the spluttering form of Bellatrix upon the floor, her back rising and falling rapidly.

Those who had been crowded around Bellatrix parted when Jenkins fell to his knees and gingerly turned her over so that she was facing upwards. Astoria was not the only one who screamed in horror when she saw the state of the other witch. Bellatrix was still clutching at her throat but the veins in her face had turned a poisonous looking blue and her chalk white skin was turning a sickly yellow. It was all too much for Clarissa who promptly fainted, sliding from her chair and onto the floor while Linnea fell to her knees, sobbing in shock and fear. Fadila Norton launched herself to her feet and ran from the room screeching shrilly and was swiftly followed by Adelaide, Elizabeth, Clemence and several other terrified wives. Wizards were shouting at one another, Issa had started to scream again as did many other witches as Bellatrix writhed grotesquely upon the floor and began to make terrible rattling sounds as she struggled to draw in breath. Her eyes were bulging out of her hollow face and were darting in all directions as she looked out at all the horrified guests staring back at her.

She is afraid – really, really afraid Astoria thought with a start as she continued to stare at Bellatrix, transfixed with horror, her hands over her mouth.

“Do something!” Bellowed Walter Selwyn at Jenkins.

Jenkins recoiled in horror. “I – I have never seen anything like it,” He stammered over the din, his hands shaking. “I think it may be – it may be poison Master Selwyn, nobody should eat or drink anything in this room henceforth.”

“Remedy it then!!” Roared Thorfinn who had gone as pale as milk while Antonin, Yaxley and Travers exchanged whispers, though all their eyes were fixed upon Bellatrix who was now beginning to cough up blood as she rasped and gargled. “I command you to remedy this mess!”

Jenkins jumped at the ferociousness in Thorfinn’s voice but shakily drew out his wand and opened his leather case with a small flick.

“Anapneo!” He gasped as he turned his wand on Bellatrix, but the spell did not seem to have any effect, so he tried again. “Anapneo maxima!” Still nothing happened so he began to frantically rifle about in his case, pulling out colourful jars and vials.
Jenkins tipped a small red vial of liquid over Bellatrix’s blueing lips and it did seem to give her some relief as she took in a huge gasping gulp of air and tried to speak but her words were unintelligible. Encouraged, Jenkins tipped another vial into Bellatrix’s mouth and started waving his wand murmuring Healing incantations that Astoria could not hear over the screaming, crying and yelling.

“There, I think there is some improvement Master.” Jenkins panted as Bellatrix’s rapid breathing began to slow down to normalcy and her spluttering became less frequent. “We must wait a few moments before proceeding with further treatment.”

“Very well Jenkins.” Thorfinn replied, his blue eyes still fixed on Bellatrix as she twitched upon the floor, his expression still guarded. “I think it prudent if we move her to—”

But Thorfinn’s words were drowned out by a terrible, strangled scream. Bellatrix suddenly sat bolt upright looking like a horror; her skin was completely yellow all over now even down to her hands and the bright blue veins criss crossed all over her so that she looked like a grotesque sort of map. Both hands were at her throat now as she tried to scream again but it sounded as though her throat were closing as all she could emit now was a high pitched whistling sound. There was an eruption of noise and movement as many more guests fled for the door while Jenkins fell to his knees once again and tried to empty another vial into her mouth, but it was no good. Bellatrix was coughing up what looked like pieces of lung, she was bleeding from the eyeballs and she had started to claw at her face, tearing at her own flesh which was now beginning to darken and waste.

“Somebody do something! Somebody find that serving slave!” Yaxley yelled at everyone and no one, shaking his fist in helpless fury.

“Stand aside!” Antonin snarled at Jenkins, roughly pushing him to the floor while the frightened Healer scrambled away, white faced. “Grigori!? Grigori!? Grigori where are you!?!” He roared, and Rasputin promptly came hobbling out of the shadows, wand drawn. When he reached Antonin, Rasputin began to move his wand in complicated movements and began to sing a strange Russian incantation over the choking Bellatrix.

Taking advantage of her husband’s distraction Astoria hastily pushed herself to her feet and made to run for the door, sobbing. She could not take it anymore; the screaming the shouting and those terrible rattling noises being made by Bellatrix, it was all too much to bear. Astoria was not weeping for Bellatrix for she deserved this painful ordeal ten times over for all she had done, she was weeping for what this meant for the Empire, her own fate and those of her poor, poor children. Despite all the measures put in place by the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters someone from the Resistance had gotten in yet again and had poisoned his most valued servant. She could almost feel the world crashing down around her. This would mean war, this would mean bloodshed. Half blinded by tears Astoria knocked over a tea table so that a flagon of red wine went smashing onto the floor. She was almost at the door when she felt a strong hand yank her backwards by the arm and she gave a cry of pain that no one could hear over the din. Astoria whirled around to be faced with Vadim, his pale
face twisted with fury.

“You are going nowhere without my cousin’s leave!” He shouted at her, shaking her roughly when she tried to pull away. “How dare you!? Just you wait until—”

But Vadim was cut off by yet another shuddering, strangling cry which was so blood chilling that he released her at once and they both whipped around in spite of themselves. Astoria turned just in time to see Bellatrix’s hand fall from her throat, her bloody eyeballs promptly rolled into the back of her skull before she fell to the floor with a sickening thud. There was now total silence as everyone stared in wordless shock at the discoloured, bloodied, mangled corpse of Bellatrix Lestrange that lay still and silent before them, her mouth agape from her final dying breath. The silence stretched on and on and when Astoria summoned up the courage to chance a brief glance at Antonin, she saw rank fear spread across his pale twisted face, his blue eyes wide and staring at his former comrade. They were all snapped out of their horrified trance when there was a scream of terror from across the room. Everyone’s heads turned as one to stare first at Linnea and then to where she was pointing with a shaking finger which made Astoria’s insides turn to ice and her heart plummeted as she too heard herself wail in fear and dismay. For there, standing in the doorway, wand raised, his chest rising and falling rapidly was the Dark Lord himself, a look of murderous rage on his serpentine face.

Chapter End Notes

I'm SO glad I finally got to kill a major Death Eater and I loved the fact it was Bellatrix. I wanted her to die differently that she does in JKR's universe (i.e in battle) as I thought she deserved to die slowly and painfully for everything she's done both in this universe and the canon one!
For the avoidance of doubt I want to confirm that the 'red headed Muggle slave boy' that Astoria keeps mentioning is in fact a member of the Resistance in disguise and this person poisoned Bellatrix's wine.
I chose this chapter as the one where things will be really turned upside down for the Death Eaters rather than the previous one as I think Bellatrix's poisoning is far more shocking to them as they all thought they were safe. Things will start to really unravel from here on out.
I plan to build on the Astoria/James relationship especially as Draco is not in her life (at the moment). I have an idea of what I want to do with it but I'm mainly just playing around with it at the moment. Feel free to add suggestions.
XLI. - A Death Eater is Forever

Chapter Summary

Apologies for the massive delay in posting. This chapter has been finished for weeks but I have been dealing with bad morning sickness and it was impossible for me to cut and edit the chapter properly and there was no way I was going to post without doing that first.

Thanks for the patience,

S x

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I can do this until the dawn Rowle, you will give me an answer even if it KILLS you! If you think you have felt pain thus far just you wait until Lord Voldemort is through with you! CRUCIO!” The high cold screech ripped through the tense air for the umpteenth time that evening and a frisson of fear rippled around the hall in response. The Dark Lord paced and whirled around in a wild rage, his deathly white face contorted in fury, his scarlet eyes blazing like scorching coals and the horrid veins that mapped his hairless head standing out so vividly that they resembled wriggling red worms after a rainfall.

Thorfinn’s screams echoed horribly around the Grand Hall of the Rowles for the umpteenth time as he thrashed and gargled upon the floor while white foam poured from the side of his mouth, his blue eyes lost from view as they rolled into the back of his skull. Many of the dishevelled and bloodied party guests who had been brusquely herded into the Hall to face his Lordships judgement turned their faces away. Ladies sobbed into scraps of silk and wizards averted their eyes warily, but others seemed to be transfixed with horror at the sight for it had been years since anyone had seen such a top ranking Death Eater punished so publicly. Alecto Carrow and a cousin of Snape’s named Dorian Prince had accompanied the Dark Lord when he had burst in on them along with a savage coterie of fifteen battle scarred Empire guards. The formidable pair were stood just behind their Master looking upon the scene with cold indifference as Thorfinn continued to yell. The other guards were strategically placed about the hall with their wands raised as they kept the guests in place; a stark warning to anyone who dared to think of interfering. The Dark Lord abruptly released the spell with a careless flick of his wand and at once Thorfinn ceased in his convulsing and merely twitched upon the marble floor taking in great shuddering breaths, his huge shoulders heaving.

“My Lord,” Thorfinn breathed hoarsely into the silence, his voice sounding very weak. “My – my Lord I s – swear to you I know not how this – this tragedy befell us. I c – cannot conceive how – how this could have happened under my roof… please, please believe me my Lord I –” But the Dark Lord gave a snarl before slashing the air with his wand and Thorfinn’s words turned into howls of agony once again as he was hit with another bout of the Cruciatuss curse.
“LIAR! Do not test Lord Voldemort you fool, he knows! He always knows!” The Dark Lord screamed, his lipless mouth pulling back from his greying teeth so that he looked positively feral as he twisted his wand through the air increasing the ferocity of the curse while Thorfinn screamed at the top of his lungs, his back arching grotesquely. Linnea lay ten feet away from her husband seemingly forgotten in a corner, her eyes closed and her face as white as marble while a patch of congealing blood pooled from the back of her head, sullying her silvery hair with scarlet streaks. She had been the first to taste his Lordship’s vicious wrath and her torture had been brutal… now it was impossible to tell whether she was alive or dead. “You will tell me all that you saw Thorfinn or I swear I will make you regret the day you were born! CRUCIO!”

Terrified, Astoria closed her eyes turned her face away and hugged her knees closer to her body as she huddled against the wall, trying not to think about what may have befallen Linnea and desperate to block out Thorfinn’s terrible screams. She sat there hunched and trembling, resisting the urge not to begin rocking backward and forward like a madwoman even though she looked a half wild mess already. Her face was bruised and tear stained, her golden hair had come loose from its elaborate updo and was matted with blood which dripped from her left temple and oozed down her neck before blossoming over her blue gown to form a hideous red flower. When his Lordship ambushed them in the Grand Theatre his rage had been so potent that the magic exploded out of him in a great tide of fury, knocking all in the vicinity to the ground. Indeed, Astoria had been blasted into a sideboard and hit her head as she fell which is how she came to sport the throbbing wound. Even though that was hours past she still felt dizzy and confused, her head felt three times as heavy as it ought to and even blinking caused tears of pain to prickle in the corners of her eyes. She supposed she ought to feel lucky that she had escaped with something as minor as a head cut – many others had not been so fortunate. When the Dark Lord had beheld the twisted and blackened corpse of Bellatrix Lestrange, he had become even more crazed with rabid anger firing out killing curses with reckless abandon so that by the time he had finished no less than a dozen Purebloods lay dead in the theatre, poor young Clemence Black among them. Under the sounds of Thorfinn’s continued torture Astoria heard a low soft hissing to her right which caused her eyes to jerk open at once, she gave a small whimper of fright and shrank backwards as Nagini came slithering serenely past her feet, her slit orange eyes watchful. She glanced up anxiously to see if Antonin had noticed her small outburst, but he had not. Her husband seemed a million leagues away as he continued to stand there rigidly his face a mask of bloodless stone, his cold blue eyes unblinking as he looked without really seeing at the black robed figure of the Dark Lord towering over Thorfinn.

“Who else saw what happened!?” Demanded the Dark Lord shrilly down at a grey faced Thorfinn, “Whom I ask you!? I want every one of their names! Tell the truth!”

Thorfinn wheezed words Astoria could not hear which did not amuse the Dark Lord who gave an inarticulate shriek of fury and raised his wand threateningly before the broad squat figure of Alecto Carrow stepped out from behind him and lumbered across the hall toward Thorfinn, her hood thrown back and her expression grim. When she reached him, Alecto took a knee beside Thorfinn and listened intently as he continued to gasp and gibber before she pushed herself heavily to her feet and made her way back to her Master. Everyone watched tensely as the Dark Lord stood there silently while Alecto murmured into his ear, his cold blue eyes unblinking as he looked without really seeing at the black robed figure of the Dark Lord towering over Thorfinn.
upwards abruptly to stare around the hall before they locked firmly upon Astoria who felt her breath catch in her throat, too frightened to even scream. The eyes of everyone in the Hall swivelled around to stare at her but they were a sea of blurry meaningless faces; all she could see were the red eyes glaring out of the hollow face as the Dark Lord stared at her.

Then without breaking his gaze, the Dark Lord screamed into the silence, “Bring me the Justiciar’s wife! Now!”

At once Alecto and her brutal companion Dorian Prince came marching toward Astoria side by side their expressions as hard as stone and she shrank back into the wall, vainly trying to avoid the inevitable as they drew closer and closer. She could not help but give a terrified squeal as they roughly seized her by each of her arms and dragged her across the marble towards the Dark Lord. Finally, when they were before their Master, they hurled Astoria to the ground where she landed with a stinging smack… right at his Lordship’s feet. She gave a cry of pain before huddling into herself wanting nothing more than to disappear as she continued to shake and tremble upon the marble fruitlessly trying to stifle her sobs of terror. Her fall had caused her long hair to cover her face so she could see nothing, but she felt the eyes of the room on her all the same. The gaze she felt most keenly though was that pitiless red glare high above her that seemed to scorch through the back of her head and she lay there wondering if these were going to be her last woeful moments on this Earth.

_Merlin protect my children… _she began to silently pray but then –

“Look at me Madam Dolohov.” Hissed the cold reptilian voice from high above that turned Astoria’s blood to ice. “Look at me and cease in your pathetic snivelling.” It took every ounce of courage she possessed to slowly lift her blotchy tear stained face up toward the deathly white serpentine one, but she had no choice; one false move and she would be dead before she could blink. “What a _wretched _little fool you are,” He said disdainfully, “I used to have respect for your wits and bravery, but it seems that _Motherhood _has turned you soft over the years. What do you have to say for yourself woman!”?

“M – my Lord?” She breathed in a tiny whisper between short shallow breaths, barely being able to speak so gripped was she by fear as the red eyes continued to bore into her.

“How did this happen!?” The Dark Lord screeched viciously, raising his wand so that green fire spurted from the end as his hand trembled in fury. “Carrow tells me you did not run off like most of those other foolish hens so what did you see pray tell!?”

“The boy! The boy did it!” Astoria said at once, her voice high pitched and quavering with fright. “There was this – this red headed slave boy my Lord he –”
“A SLAVE!?” He screamed at her, his red eyes bulging alarmingly from their hollow sockets. “A slave killed my Bella!? You LIE! CRUCIO!”

Astoria got but a glimpse of the Dark Lord bringing his wand down in another savage slash before her eyes began rolling like a crazed beast and horrific pain ripped through her entire body. White hot knives pierced her flesh, cruel axes hacked at her bones, savage claws tore at her innards and her throat was aflame as she screamed and writhed upon the floor, her limbs flailing. Hours or perhaps minutes later he released the spell and the world was a chaotic spinning whirl of colour when she opened her eyes as they darted around her sockets uncontrollably. There was a faint ringing in her ears and her head was throbbing worse than ever as though she had been struck with a Troll’s club, but Astoria wrenched herself back into the moment and forced her gaze upwards toward her tormentor as the high cold voice began to speak again.

“More my Lady?” The Dark Lord demanded and despite his insane fury his lipless mouth could not help but twitch with cruel amusement when he surveyed her quaking in a crumpled heap upon the floor. “Or will you tell your Lord and Master the truth this time?” He gave a casual flick of his wand and a burst of orange light came hurtling toward her before colliding with her shoulder.

Astoria shrieked in pain feeling as though she had been stung by a snake bite and promptly began to sob again, not knowing what to say. The Dark Lord did not want to hear talk of slaves but that was all she knew – or suspected. However, she did not dare lie so she tried again praying with all her might to whatever God or deity that may be out there that he would not kill her.

“I swear it! I swear it my Lord! It was the boy!” She wailed, her tears spattering on the marble as they continued to fall thick and fast, “He was serving her last my Lord, that is all I saw! Then when M – Madame Lestrange fell into difficulty, he was nowhere to be seen he – simply vanished… I swear it, Master I swear it!”

The Dark Lord made no reply but glared at her so ferociously that Astoria turned her face away from his gaze and shuddered, bracing herself for another dose of the Crucius curse. Instead she heard his long robes swishing over the floor accompanied by feverish footsteps and wild muttering. Only daring to dart terrified looks up at him Astoria saw that the Dark Lord was pacing back and forth, fingering his wand with his long white fingers while his foul serpentine thrall hissed somewhere out of sight behind him. He then stopped abruptly, and she felt another shiver of fear as the red eyes flashed toward her again.

“Right!” He snarled, his slitted nostrils flaring in fury as he raised his wand yet again. “Right! We shall see about this… oh yes, we shall see! Legimens!”
Before she could do anything other than gasp in horror Astoria’s head snapped backward onto the floor with an audible *smack* and she felt as though invisible hands were trying to wrench her skull from her shoulders. Powerless to stop the Dark Lord delving into her mind lightening suddenly erupted in her head and vivid pictures began to streak across her mind, as clear as though she could reach out and touch them…

One moment she was hoisting herself from the carriage and shivering at the sight of Dementors, the next she was confronted with Greyback and Bulstrode, Greyback’s maniacal grin stretching wide in the sinister orange light. Muggle slaves were chained together whimpering and shuffling and the blue eyes of a red headed slave boy stared steadily back into hers. Guests laughed, silk whirled, and goblets chinked before the sights and sounds of merriment turned into screams of horror with figures dashing everywhere. Bellatrix was coughing, writhing, dying while a spatter of blood red wine arced across the floor…

And then it suddenly stopped, and Astoria was gazing up through glazed eyes at the cavernous ceiling of the Rowles Great Hall, her chest rising and falling rapidly as she grappled with the teeming thoughts that were swirling around her head like a thunderstorm.

“You did well not to fight me Madam Dolohov or it would have gone very ill for you. It seems that you are not as great a fool as I first thought after all.” The Dark Lord’s voice called callously from somewhere above her, but she made no response. There was a short pause and Astoria could still feel his Lordship’s eyes on her, considering but then – “Bulstrode! Greyback!” He spat furiously and through her haze of pain and confusion she heard hurried footsteps clattering on the marble growing louder and louder.

Still breathing hard Astoria rolled laboriously onto her side her face once again obscured by her hair, though this time she was just about able to see the figures of the Dark Lord, Bulstrode and Greyback through the golden strands as she stirred feebly upon the floor, her limbs screaming in pain.

“My Lord.” Mumbled Greyback and Bulstrode in turn as they bowed clumsily before the tall thin figure.

“What would you have of us my Lord?” Bulstrode asked, not daring to look directly into those scarlet eyes.

“You will tell me all you know of those wretched slaves you brought here tonight!” The Dark Lord snapped causing both Bulstrode and Greyback to flinch. “Madam Dolohov’s recollections told me all I needed to know and now it is time for you two to explain yourselves.”
There was a moment of silence before Bulstrode the higher ranking of the two, spoke up again.
“They – the slaves I mean were taken from a captured ship that blew into our waters due to the hexes your Lordship placed upon the seas.” He said nervously, still not meeting the Dark Lord’s eye while the latter continued to stare at him unblinkingly. “If my Lord recalls it was not too long after the – the siege when those spells were put in place… I mean to say each prisoner was thoroughly checked as is protocol and at your – your express c – command… We will round them all up at once my Lord if it please you, every last one.” He added hastily, “Your Lordship can be assured that I will not rest until I throw these verminous cretins at his feet.”

“Very well Bulstrode.” The Dark Lord replied; slow, quiet and menacing as he gazed down at his wand. “I shall hold you to those words.” Bulstrode allowed a look of relief to pass across his blunt features which vanished almost at once when the Dark Lord’s hairless head jerked upwards to glare at him once again. “I trust I do not need to tell you what shall befall you should you fail!!?”

“N – no my Lord,” Bulstrode spluttered, stumbling backwards in his haste to get away from his Master's fury and tripping over his long cape so that he went crashing to the floor. “I will always be at – at your eternal service.”

“Get up!” His Lordship spat furiously jabbing his wand at Bulstrode so that a flash of silver light went slamming into his leg as he continued to scramble away. “Get up you cringing piece of scum!” Bulstrode stifled a grunt of pain and fought himself back to his feet clutching at his leg which was trembling as he attempted to stand up straight, his eyes still averted. Ignoring his struggles, the Dark Lord turned his cruel gaze upon Fenrir Greyback. “You, Werewolf!” He snapped, pointing a long white finger at him. “You will accompany Bulstrode and aid him in weeding out these filthy slaves seeing as you had a hand in bringing them here tonight and when you do, I want them alive do you understand me beast?”

“Yes Master.” Greyback said quietly his back still slightly bowed so that he looked hunched and awkward and like Bulstrode he did not dare look into the Dark Lord’s face.

“Good you will begin immediately, now get out of my sight the pair of you.” Greyback hastily bowed lower still and mumbled words of obedience but as he straightened the Dark Lord gave a lazy flick of his wand and a deep slash opened upon the Werewolf’s cheek fountaining blood. “Take that as a warning!” He snarled malevolently as Greyback yowled and clutched at his maimed face while Bulstrode who had gone white seized the Werewolf’s forearm and began to drag him toward the back of the Hall. “You had best RUN!” His Lordship screamed at the top of his voice so shrilly that a glass urn shattered before he fired out a myriad of vicious hexes after Bulstrode and Greyback as they fled in terror. “RUN! And do not return here until you have brought me every last one!” The spells ripped through walls and blasted apart statues causing many in the Hall to yell in fright and pain jostling one another out of the way to escape harm as stone, marble and plaster exploded everywhere in great clouds amid the flying jets of light.
Soon there was no trace of the Half Blood and the Werewolf other than a trail of blood from Greyback’s wound and the Dark Lord stood there, his thin hollow chest rising and falling uncontrollably as the walls smoked and his terrified subjects whimpered into their hands. Astoria who had not dared to move the entire time other than to cover her head from the flying debris once again became a stiff as a board and felt an icy stab of terror as she heard the malevolent *swish* of his Lordship’s robes as he turned.

Through her curtain of hair, she could see the serpentine face glaring down at her contemptuously and her insides twisted in fear as she wondered what horror her cruel Master had in store for her next. Astoria inwardly readied herself for another bellowed curse another shock of scalding pain, but the Dark Lord merely gave a dismissive wave of one of his large white hands and called to no one in particular, “Someone give the Justiciar’s wife back to him.”

Boots clicked smartly on the ground from somewhere behind her as Astoria lay weak as a lamb upon the floor her blood searing and her limbs pulsing painfully. The sounds grew louder and louder until they stopped just short of her head and despite her agonising pain, she felt a swoop of relief when she saw the face that loomed above her now. His dirty blonde waves were unkempt, his face was as pale as milk which was made even more apparent by the gaping black bruise that covered his left eye, but Astoria was more grateful than she could say when James Clearwater’s arms slid gently underneath her form and lifted her into the air.

Feigning unconsciousness she allowed herself to be carried across the Hall still feeling the wary and watchful eyes upon her before she was gently laid against a wall where she slumped slightly, her head lolling to the side. As James released her, she could have sworn that he had given her right arm the smallest of squeezes before he straightened and muttered, “Your Lady, Justiciar.” Antonin however merely grunted in reply as though what the Half Blood said was barely worth his notice.

It was not until Astoria heard James’ retreating footsteps that she dared to open her eyes by just a fraction and saw that the Dark Lord was pacing once again, his spidery white hands clasped behind his back and encircled about his deadly wand as the angry red veins upon his head pulsated sickeningly. Then suddenly he stopped, his catlike eyes staring about the room scrutinizing each tense face with a mixture of suspicion and hatred.

“This is something that I should have foreseen but… I did not, I *did not.*” The hairless head flicked upward toward the cavernous ceiling and his Lordship clenched a white fist which shook slightly before he hissed, “Those filthy Mudbloods will think that this is a victory, but they are very wrong indeed. To be sure Bella was a talented and useful servant and her wand shall be missed, but these vile cretins did not have the gall to try and strike down Lord Voldemort now did they? *Why?* Because they know deep down in those treacherous Mudblood hearts that I am undefeated, indestructible, *all powerful,* the greatest sorcerer in the world!” His voice rose uncontrollably then and many of his Death Eaters nodded and muttered their approval as he began to pace yet again, his terrible stare lingering on some longer than others as he pressed on. “Death Eaters let us make them see their grave error in provoking Lord Voldemort’s wrath, in daring to rob him of
The babble from the surrounding Death Eaters grew louder still and Silas boldly pushed his way through a knot of cowering guests to stand before his Master. “We should give their women to giants and make the rest watch as they ravage them!” He spat, his disfigured face made even more unsightly by the bloody gash that marred his forehead as he glared about the room with his mismatched eyes as though daring someone to challenge him.

“I would tie them to the flagpole of my Castle and have them burned alive by dragons!” Travers declared loudly as he also stepped forward, his withered face twisted with anger as he gesticulated forcefully at his chest.

“Hand them over to Count Dracula and make their dying last a moon’s turn!” Snarled Yaxley through gritted teeth as he shook a large fist. “Just like the old days!”

More shouts followed this pronouncement and Astoria could not help but flinch when Antonin stepped forward and said venomously, “Give them to me and they will be begging for the sweet gift of death!”

A terrible grin twisted the lipless mouth as more Death Eaters stepped forward to swear bloody revenge and the scarlet eyes seemed to gleam with barbarous vengeance. Astoria could just imagine the vicious and horrific punishments his Lordship was dreaming up for his enemies at that very moment. He had gotten his bloodthirsty followers good and riled and was unable to hide the malicious enjoyment warping his serpentine features and she felt a building sense of dread wondering what the Dark Lord’s retaliation would be after this latest outrage against his precious Empire.

“Very well then!” His Lordship screeched through the din, raising his wand high in the air as a jet of green light burst from the tip giving birth to a glittering Dark Mark that swirled inside the domed ceiling while his servants roared their approval and set their own jets of light flying into the air. “Come Death Eaters, we shall weed out every sneaking spying Mudblood crawling about our Empire and send them back to their wretched so called ‘leader’ in pieces! With me now! To the Fortress!” And with that he spun on his heel and disappeared with a noise like a thunderclap followed by a surge of black smoke.

“To the Fortress!” Bellowed hundreds of Death Eater voices over the sounds of wailing guests and their Disapparating comrades before they too vanished into thin air.

From somewhere above her Astoria heard Antonin snap something brusque to someone, but the surrounding noise was too great for her to hear what and she knew by the faint pop that came from her right that he too had Disapparated. Silence soon fell over the Hall but for the stifled sobs of the
witches who had been left behind, just as they had been left behind when the attack of the city broke. Astoria rather thought that this was like being trapped in some terrible nightmare that kept repeating itself with each predicament becoming worse and worse each time it came around to bite them all. Almost at once several Rowle witches went rushing over to the lifeless Linnea with Clarissa falling to her knees beside her good – aunt and bursting into tears while Euphemia drew her wand and barked out for a Healer. Other witches embraced each other, burying their faces into each other’s necks and muffling their grief while others screeched and wailed at the top of their lungs over the low rumble of worried muttering that had broken out.

Astoria merely watched it all unfold in a detached sort of way as she continued to sit there slumped against the wall, her breathing shallow and her body still reeling from the *Cruciatus* curse and the invading *Legilimency* that she had been made to endure that evening. Her eyes searched dully about the place for Elizabeth and she soon found her. Like Astoria Elizabeth was huddled upon the floor but her head was in her hands and her whole body shook from crying while her husband’s Mistress Veliane stood a short distance away looking very worried. Now she was satisfied Elizabeth was alive though perhaps not well, Astoria closed her eyes and allowed her mind to spiral into a dark oblivion, the thoughts of what if’s and who if’s leaving her mind completely to make way for complete nothingness. It was oddly blissful just to sit here and not have to worry or think; she did not even have the strength to cry anymore yet witches all around her were practically tearing themselves to shreds.

Then through the dark smog that was her mind Astoria heard a faint sound: *click, click, click.*

*What was that?* She thought with annoyance, wishing she could just be left in peace.

*Click, click, click.* It was far louder now, and she felt another stab of irritation but then – *click, click, CLICK.*

Astoria wrenched her eyes open in anger and jerked her gaze upwards before her breath caught in her throat. For the second time that evening the tall figure of James Clearwater was standing over her and once again she felt her intense fear abate somewhat when she beheld him there even though he looked graver than she had ever seen him.

“What?” She mumbled stupidly, wearily brushing her hair out of her face and peering up at him. Her brain still felt as though it had been banged about her skull and she now seemed to be seeing two of James, his concerned face swimming high above her and his mouth moving though she could not make out the words. “What?” She asked again, still feeling confused.

Astoria saw his dark figure crouch down low and his face was finally brought into sharper relief as it came to the same height as hers, black eye and all. “The Justiciar has commanded me to escort you back to the Palace my Lady.” James said slowly and clearly, finally making sense.
“Yes,” She replied absently, “Yes I must go – palace… my – my children they…” But her voice tailed away, and the words she intended to utter were lost on her.

Though Astoria’s mind felt slow and clumsy, the urgency to get back to her babies still endured and with an enormous effort she attempted to push herself off the floor, but her arms shook as fiery pain gripped her, and she was unable to move even by an inch. The small act of trying to stand had sapped her of what little energy she had left causing her heart to race and her breath to come out rapidly as she twisted feebly upon the floor, frustrated that her body was not responding to what her mind was telling it – albeit vaguely, what to do.

Then through her struggles she heard James’ soft voice again. “Here, take my arm my Lady it’s alright.” He said kneeling down right beside her and offering his arm, his long black cloak pooling on the floor.

Astoria grasped the proffered arm and tried to push herself to her feet as James in turn began to rise trying to lift her up with him but almost at once she collapsed upon the floor, her limbs trembling uncontrollably and her head spinning so badly that the world seemed to be turned upside down. She tried to hold back, but she found she could not as she lay in a tangled mess upon the floor and she promptly burst into tears; a mixture of pain, humiliation and fear. There was a slight dip in the low babble of pointless noise that surrounded her, but Astoria made no effort to stem her weeping for she was past caring who saw or heard her. Her body shuddered with the effort of her sobbing as she tried in vain once again to get herself up before sliding pathetically to the ground, her knees buckling uselessly beneath her.

“It’s alright my Lady, you needn’t walk.” Said James yet again but he sounded as though he were very far away. “I shall take you.”

Still in a haze of despair Astoria quickly stifled a yelp of surprise when she felt the strong yet reassuring arms lifting her easily from the ground with nary a stumble. Once again, she drifted through the air as James took long sure strides and briefly allowed herself to be lost in the moment as she was carried like a babe in arms. She knew that they had left the hall when the air grew cool and the only sounds that could be heard were the incessant click - click of James’ boots upon the marble; the cries of fear and despair ebbing away like a distant memory. James’ strides suddenly became steep and long and Astoria’s eyes jerked open in surprise and she looked blearily about her trying to bring the world back into focus. The sudden change in movement had been caused by James negotiating down the steps from the palace toward the Justiciar’s carriage which looked to be waiting in the same place as it had been earlier when it had dropped her off. Unlike the beginning of the evening though there was not a Dementor in sight and over the nervous pawing and snorting of the unicorns Astoria could hear dragons roaring somewhere in the distance, doubtless soaring toward the Dark Lord’s Fortress awaiting instructions from their Master.
Peering about the place once more to make sure they were completely alone she then felt brave enough to glance up at James. “Thank you.” She croaked weakly before gently placing a hand over his chest where she felt his heart racing like an uncontrollable drum.

_He is not traditionally handsome_, Astoria thought vaguely as her eyes took in the angular jaw, the blue eyes, the plain yet strong features of his face – _but there is something about him that draws the eye._

James shifted slightly at her touch but made no reply to her words as he continued to glide down the steps toward the carriage, his gaze fixed determinedly ahead and Astoria worried that her small act of thanks had made him angry. However just as they drew up to the doors there was a sudden chilly gust of wind which made her shiver violently and almost at once James held her more closely in his arms as though to shield her from the cold and she in turn huddled closer into his embrace.

At this their eyes met briefly for a moment before James hastily averted his gaze and muttered, “Alohomora.”

The carriage door swung open at once and James hoisted himself up onto the footplate while still carrying her, panting slightly from exertion and Astoria felt a bizarre sort of thrill as he bent low under the doorframe so that his body came within a whisker of touching her own. Still bent double James gently eased her onto the soft velvet seat but despite his tenderness Astoria could not help but seize up from the pain that was still burning through every ounce of her flesh and she promptly gave a shriek, her eyes filling with tears when her battered body made contact with the surface.

“I’m sorry my Lady, sorry!” James whispered frantically looking aghast as she began to shake alarmingly again. He hastily grabbed a couple of plush cushions and placed them all about her to make her more comfortable and Astoria could not help but feel a little touched.

Emboldened by this act as James continued to fuss over her, she gently reached up to touch the right side of his face where the black eye was. “Who did this to you?” She whispered weakly, her fingers tracing lightly from his cheek down over that strong jaw.

James was lightening quick in his reaction. At once he seized her hard by the wrist, his face turning paler than ever and his eyes flashing. “Don’t!” He snarled, “I have a wife and you have a husband, stop this foolish game at once!” His voice was angry, fearful, shocked as he glared at her and Astoria shrank away from him with a whimper, frightened. At this he released her at once still looking wary – but also guilty. “I’m sorry.” He said in a far softer tone before anxiously glancing out the carriage window again and muttering, “You have endured a great deal this night and you are – you are very… confused my Lady, you are not thinking properly…” His voice tailed away then and he seemed unable to look at her and Astoria in turn lowered her eyes, fighting back the tears; she was so sure there had been _something_ between them. There was a long awkward pause before James
cleared his throat uncomfortably and said in a slightly choked tone, “I shall take you home now my Lady, it is not safe here.”

The journey back to the palace seemed far quicker than the outward bound one perhaps because Astoria was more consumed than ever with fear, worry and the endless questions that continued to swarm about her head. Through the muddle of her fretful thoughts she also felt a twinge of guilt; James had been right he did have a wife – children too, yet Astoria had not spared them a single thought when she had made to touch him, nor earlier in the evening when her mind had wandered to forbidden places concerning the Half Blood. Though to be sure on the few occasions Astoria had seen James and his wife interact with each other she had surmised that there was no great warmth between them. After all his Pure Blood wife had been given to him as a ‘gift’ as per the Dark Lord’s command for James’ ‘services to the Empire’ which was hardly the best footing to start a courtship on.

Veronica Prince, Astoria mused momentarily distracted from her terror as she tried to recall what she knew of the other witch while the unicorns clattered and snorted through the derelict city. The Princes’ have always been proud, and Veronica would have considered it an insult to be married to a Half Blood no matter what the circumstance...it could be that she cannot stand him. Yet James seems devoted enough if that outburst was anything to go by... what does this all mean?

Astoria felt confused and upset as she tried to grapple with her mismatched feelings, but her inner turmoil was brought to an abrupt end when the carriage jolted clumsily to a halt and a quick glance out the window told her she was back in the courtyard of the Justiciar’s Palace. The sudden stop seemed to bring her fear rushing back like a slap in the face and she began to tremble like a doe again. She anxiously leaned forward, peering out into the night that was as black as pitch but for the small balls of light emitting from more or less twenty wand tips and a few patches of orange light gleaming dimly from the palace windows. There was also a low rumble of foreign tongues that were muffled outside the carriage doors which only served to heighten Astoria’s disquiet. Heart hammering and feeling she may not get another chance she hastily drew out her wand with shaking fingers. A small flick followed by a spark of purple light and a smoking piece of parchment was suddenly fluttering through the air which she hastily snatched from its dreamy spiral as a dark shadow suddenly loomed larger and larger outside the carriage door before there was a loud snap of the lock being released.

“My Lady.” Came James’ solemn voice as the door swung open and ice cold air filled the carriage interior. “Come, we must get you inside.”

Astoria made no reply but rose from her seat and groped in the darkness for James’ outstretched hand. As her fingers brushed the leather of his glove, she hastily shoved the parchment that was still warm into his palm. James flinched but she ignored his sudden movement and hoisted herself from the carriage giving him no option but to accept her token. At once a hoard of cloaked and hooded figures converged upon them, their faces obscured by their dazzling wand tips which caused Astoria to shield her eyes as they shouted in languages she could not understand.
“Get back!” She heard James snap as she stumbled through the dizzying panoply of bright balls of light in the gaping black abyss. “Get back now!”

“Who goes there!?” Came an aggressive German voice from the shadows as a lit wand tip was brandished in their faces. “We have orders to lock down the Palace, declare yourself at once!”

“I am the Justiciar’s Head Guard man!” James barked as they continued to push their way through the throng, not knowing right from left. “Now get back and let the Lady Justiciar pass if you know what’s good for you!”

There was some resentful grumbling, but the unfamiliar wizards soon parted though keeping their wands raised. As they drew closer to the towering palace Astoria saw in the weak light from the windows that each wizard in question was masked so it was impossible to see who they were, but she felt sure that she did not know any of them judging by both their unfamiliar speech and the way they held themselves. Still shivering slightly she continued to make her way toward the palace on James’ arm and saw with a small glance that his fist still seemed to be clenched tightly around the parchment she had given him but another glance up at his face told her that he was furious; though whether it was with her or these brusque guards she could not tell.

Finally, they came to the gilded French doors that led into the ante hall beyond. “Inside.” James said curtly, motioning with his arm before turning sharply back toward the hoard of masked and hooded wizards outside. “I shall return forthwith. No one is to leave their post until I return with further commands.”

“Who – who are they?” Astoria ventured tentatively as the doors swung shut behind them, beams groaning and hinges whining.

“Foreign recruits. They arrived yesterday to shore up the numbers.” James said tersely, his expression still very angry as he strode ahead toward the gloomy passageway back into the main palace.

Due to James’ frosty response Astoria did not try and offer up any further conversation and they made their way through the empty palace in silence that was so absolute it was almost deafening. At last they came to the gilded doors of the Justiciar’s family apartments and still avoiding James’ eye Astoria took a hasty step forward wanting nothing more than to run away and hide. She was just about to take another when she felt a hand on her shoulder causing her to jump like a frightened cat.
"My apologies my Lady." James said gravely, "But I have been given one last command in respect of your safety this night." His tone made her pulse quicken and she stared at him quizically, dreading his next words. "Please know that I take no pleasure in this my Lady, but I require your – your wand if you please."

*My wand!?* No! Astoria wanted to scream, her eyes filling with furious tears; this had nothing to do with her ‘safety’ and she could smell Antonin’s vile touch all over this – without her wand she would be well and truly defenceless to whatever or whomever was still out there.

All she could utter though were half formed sentences as she wrestled with the abhorrent notion. “My – my wand? B – but B – Bellatrix, the Resistance – why? *Why!*?” She spluttered, roughly wiping away her tears and looking at James pleadingly.

All of James’ anger from a few moments ago seemed to have melted away and he was now looking desperately sad and ashamed. “Please my Lady” He said gently, “I am just the messenger not the enforcer, please just give it to me and you can go and get some rest. The palace will be sealed shortly, and I will be patrolling round your apartments throughout the night, so you need not fear.”

*I have every cause to fear* Astoria thought despairingly.

But rather than reply she slowly drew out her wand half blinded by tears, devastated that she was being stripped of the only thing that gave her the one grain of power she possessed in this cruel, cruel world. Without another word she thrust her precious Aspen wand into James’ outstretched hand before whirling around and bolting for the double doors which burst open at her approach. Astoria could have sworn that James had called out to her, but she did not hear him, nor did she wish to as she fled back into her gilded prison, sobbing her heart out.

The white frilly surroundings of the Nursery were bathed in an eerie blue light as the moon attempted to shine through the lace curtains that shrouded the windows. Astoria shifted uncomfortably in her seat as quietly as she could and rearranged her long flowing bed robe with a whisper of silk and continued to watch them intently, oblivious in their sleep. This ritual was one she had performed the night before; with all that had happened Astoria could not rest until she had satisfied herself that her children were safe and contented – in that moment anyway. Since she had been returned to her apartments, Astoria and her children had been locked within the apartments' walls with only an exhausted Muggle slave and unfamiliar Half Blood guards to attend them. The guards, rather than be a reassuring presence had filled her with fright. Every few hours or so a wizard would come stomping into the apartments to magically ‘sweep’ each room for danger and their brusque and heavy handed manner had terrified her poor little ones who were already confused and afraid by the further disturbances to their little lives. Thus, Astoria had to do what any Mother would when she feels her children are threatened – and watch over them. A shiver suddenly chased its way down her spine as she continued to gaze as them and she felt ill at ease as an unpleasant thought intruded upon her mind. Her babies were beautiful of course but seeing them lying there so still and silent and
appearing to look blue was almost more than she could bear, and she wondered with a sickening twist in her stomach if this was some terrible foreshadowing. Astoria gave a little start as there was movement toward her left, her gaze sharp and alert as her head whipped around but it was only Nikolai rolling over in bed, a chubby thumb in his mouth and an arm wrapped around a toy dragon that had once been Leo’s. She let out a deep breath trying to calm her shattered nerves and feeling relieved it had not been something more sinister.

*He needs to stop doing that,* she thought vaguely as she continued to gaze at her sleeping son who continued to suck on his thumb contentedly.

Tearing her gaze away from Nikolai Astoria glanced up at a gilded golden clock in the likeness of a laughing sun which was ticking quietly atop the marble fireplace. When she saw the time, her heart seemed to flip over in her chest before it started to thud uncomfortably so that it felt as though it were in her mouth. Slowly and stiffly she rose from the Nurse’s rocking chair and took in her children once more, not wanting to leave them yet knowing if she did not pursue her chance this night then she may never get another.

“Sweet dreams my darlings.” Astoria whispered; her throat constricted with emotion, though it did help to keep the rising bile brewing in her gut as she gently shut the Nursery door.

Her journey back to her bedchamber was swift and silent as she hurried through the deserted sumptuous rooms of the Justiciar’s apartments which were bathed in the same blue glow as the Nursery. Astoria was certain that no more guards would try to muscle their way in as a final ‘sweep’ had been done by a French Half Blood named Gavroche before she had put the children to bed. Even so that did not stop her from fearfully glancing over her shoulder as she swept through corridors and tip toed up small staircases until at last, she came to her bedchamber. The great curtained bed where so much misery had taken place loomed threateningly in front of her as she crept further into the room her bare feet moving soundlessly over the carpet while the jewelled eyes of frozen statues and ornaments looked down upon her as though they were following her every move. Shivering slightly Astoria averted her eyes and scurried toward the bed where there was a secret door embedded into the wall complete with a doorknob in the likeness of a snake. Tentatively she reached out with a ghostly pale hand grasping the twisted piece of metal as tightly as she could and to her relief it opened at once with a *click*; one small push and she was promptly plunged into even deeper darkness. Large and cavernous the dressing rooms that were connected to the bedchamber were spread over two floors to house all of her and Antonin’s garb and where she would usually be primped, powdered and trussed up for important events. No detail of the rooms could be seen just now as there were no windows to let in the moon; the only source of light was that of a flickering serpent candelabra that stood on a carved dressing table its candles almost spent. Timidly Astoria crept towards the dressing table and stared at her frightened looking reflection in the mirror in the tremulous glow of the small flames.

*I do not have to do this,* she thought, *I could simply turn around, walk back through the door, climb into bed and go to sleep.*
For a moment Astoria pondered the thought, but then she inwardly shook herself and instead reached out a quivering hand toward the candelabra before grasping it firmly, taking long deep breaths to calm herself. The gaudy thing was crafted from solid silver and its immense weight took her by surprise which caused her to stumble a little as she tried to lift it upward to light her way, wishing more than ever that she had her wand. Panting slightly Astoria instead wrapped both her slender hands around the candelabra and walked further into the depths of the room before she came to a winding staircase. With her bedrobe slithering on the carpeted floor in the silence she lightly crept up the steps, her heart beating from both trepidation and the weight of the candelabra which was already making her arms ache. She scuttled through passageways stacked high with fantastical feather hats which painted eerie spidery shadows up the walls in the flickering orange light. Mahogany panelled wardrobes towered above her making the darkness seem even more absolute while rows and rows of lavish heeled slippers winked at her as she swept past, their jewels illuminated ever so briefly. Finally, Astoria came to a small wooden door which was in the farthest flung Western corner in the labyrinth of rooms. The door creaked alarmingly as she hesitantly pushed it open and drew in a sharp intake of breath, but she knew in her heart she was far too far away for anyone to hear anything in this lonely wing of the palace. Heart still fluttering Astoria made her way inside and gratefully set down the candelabra on a rickety old table with a small sigh of relief before wrinkling her nose in distaste at the musty smell of the room.

To be sure, it must be years since anyone has set foot in here.

Indeed, the room’s long vacancy was plainly apparent even in the darkness for the place had an air of neglect and despondency about it. There was but one window which was small and circular set high into the wall so that only a sliver of moonlight was able to peek through. The once ornate chairs were now dusty and peeling, the sagging bed had been stripped of sheets and duvets alike to show a lumpy feather mattress covered in dark stains while the carved wardrobe that dominated the Western wall looked like such a tumbledown mess that it was a wonder it was still standing at all. Astoria shivered and hugged herself feeling ill at ease in this cold bleak place and she took several wary steps toward the soiled bed, gritting her teeth as the floorboards creaked loudly beneath her feet. Gingerly she perched on the edge of the mattress which sagged dismally even though she weighed hardly anything at all… and waited. She did not know how long she waited for but the sharp crescent moon hovering high in the sky above had long since drifted out of sight from the small window that was the only source of light and the dim flickering candelabra was soon spent, the tendrils of blue smoke snaking up into the air from pools of melted wax. Stiff and cold Astoria unfolded her arms and legs which she had crossed tightly to stop herself from shaking feeling more alone and dispirited than ever. Soft tears trickled down her cool cheeks and she angrily wiped them away feeling like a fool before pushing herself to her feet and taking a step toward the door when she suddenly froze. Another floorboard had creaked ever so slightly, yet it was not she who was the source for she had made no move to take another step. Astoria stared at the door heart hammering and she felt a great swoop of trepidation as another faint creak emanated from somewhere beyond and she began to tremble like a leaf as slowly, slowly the old wooden door began to open, its rusted hinges whining slightly in the silence. For a moment she was struck dumb the power of her speech seemingly vanished as a mixture of fear and relief crashed over her, unable to believe what she was seeing.

Then Astoria finally found her words. “I – I did not think you would come.” She said weakly as
James Clearwater stepped further into the room, his wand gripped in his hand as he lowered the cloak of his hood slowly, staring at her, his blue eyes gleaming strangely in the weak moonlight.

“I did not think I would come either.” James replied quietly before breaking their gaze and looking warily about the dilapidated room before reaching into the depths of his cloak and drawing out the small piece of parchment Astoria had given him last night. She could not see the words that were scrawled there but she was not about to forget the message that she had passed to him: *Meet me in the Westernmost wing in the dressing quarters after the clock strikes twelve*, the note read. James gave a flick of his wand and the note disappeared in a flash of blue light before he turned his eyes upon her again and took in a great shuddering breath. “Handing me that note was utter madness my Lady.”

“I was desperate.” Astoria said pleadingly, “I knew I would be told nothing, and I was right. I have been walled up in my apartments all day visited by strange guards who prowl about me and barely say a word. I need to know what is happening so I can – I can… prepare for the sake of my children if the worst is truly to come, surely as a Father yourself you can understand that?”

James did not answer right away but his mouth twitched slightly at the mention of the word ‘Father’ as he continued to look about the place still avoiding both her eye and her question and asked warily, “Why here? What is this place?”

“My husband used to bring his whores up here.” Astoria replied baldly and without preamble so that James looked up sharply at her. “Usually while I was in confinement downstairs about to have a baby, he would pass the time and subsequent birth by bringing some poor girl up here and tormenting her to his heart’s content.” She felt her mouth twist in distaste and glanced up at James whose look of revulsion had turned to one of fear, so she hastily added “You need not worry though he has not been up here in years, not since Aires was born. Now he prefers his chattel brought up to him in his private apartments where he can enjoy their suffering in comfort and with the benefit of all that spare space if he wishes Thorfinn, Yaxley or Travers to join in his twisted games.” Her voice was still low and quiet, but it was laced with the utmost bitterness and contempt as she spoke of the monster she was married to.

“I did not know.” James replied, his mouth working unpleasantly as though he had just been forced to choke down some foul potion. “Usually when the Justiciar requires a girl he commands us to accompany him to a brothel and –” He then stopped talking abruptly looking uncomfortable and embarrassed. “Forgive me my Lady you do not need to hear such things.”

Astoria gave a soft mirthless chuckle, “No need for pardons for this Lady. In truth each time my dear husband is off bedding someone else I thank Merlin for his mercy as it keeps him away from me if only for a night or two.” There was a long uncomfortable pause before she recalled the reason why she had asked James to come here in the first place and she ventured warily, “Where is Antonin in any case? What is happening? And Bellatrix it must have been poison, surely? What about Linnea?”
James’ pale face went even paler at her flurry of questions and he swallowed hard before answering. “The Justiciar is with the Dark Lord; all the top ranking Death Eaters are, awaiting their foreign counterparts who have been summoned from all corners of the Empire. They are walled up in his Lordship’s War Room and will probably be in there for days, but I know not of what they speak as I was not permitted entry. The only Half Blood in there is Snape I believe.” His gaze then became distinctly softer as did his voice when he said quietly, “Linnea Rowle lives my Lady, she is hurt but the Healers are confident that she will make a full recovery… in time.”

Astoria’s head spun as she tried to reconcile the opposing feelings that threatened to tear her in two; she was deeply relieved that Linnea had survived the Dark Lord’s savage attack but at the same time her stomach churned at the mention of the War Room, her worst fears building themselves higher and higher like precarious stones in a rickety tower but she did not interrupt and continued to look expectantly at James who continued to press on albeit hesitantly.

“There is – there is no doubt that Madam Lestrange was poisoned my Lady. Based on the information the Dark Lord extracted from you the main culprit is suspected to be this slave boy who almost certainly had some form of help to do - to do what he did. Thus far however we have found neither hide nor hair of anyone, nor can the Healers identify what kind poison was used.” He then took a deep steadying breath as though he were recalling some unpleasant nightmare. “Anyone that returns to his Lordship with an unfavourable answer is brutally tortured or even killed when the rage gets in him; there are a dozen new heads on spears outside the Fortress now. His Lordship will be lucky if he has an army left if he carries on at this pace and we will soon need every wand to spare.”

“Why?” Astoria demanded, terror tearing at her heart.

Again, James looked as though he would rather not answer but continued all the same. “Well… there has been no official declaration and his Lordship has not expressly said it himself but – but I fear it will be war, my Lady. Not a battle, not a siege but a war. The Dark Lord is hungry for revenge and everything I have been able to glean from the talk around me seems to point toward that eventuality.”

Astoria stared at him unable to speak her mouth agape in horror as her eyes promptly filled with tears and without even thinking she flung herself into his arms and began to cry weakly into his chest, burying her face into the coarse black wool of his Death Eater robes to muffle her sobs. She had been preparing herself for these terrible tidings but hearing them out loud made them very real indeed and thrice as frightening when she thought of all the horror and bloodshed war would entail – all over again. James immediately grabbed her shoulders as though to push her away, but he seemed to think better of it and did not. Instead he awkwardly but gently put his arms around her and held her there silently, but she did not require him to speak. This was the first time in a long time that Astoria had felt remotely safe in someone’s grasp and that made her weep even harder knowing that this moment was just a flicker and would not last.
For years I have done my duty protecting you from war and the Empire’s enemies and this time shall be no different.” James said in a low voice over her sobs and sniffs, “My biggest regret however has been and continues to be that I cannot protect you from – from… him. I am so sorry Astoria.”

Astoria gave a surprised hiccup and her sobbing suddenly stopped – James had never ever called her by her first name before, it had always been ‘My Lady’; so stiff and so formal. Through the mist of her tears she could see that he was looking down upon her with a mixture of fear, sadness and remorse and though she could have sworn she were imagining things Astoria rather thought she saw a gleam of desire there as well. She was not able to dwell on the point however for James continued to press on and despite his quiet tone she got the sense that he had been longing to say that for years.

“All those nights when I stood guard outside your bedchamber and I would hear you screaming, crying, begging while that – that monster tormented you yet being able to do nothing…” He swallowed hard, “Was almost more than I could bear, I cannot tell you how many times I wanted to blast down the door and curse him into a thousand pieces to stop him hurting you. Betraying everything I ever stood for to become a Death Eater was bad enough, but it does not even come close to the guilt I have felt all these years while watching you suffer at his hands over and over again. I was and still am, a coward Astoria, a coward who has always followed orders without question to save his own worthless skin.” Astoria felt her eyes brim with tears again feeling both sad and deeply touched that James had harboured all these feelings for her for so long, but she did not interrupt him. She instead placed a gentle hand on his chest to give what comfort a touch could, trying to tell him without words that he was not a coward. “I told myself the shame and remorse I felt would soon fade but it never has, indeed during this past year in particular since the arrival of my first daughter these feelings have only bloomed like a poisonous flower, tainting me from the inside out.” James clenched his teeth and anger flashed in his eyes. “I struggle with the notion more than ever now how anyone can treat a woman in this way.” He let out a long, weary sigh. “It weighs so heavily on me that can barely sleep at night sometimes, wondering if I am going to wake up the news that he has finally killed you.”

There was a long pause.

“I never knew how you – how you felt.” Astoria said thickly as she tried to blink James back into clarity, her eyelids feeling sore and leaden while tears continued to trickle beneath them. “I never thought that anyone cared about what was happening to me, whether I lived or died… The only thing that has kept me from slashing my wrists all these years are my wonderful children, without them I am lost.” She took a deep shuddering breath to avoid weeping again, blinking back the tears. “But I do know and have always known that you are not like the rest of them James, you are not bloodthirsty like Flint nor cold like Bulstrode and you did not seem to take the same barbaric pleasure in enforcing my husband’s twisted commands.”

“I have never once defied him, though have I?” James asked bitterly, closing his eyes momentarily in
disgust and Astoria immediately recognised those same feelings of self loathing that she had so often battled throughout her time as a Death Eater. Her heart went out to him and she felt an urge to hold him, to save him, to do anything to mend his hurt.

“You had no choice he would have killed you; he would have killed your entire family.” She said softly, rubbing his chest soothingly with her slender fingers.

“My obedience did not stop Penelope from being killed though did it?” James asked sharply, the anger still simmering in his blue eyes. “It did not stop the Death Eaters from brutalising her like an animal before they finally ended her life and called it mercy.” Astoria knew that James’ cousin Penelope had been among those who had chosen to flee after the battle of Hogwarts rather than submit to the Dark Lord’s tyrannical rule but she had been tracked down in less than a fortnight and after refusing to yield to the Death Eaters she had been viciously raped by Greyback’s wolf pack before having her throat slit. “But despite her barbaric death at least Penelope was a Clearwater who died with her honour and principles intact, not like me – one of the Empire’s most *loyal* Half Blood subjects.” He went on contemptuously, “She went to her grave with defiance and bravery, but I am likely to meet my end cold and alone on a muddy battlefield somewhere. If I am remembered at all the Dark Order will dismiss me as ‘just another Half Blood’ and the Resistance will vilify me as a coward and a traitor. A Death Eater is *forever* Astoria one can never go back, not even in death and there is *no* atonement.” Astoria felt as though a cold hand had wrapped itself around her heart when James said those words but she hastily pushed the feeling away; James’ eyes were blazing now his chest rising and falling, his face marred by years of pent up rage, pain and hatred as he glared up at the small window high above them.

“I am so sorry.” Astoria whispered, trying to comfort him. “But you cannot blame yourself, you trod a terrible path to protect yourself and your family. That is a different kind of bravery I think; to wear a mask each and every day and wear it convincingly, to live in fear of it slipping and to carry out acts you never thought you were capable of doing – all just to survive. As I said I know you are… *different* from the others.”

“How odd,” James said in a dreamy faraway voice, “I have always rather thought the same thing about you.”

There was another long silence.

Astoria tentatively looked up at James and when their eyes locked on one another’s she knew that he understood her and she him; nothing needed to be said and she felt an odd sort of relief flushing over her after all that had been exchanged between them. Tentatively she reached up and gave James’ shoulder a small squeeze, but he did not pull away from her and instead pulled her *closer* to him in his strong grasp still holding her gaze intently. The flicker of desire that had come and gone so quickly beforehand returned with a vengeance as his eyes raked her figure unashamedly, the silken robe that was clinging to every curve and swell leaving little doubt that she was naked underneath.
Astoria let out a breath of air feeling giddy, scared and excited all at once and it was then that she suddenly became aware that her breasts were pressed up against James’ chest and her pulse quickened. Another part of her knew that she ought to push him away right now and run but she did not. James held her still more firmly in his arms and reached up to gently brush her damp cheeks with his thumb as they continued to stare steadily into one another’s eyes. His breath came out deep and forceful as he continued to caress her cheek and Astoria felt her chest rising and falling rhythmically in turn as his hand moved softly down her neck before one of his fingers slid aside the silk of her robe to expose her right clavicle which was still bruised from the night before. Astoria turned her head away ashamed but she suddenly took in a sharp breath which promptly morphed into a pleasurable sigh as she felt petal soft kisses being planted up and down her marred flesh and without thinking she reached up and raked her fingers through James’ hair as blood rushed to her head, breasts and nether regions making her feel drunk. James soon ceased in his kisses and tenderly turned her face toward his once more, easing his hand through her buttery soft hair to draw her even closer to him so that their lips were almost touching. In the midst of this tumultuous sea of pleasure there was a voice screaming at Astoria to stop this insanity, this foolishness, this rank madness but she pushed it far, far away as James’ other hand slowly travelled down toward her waist and she felt a great twinge of longing between her thighs. Soon enough that nagging voice was long gone and all she could hear was her heart thudding in her ears as she continued to press her body against his. Then very slowly she reached upward with a trembling hand toward James’ face and drew him firmly downwards closing the small space between them and she felt a great rush of pleasure that she had not felt in years and years when their lips locked. His mouth opened at once for hers their tongues dancing delicately over one another’s at first – explorative and unsure – but soon they were twisting and coiling together with a passionate intensity and Astoria gave a small moan when James’ hand unexpectedly cupped her backside and gave it a firm grasp. He moaned back in response and ground himself into her as they continued to steal kisses and she felt a thrill of pleasure when she felt the hard swell of his manhood pressing up against her.

“We should stop.” James murmured between kisses, “We should stop doing this –”

But Astoria did not want to stop, and she could tell James did not truly mean what he said; his voice was low and weak, and he was unable to keep his hands off her. Instead of answering she only kissed him harder, one of her hands darting forwards to rub the bulge between his legs and James gave a great groan, his body becoming momentarily limp as she continued to touch him before she felt a sharp tugging on the tassels of her bedrobe.

Now I have my answer.

Astoria made no move to resist and after a few clumsy fumbles her silks finally sprang open to reveal her nakedness beneath. James promptly broke their embrace and his eyes devoured her half nude figure bathed in moonlight with an avid hunger but not in a way that made her feel dirty or used as was the norm; his gaze made her feel beautiful, wanted. The aching tension between her legs intensified as he placed his hands on her hips and ran them up and down her naked body panting heavily with arousal while she felt a pleasurable sort of squirm in her lower belly when his bare skin touched hers. Astoria flung her arms around him to draw him closer to her so that his forehead rested on her own and she rather thought that she could feel his heart banging in time with hers as she
seized the front of his robes and pulled him toward her as they began to awkwardly stumble backwards. Moments later Astoria’s legs made contact with the ancient bed frame and they both collapsed onto the wilted feather mattress. She did not want to let James go as she continued to kiss him as though her life depended on it while they groped at each other and she felt a great flutter of exhilaration as she felt him gently easing the silk off her shoulders and promptly shrugged out of the robe leaving her completely naked. James responded by snatching at his own robes and dragging them over his head and there was a great ripping sound as Astoria grabbed at his garb in her haste to get it off. There was a faint *flump* as he tossed the robes aside and they landed somewhere on the dusty floor behind him followed by breeches that were hastily yanked down until finally Astoria got to take in his form, all of it. James’ skin was milk white under the weak blue tint of the moon which made his arms look as though they were crafted from carved marble and brought the dark lines of rippling muscle on his hard flat stomach into sharp relief as his chest rose and fell while he tried in vain to catch his breath. Her eyes were then drawn to the bottom of the ‘V’ that was chiselled into his hips and she stared at his manhood which protruded from the juncture of sparse golden hair between his thighs, large and erect. The sight drove Astoria wilder than she could say, and she bit down on her lip so hard that it hurt, her breath coming out in short sharp bursts as James slowly pushed her legs apart to reveal her soaking wet folds and he in turn gave a growl of pleasure at the sight. Those strong hands that once had carried her so robustly were now light and tender as they travelled up her thighs before one gently eased itself down between them and Astoria let out a sigh as she felt a thumb nestle over her sweet centre, the pleasurable twinges and aches growing stronger as he began to work it harder and harder over the throbbing nub. She squirmed and bucked underneath him as he continued to watch her rapturously his engorged manhood quivering until she reached down and wrapped a slender hand around his girth, causing him to grunt as he grew larger still in her grasp. All thought was driven from her mind as they lay there pleasuring one another with nothing more than their hands; the only thing that she was certain of was that she never wanted him to stop touching her; the taste of him, the feel of him, everything about James Clearwater was intoxicating to her. Then James suddenly pulled away from her and she felt a blow of cold after the warmth of his flesh against hers and shivered a little but he softly caressed her thigh to reassure her as he took in her naked body in the weak moonlight, his eyes searching every part of her hungrily as though he would never have the chance to look upon her again.

The kisses he planted up her stomach toward her breasts were velvety soft making her tingle and shudder which only intensified when his wet hungry mouth found a hard nipple, his eager tongue rolling over the delicate mound making her writhe and moan. Astoria’s breath caught in her throat and she trembled as she felt his iron hard manhood brush up against her lower lips which were now drenched in moist sticky juice as he pinioned his naked body up against hers. They were both breathing hard and she continued to look into James’ eyes, her fingers tracing lightly over the back of his neck as he gazed back at her. She knew what he was trying to ask her without words and for an answer she delicately cupped his cheek and gave him a soft kiss on the lips that was full of meaning. At this James promptly buried his face into her neck panting heavily his hot breath rushing over her skin and sending ripples down her spine. He entwined his fingers through her own and she responded by grasping his hand tighter still as slowly, slowly he began to ease himself into her. Astoria could not help but gasp as he filled her in earnest as a warm surge flooded her entire body and her womanly folds gripped onto him tight, pulsating with a sweet ache that coiled up into her belly. She felt half surprised and half elated; she was not used to feeling this way when a man entered her, so calm warm and aroused as though she were floating dreamily over the clouds. Indeed, her gasping soon turned to moaning as James began to grind his hips into hers driving his shaft deep inside her, slowly at first but then faster and faster while he heaved and groaned with the effort still unable to take his eyes off her as he kissed and touched her face. She bit down hard on her lip in an attempt to stifle her cries but she could not, she had not felt pleasure like this in *years* and gave
herself to him completely, arching her back and opening her legs to allow him in further, her breasts beginning to bounce he increased the pace of his thrusting. Then James suddenly kissed her deeply silencing her, sinking his fingers into her thick golden tresses as he did so and Astoria drifted to a faraway place allowing herself to get lost in his flesh, digging her nails into the muscle of his broad shoulders as the searing lust for this man continued to rage through her.

They could have been tossing and turning upon the bed for an hour, a year or mere minutes, Astoria did not know – nor did she care, for James made her feel sensations that she had never felt before and she did could not tell up from down nor right from left. She sighed and let her head roll backwards as James cupped her breasts while she sat astride him, rolling her hips as she gently bounced away in his lap. The idea of being in control was new to her but with a little encouragement she had found it deeply pleasurable and satisfying. James gave a murmur of pleasure as she went a little faster and he drew her in for another kiss, slow and deep abandoning his hold on her breasts and instead filling his hands with her rounded cheeks, groping the peachy soft flesh. Astoria's eyes suddenly flew open and she gave a surprised little gasp as she was flipped onto her back with James atop her once again, his hands resting either side of her head and the muscular indentations on his body rising and falling with the force of his breathing. The move was bold, vigorous and had a domineering air to it but without the brutish aggression she was used to, and Astoria was unafraid as she looked up at him, waiting and wanting. James was moistening his bottom lip with his tongue and was looking back at her in a way that suggested that he wanted nothing more than to devour her right then and there and she ran a hand up his body to hasten him on. Taking her cue, he seized her thighs and pinned them even further apart so that it almost hurt, and she gave a great shuddering moan as he pushed himself up inside her as far as he could go, her folds now swallowing his manhood completely. Invigorated by her response James began to drive himself into her with a reckless abandon Astoria had not yet seen, growling and roaring like some wild untamed creature, probing depths within her she had not known existed as she gasped and shrieked, a delicious tension building in her delicate centre that was threatening to erupt. Feeling emboldened in her passion her slender hands reached upward to grasp those sculpted buttocks to urge him on inside her and he responded eagerly, the iron muscle clenching beneath the soft skin with each thrust. Then it came on her suddenly; the deep ache between her legs had finally reached its limit and it burst forth in a heady rush flooding outward to her limbs, her head – up into her chest and stomach as she arched her back and wailed. It was as though all the pain, hurt and fear that she had carried with her for so long was being washed away in a great warm tide and for a moment Astoria felt as though she were flying. When he saw what was happening James promptly reached down and rubbed her centre hard with his thumb again intensifying the euphoria that gripped her very being and eliciting more moans and gasps of pleasure as she tried to catch her breath. There was no time to do so however as James continued to pump at her mercilessly, drenched in sweat and Astoria reached up to press her forehead against his, wrapping her weak legs around him as she did so, wanting to draw him out to his own release. Indeed, only moments later James’ entire body began to stiffen before his teeth clenched and his muscles flexed, his climax seemingly as powerful as her own as he too shuddered and groaned his breathing ragged. Astoria continued to hold him tight as his manhood pulsed inside her powerfully, saturating her depths with his warm wet seed, the rocking of his hips becoming slower and slower. They were both sweating and shaking as they continued to stare at each other; blood was thundering in Astoria’s ears as the enormity of what they had done crashed down over her like a tidal wave, but she felt too contended to pay it any mind. She gently held James’ face in her hands and gave him a long deep kiss before allowing her head to loll backwards onto the ancient mattress. At this James lightly brushed her cheek and gave her a lazy smile before nuzzling at her neck and Astoria sighed as she closed her eyes. She gently grasped him by the shoulders her own mouth now curving in a gentle smile, feeling happy and complete for the first time in what felt like forever.
Astoria had lost count how many times that she and James had made love that night as she lay there next to him in that cold bleak room staring at the cracked ceiling, their arms and legs tangled about one another as their chests gently rose and fell. She huddled closer to James and placed her head on his damp chest to which he responded at once by throwing an arm around her shoulders and giving her a soft delicate kiss on the forehead. The gesture was both protective and affectionate which gave her a pleasant warm feeling in her chest and she too slid an arm around him, wanting to feel as much of him as she could before she had to let him go as she knew she must. A shard of bright yellow sunlight suddenly burned through her line of vision as it gleamed high above from the small window and in that split second Astoria was suddenly aware of the lightening sky which seemed to fully awaken her with a sickening jolt. Uncomfortable and unwelcome thoughts then came seeping to the fore of her mind and all that James had told her the previous night began to gnaw at her like some horrible sickness, filling her with dread.

“Will it really be war again James?” She whispered quietly, her words sounding strange in the silence.

James did not reply at once and turned his head to look at her, but Astoria was still gazing up at the ceiling and did not meet his eye. “Yes, I am afraid so.” He finally replied in a weary voice giving her shoulder a slight squeeze. “But I will do all in my power to keep you safe, I swear it.” Rather than being reassured by his words she instead gave a shiver of fear when she realised with another horrid jolt that she had a husband to face soon.

*Will he be able to sense my betrayal just by laying eyes on me? And if he does what will he do to me? What will he do to the children? Oh, Merlin how stupid I have been!* Astoria thought as she began to panic, her heart racing, her mouth drying and her palms moistening with sweat.

Not recognising her unease James gently disentangled himself from her and sat upright before bending almost double to grope about on the floor as the bed groaned in protest. A moment later her emerged with his robes that had been so carelessly thrown aside before and gently placed them over her. “Here, are you cold?” He asked softly but again Astoria did not answer and continued to shudder ever more violently, and silent tears promptly began to cascade down her cheeks. “What is it?” He asked in an urgent whisper, stroking her hair gently. “What is it Astoria?”

“I – I c – can’t go back to – to… him, n – not now! I can’t do it James!” She choked thickly, fighting down the urge to scream at the top of her lungs. “You – you know what – whatever h – happens he will always, always own me. You know w – what he – he is g – going to d – do to me when he gets h – home! I c – cannot bear another day with him James I cannot!” The tears fell thicker and faster than ever so that Astoria had to press her hand to her mouth to keep from openly bawling like a babe and through her watery vision she could see James’ concerned face swimming above her apparently lost for words. A crazed reckless thought suddenly struck her then and not caring how insane it sounded she seized James by the arm and the words burst from her lips, “You have to kill him!”
James’ expression of concern promptly morphed into one of rank disbelief and he stared down at her as though she had gone mad. “Don’t be so ridiculous.” He breathed finally, his eyes wide and horrified. “I – you – that is impossible Astoria, how would I even? In – in any case if the Justiciar… dies then you are to marry his cousin Vadim you –”

“You said war is coming.” Astoria interrupted, pushing herself into a seated position so they were looking directly at one another and ignoring the dizzying spin in her head. “Vadim may be one of the first casualties of that war but my husband? I am not so sure.” She reached out to touch his face, her voice quivery and unstable through her tears. “When – when battle comes as it surely must soon, perhaps you could – could seize an opportune moment? Maybe when his back is turned or if he becomes wounded, you know Antonin has not been right since the injury to his leg in Germany he –”

“Enough!” James said sharply, shying away from her hand and looking angry as well as afraid now. “Enough of this madness!”

Astoria let her hand fall limply onto the bed and turned her face away as she tried and failed to fight back the tears feeling like a helpless fool.

*James is right, my notion is an insane one and would most like end with both of us getting killed.*

She needed to run, she needed to get away, to put this foolish fantasy aside and pretend than none of this sorry mess had ever happened – to return to her life of fear and uncertainty where she had existed for so long. Her children needed her now more than ever and over these past few hours she had put their lives at risk for no good reason other than a pleasurable escape from her misery; they are what mattered above all regardless of how much she had to suffer.

*I am reckless and foolish, a terrible Mother.*

Quick as a flash Astoria promptly sprang off the bed, James’ robes sliding from her body to leave her naked and trembling as she looked about wildly for her bedrobe.

“I – I must to go.” She said jerkily, wiping away her tears and snatching up the pool of crumpled purple silk before putting it about her shoulders and avoiding James’ eyes which she could feel watching her. “Forgive me for saying what I – what I did. You were right – it was…” But she did not finish her sentence as she promptly began to fiddle with the silken tassels as she attempted to do up her robe with shaking fingers while she continued to snuffle and choke.
Still not looking at him Astoria strode across the room, put her hand on the doorknob, gave it a twist and just as she was about to wrench it open and bolt James’ voice suddenly interrupted her flight. “Wait!” He burst out, striding across the room and fumbling with the laces of his breeches as he awkwardly pulled them up. “Please Astoria I’m sorry just let me –”

“No, no do not apologise.” Astoria mumbled, her eyes still downcast even though James was but a couple of feet away from her now. “This – this was a mistake. I am the one who should be sorry I never meant to be so–”

But her last words were cut off when James’ hands gently cupped her cheeks and she was promptly drawn in for a kiss once again. Though Astoria was in a wild state of panic her mouth could not help but open under his and she gave a shuddering sigh as he continued to gently kiss her and despite everything, she felt her arousal stirring yet again. After a few moments they broke apart and James held her gently by the shoulders and rubbed them soothingly, but it did nothing to quell the intense fear that seemed to grip her by the very throat.

“If he finds out about – about… this he’ll kill me.” Astoria whimpered as James continued to hold her, her voice shaking with fear. “The children too.” Saying those words out loud was like having the heart ripped from her and she cursed herself yet again for being so selfish and stupid.

She whirled around preparing to flee again when James’ next words stopped her dead in her tracks. “Then I’ll make sure that never happens. I’ll kill him.” Astoria jerked her head around so fast that she felt her neck give a little crack as she stared open mouthed at James who stood there with his muscular arms folded and a look of steely determination upon his face. “Should an opportunity present itself in the wars to come I shall do what you asked of me Astoria Greengrass and I will kill that bastard.”

Astoria felt an odd light feeling in her chest at hearing her name, her true name before she had been forced to give it up years ago and there seemed to be a faint ringing in her ears as she tried to take in the weight of what James had just said as she stared open mouthed at James who stood there with his muscular arms folded and a look of steely determination upon his face. “Should an opportunity present itself in the wars to come I shall do what you asked of me Astoria Greengrass and I will kill that bastard.”

“I know.” James said gently, reaching up again to touch her hair. “Come back here if you can, I will endeavour to do the same.” Astoria gazed hard into his eyes trying to say without words how grateful she was to him for everything and when he looked back at her she could tell that he understood. “Go,” He said softly, planting a gentle kiss upon her forehead and Astoria grasped his
arm with a desperate strength before she turned tail, fled out of the doorway and back down the dark corridor from whence she had come.

The next week passed as though in a dream. Astoria was consumed with thoughts of James day and night, wondering what he was doing and if he thought about her as much as she did him. She also had constant lurches of terror that pulled her from thoughts of the war to the dread of Antonin’s return all while trying to rear seven small, scared children. Worse still, for the past several days the wives and children of the highest ranking Death Eaters had taken up residence in the Justiciar’s Palace as there were no guards to spare to watch over them in their own abodes while the Dark Lord readied his army. Thus, with all this occupying both her time and her mind Astoria had been unable to slip away for another twilight encounter with James and it was lucky she had not for she soon had another unpleasant surprise to the tumultuous black storm that was her life. Though Astoria had not seen or spoken to Antonin since the night of Bellatrix’s death, two nights past he had unexpectedly barged into her bedchamber, ripped off her sleeping silks and used her like an animal; never uttering a single word from the moment he arrived, to the moment he left. She had not seen him since and though she had cried herself to sleep that night she drew strength from the one seed of hope that she had within her that one day she may be rid of him once and for all. Like all things worthwhile in life though Astoria knew that she must wait, that such a monumental task would not be accomplished overnight and that she herself needed time to plan for such an eventuality. To be sure, the question of what she would do in the event of Antonin’s demise was another matter entirely but she knew that wars were chaotic, it was only a matter of time before an opportune moment presented itself and when it did she would take the children and flee as far away from all this as she possibly could. Still, the more she thought of the how, who, what and where the thornier the issue became; she was utterly lost on what James himself might do afterward especially as he had his own children to think of. At the time when Astoria had asked James to do this for her, she had not thought of all these things and each time when she tried to formulate a solution to a problem two more obstacles presented themselves in front of her plans.

*I will think of something,* she told herself willing herself to believe it. *I must think of something, there is no other road for me to take otherwise.*

The pale weak orb that was the sun sank dismally in the purple grey sky getting lower and lower with each minute that ticked by and Astoria sighed as she gazed out the window, trying to ready herself for her ordeal that evening. Though the Empire teetered on a precipice, customs and expectations remained unchanged and dinner was still a strictly formal affair for both her and her guests; gowns jewels and all. As the Lady of the House she was compelled to play the dutiful hostess but with so much raging through her mind right and the fear of the unknown about what was going on beyond the Palace walls, she just wanted to be alone. Astoria wondered dully how much longer she would be locked up and forced to dine morning noon and night with all these witches; other than Elizabeth, Linnea and Adelaide she had little in common with any of the other wives who she found to be vapid and unkind and feared that her sweet politeness could only stretch so far.

“Will that be all my Lady?” Croaked an elderly Muggle slave woman as she set aside carved jade comb and took a submissive step backwards.
Astoria’s eyes flew from the window to stare at her and the Muggle’s reflection in the large mirror that hung above the dressing table where she had been sat for the past hour. Indeed, what stared back at her came as a surprise as she had barely paid attention to what the Muggle was dressing her in such was the ferocity of her thoughts. Her hair had been swept back artfully from her face and she was clad in deep red velvet gown which contrasted sharply with the exquisite Goblin cut diamond set that adorned her neck and ears that was so clear and so bright it almost hurt the eyes.

“Yes, thank you.” Astoria finally replied vaguely, “That – that will be all.”

The Muggle gave a stiff curtsy and left the room in silence, closing the door as gently as she could behind her. When Astoria glanced out of the window again the sun had been completely swallowed by the muggy sky giving way to absolute darkness but for a few orange lights flickering in the Dark Lord’s Fortress which towered ominously on the other side of the city. Feeling a horrible sense of foreboding she tore her eyes away from the sinister sight, wanting more than ever to just crawl under her bedsheets and not speak to anyone. Astoria took in a deep steadying breath before pushing herself to her feet, resigning herself to the worst as she checked her reflection once more before wearily brushing a golden lock behind her ear. She had taken but two steps toward the door when she suddenly stopped dead, her entire body became rigid and for a moment it seemed as though there was no air in the room. Then she screamed a terrible bloodcurdling scream before falling to her knees, gasping and spluttering the floor spinning dizzily beneath her as what felt like dragon fire ripped through her arm, searing her flesh and bone. As the pain continued to grip her like an iron hand, she ripped back the sleeve of her dress tearing the velvet as she did so as two guards suddenly burst into the bedchamber, their wands raised and their eyes sweeping the room wildly.

“My Lady what? –” One of them began but he was cut off by Astoria’s wail of fear and despair as she gazed down at her left arm, horrified by what she was seeing.

For the first time in over six years the skull and snake which had long since faded to a pale grey on her skin was now black and glaring as though she had just been Marked for the very first time as it continued to burn with a fierce intensity. She wailed again not wanting to believe what was happening, but a sudden vision of the Dark Lord’s Fortress flashed across her mind as clear as she had just seen it out of the window and the crushing truth hit Astoria like a tonne of stone as rank terror pulsed through her veins. The guards were still staring at her as she quaked and trembled upon the floor, her lips white and trembling, her eyes wide and frightened as cold sweat poured down her face while she shook her head in denial.

*No, no, no! This cannot be! Summoned!? I have been **Summoned**!? Why!?*

She grappled with panic, confusion, *bewilderment* and as Astoria fought her way back to clarity the bitter words James had spoken all those nights ago suddenly came back to her. They were stark, haunting and sent an ice cold chill flooding through her very being: *“A Death Eater is forever Astoria; one can never go back...”*
Yes. A Death Eater was forever, she had said the words and taken the Mark after all. The Dark Lord was merely calling her back so that she might fulfil the oath of eternal servitude she had pledged to him all those years ago; the fact that she had spent many of them hosting balls and lunches instead was utterly immaterial.

Feeling as though her limbs were made of lead Astoria rose tremulously from the ground to face the fearful looking guards, “Please call the slave in here at once.” She said in a choked, dry voice that made her sound half dead. “And tell her to bring me my robes, my – my Death Eater’s robes if you please.” She felt curiously light headed when she uttered those words and seemed to solidify the grim situation, to make it a little more real.

The guards exchanged brief looks before turning on their heels and dashing from the room, their long black cloaks whipping around the doorframe and out of sight. Still feeling dazed Astoria turned around so that she was facing the large carved mirror once again and stared hard at her reflection which seemed to look entirely different to her now, a thousand thoughts flying across her mind which were interjected by distressing questions that jabbed at her like the blade of a dagger.

Will I be made to fight? What if I am killed? What will happen to the children?

The corners of her eyes stung and moistened but Astoria angrily fought back the tears; she was not going to fall to pieces and weep like a helpless woman, she needed to be strong now more than ever, she needed answers and she was not going to get them by losing herself to despair and cowering in the dark. Her fearful contemplations were brought to an abrupt end however when an ice cold voice suddenly sounded from behind her that seemed to make her racing heart stand still.

“I hope you do not intend to stand there all night my dear, you know the Dark Lord does not like to be kept waiting.”

Astoria spun around so fast that for a moment the room was nothing more than a whirl of colour before she stopped dead to face who was in front of her. Antonin was standing in a doorway on the other side of the chamber, his expression grim and his cold blue eyes harder than ever, his gaze darting briefly to her ripped sleeve and pulsating Dark Mark before fixing on her face once again with almost painful scrutiny. Astoria did not know how long he had been standing there, she had not even known that he had returned to the Palace and just the sight of him made her want to turn tail and flee but she made no move to do so, her terror freezing her to the spot as he began to lumber toward her.

“I suppose it is only fitting that you have this given – given the order of things.” Antonin said, his voice constricted with rage as he nodded to her arm, acknowledging it once again. He jerked a large
fist upwards which made her flinch but when she saw what he was holding her eyes widened for there, clutched in his grasp was a thin silvery strip of Aspen that was hers and hers alone: her wand.

Astoria reached out with a trembling hand to take her wand from Antonin’s palm half expecting him to snatch it away, but he did not, he merely glared. As her fingers closed around it blue sparks shot out the end and Antonin’s mouth twisted in anger and distaste, but she was too overwhelmed to pay him any mind. A bizarre sense of power and elation surged through Astoria combined with a dark sense of dread that the return of her most precious asset now gave her the indisputable proof that she was once again bound to do her cruel Master’s bidding… whatever may come.

Chapter End Notes

I think most would have been able to work out from the tension between Astoria and James in the previous chapter that their relationship would develop into something more which has been my plan for a while now as it will have a significant bearing on the story. I know it's risky and dangerous for them both but even though they are magical folk, Astoria and James are still both human and hurting very badly.

I have mixed feelings about Astoria resuming her role as a fully serving Death Eater again as on the one hand she has more power than she has done in years but on the other she will be commanded to do terrible things which she hates... wil she do things differently this time? We shall see...

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