In These Lines You'll Find Our Story

by Ohlookitstomorrow

Summary

Lady Hecate Hardbroom, the Duke of Bedford's eldest Daughter - and a spinster at the age of three and twenty - is cold and closed off from the world, her only adventure is to be found between the pages of a well-worn book. Drowning in a family who doesn't care for her, Hecate is alone and longs for something more.

Vivacious, beautiful and elegant, Lady Pippa Pentangle is right at the heart of London's, smart set. Although she holds all the appearances of a stereotypical blonde, Pippa has a hidden thirst for knowledge - the only problem is, she's no one to share it with. When she meets a handsome gentleman, in line for a Dukedom, Pippa is thrilled when talk of marriage comes afloat.

Soon to be Sisters-in-law, Hecate and Pippa couldn't be more different if they tried, yet somehow, they end up forced into friendship and subsequently become embroiled in a whole, lot more.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
Reflection of A Photograph

One thing Lady Hecate Hardbroom did not do, was, attend balls.

Dancing was never her thing, she often tripped over her long legs (much to the chagrin of her childhood dance-master, who had declared The Duke of Bedford’s daughter an unteachable pupil).

Socialising was also another of her many weaknesses, conversing with London’s, smart set (who were not renowned for their intellectual ability) proved far too taxing on her short fuse.

The atmosphere that permeated the air of London's ballrooms was akin to a scene from Hecate's nightmares. She loathed the few she had been forced to attend when she first ‘came out’ into society. A ball; for an unmarried, young woman, was the perfect place to find a husband, something Hecate had no wish of doing. She'd thanked the Gods when any expectant suitors had been scared away after the fiasco that was her second season - Hecate may have reduced a particularly handsy, older gentleman to tears.

Her Father had been furious with her inability to behave like a proper debutante and often spoke of the embarrassment he felt at his middle child. So, it was with great excitement the old Duke planned for his second daughter's coming out.

Lady Cassandra’s coming-out ball was to be one of the best social events of the season: and poor Hecate had been forced into an uncomfortable, forest-green dress, and unceremoniously dumped at the corner of the dancefloor.

She longed to escape to the library - Dickens and Eyre were her only friends - but her Father had promised her the consequences would be most severe if she did just that. So, Hecate had resigned herself to a night spent in spinster-seating, even though she was but three and twenty.

Glancing to the middle of the room, where a hoard of bodies currently swayed to the tune of a waltz, Hecate caught sight of her Sister - her complete antithesis. Cassandra was dancing with a tall, red-headed man, whom Hecate did not recognise: he didn't appear to be the usual type of specimen her Sister was attracted to - however, they did seem to be enjoying themselves. Although, the young man did allow his smile to slip one or two times, offering threatening glares to anyone else who dared to look at his partner with an appreciative eye.

A slightly, acidic taste in her mouth, forced Hecate to look away: and, it wasn’t much time later before she had to extricate herself from the clutches of a dotery, old woman who claimed she looked much like her granddaughter. Making her way around the room, Hecate ran into the last person she wished to face - her Father. The Duke’s, tall stature and cold eyes, were intimidating to most, but that was minor when compared to the fear he struck in Hecate.

“And this must be your other daughter, Bedford?” It wasn't her Father who had spoken, a smaller man with a rotund waist and a mischievous smile, was eyeing Hecate with curiosity.

“Yes, this is Hecate. Hecate, this is the Earl of Trenton.” Under her father’s stern eye, Hecate had no option but to hold out her hand and allow the Earl to greet her.

“How old are you, Lady Hecate? You look to be around the same age as my Daughter,” the gentleman asked kindly.

Hecate opened her mouth to reply, but her father seemed to fancy playing the act of ventriloquism. “She’s nearing four-and-twenty.”
The Earl of Trenton's smile seemed forced, his eyes flashing between Father and Daughter. "Pippa is two-and-twenty, not much of a difference," He stood on the tips of his toes straining his neck - with his tailcoat and tuxedo, he could have been mistaken for a penguin. "There she is, dancing with the Marquess of Grayson."

Following the Earl's, line of sight, Hecate's vision swam in a sea of pale-pink. Pippa was the dictionary's definition of a Lady; beautiful, elegant, poised. Hecate almost laughed - Cassandra wouldn't be happy if someone more becoming than she upstaged her.

"That's your daughter," questioned her Father?

When he received an affirmative response from the Earl, he excused himself, and rather than wonder what had driven him away, Hecate breathed a sigh of relief. She shouldn't have been surprised when she saw her brother dancing with Lady Pippa before the night's end.

Finally, when the clock struck three, Hecate was able to retire into the safe space of her library. She found her body and mind tired, but she knew there would be no way she could sleep, not after the harrowing experience that was this evening.

Opening the solid, mahogany door, she was highly displeased to find the room already occupied. "Why are you in here?" She hadn't meant to snap - it was only a servant girl, tending to the fire - but Hecate was too drained to care for pleasantries.

As the girl jumped to attention, she stumbled and very nearly fell. Hecate realised she had never seen this maid before, in fact, she had never seen a servant so young until now. Attempting a shaky curtsey, the girl stuttered; "I'm sorry m'lady, Mrs. Cackle said I was to tend to the fire - I'll be out of your way in a moment."

"What is your name?" Hecate asked curiously.

"Mildred, m'lady. Mildred Hubble," the maid mumbled quickly.

"I don't recognise you, Mildred Hubble?"

"I only came here a week ago, m'lady: I'm here on an apprenticeship," Mildred explained, a smile overcoming her expression.

"Is the Duke aware we have a child working below stairs?"

"I'm not sure m'lady. I'm fourteen, and I'd really like to learn here."

Mildred Hubble carried an aura of honesty and purity, and the girl was rather annoying - the contradiction meant Hecate was unable to form an accurate opinion. She was sure, however, that her Father did not like children, and she did not wish Mildred to face his wrath. "You'd do well to stay out of his sight, for now, Mildred Hubble. Now, off to the rest of your duties with you."

Before the girl fled the room, Hecate thought she might have heard a whispered goodnight.

A few days later, Hecate was seated at the breakfast table with, unfortunately, her Sister as the only means of companionship.

Buttering a slice of cold toast, she attempted to block out Cassandra and her sickly-sweet remembrances of the ball, but when the girl mentioned their Mother, Hecate's knife went right
through the well-fired bread.

“Are you alright Hecate?” There was no real concern in Cassandra’s sea-green gaze, only the snigger of laughter directed toward her awkward Sister.

Hecate could only muster a mumbled ‘fine’ in reply.

“I was just saying, how much I’d have liked Mother to have been there.” It was only a statement, not a question, and for that, Hecate was grateful. She didn’t know whether she would’ve been able to answer in a manner that was not utterly horrible - even by her gruff standards.

Eighteen years ago, The Duchess of Bedford had died in childbirth. Six-year-old Hecate had been broken-hearted and had grown resentful of the beautiful baby her Mother had given up her own life for. Everyone always doted on Cassandra more than either Perses, or Hecate - perhaps it was because the girl was motherless at such a young age, but inside, Hecate loathed the fawn her Sister received.

Perses was already on the cusp of his teens and studying at Eton when their Mother passed, he didn’t have to wallow around the house, neglected and forgotten.

The only person who seemed to remember Hecate breathed, was Ada, their housekeeper. Hecate had grown to like (perhaps even care for) the woman - Ada had proven she was trustworthy and reliable: she had been there even in the darkest of nights, but, it didn’t matter how close they became, how hard Hecate cried, or how much Ada wanted to show love and reassurance, Hecate could not allow physical affection.

Apart from the customary goodnight kisses and occasional hugs, the only time Hecate had received physical affection from her Mother was when she was sat on her lap, the softness of the comb disentangling her long, raven hair. The ghost of the comb still left a lump in her throat and a tear in her eye.

“I do hope she’d have been proud...” Cassandra’s voice brought Hecate back into reality. What would the girl know of their (Hecate’s) Mother? Hecate knew her thoughts were completely unfair, and perhaps out of a rare bout of kindness, she got up and left the room, sparing Cassandra her scathing thoughts.

Hecate had lived the majority of her life trying to suppress any hint of emotion: she had no contemporaries, all the Ladies her age thought her cold and brusque. The truth was, Hecate felt too much, and it was times like these she couldn’t keep it in.

She missed her Mother deeply.

Hecate could no longer remember her voice, and her face was blurry. There were no pictures of The Duchess of Bedford left in their townhouse: Except for one.

Hecate found herself in her Fathers study - a room she hated. Her Father only ever called her here when he wished to admonish or berate her. But, sometimes, when she could muster up the courage, she would sneak in and open the bottom drawer of her Father’s desk. There it lay: A faded black-and-white portrait of a woman who held much the same characteristics as herself. Seeing her Mother’s photograph, was the only time Hecate could ever find any sort of beauty in her own reflection.

The sentimental moment was cut short when the voice of her Father approached the door.

Scrambling as quickly as she could, Hecate threw herself under a desk at the opposite end of the
room - her Mother had once sat here, penning letters and menus. Trying her best to calm her racing heart and hold her treacherous breath, Hecate listened as her Father and a companion seated themselves comfortably.

“I must say, Trenton, I am glad you chose to come and see me.” It was The Earl of Trenton - the man she had been introduced to at Cassandra’s ball.

“Well, Bedford, I must confess it took a great deal of reflection and thought to get me here. But, I've weighed up the pro’s and con’s, and I think this shall prove a beneficial partnership.” What on earth were they talking about?

“Your daughter is certainly a beautiful, little creature,” Hecate's Father praised.

“She is,” the Earl of Trenton's voice sounded like it carried the hint of a smirk.

“And my Son seemed rather taken with her.”

“He did.”

“So...” her Father coughed.

“So, I think you’ll find her dowry very reasonable,” a loud chuckling that caused Hecate to feel uneasy echoed throughout the room.

“I dare say I will. Well, my friend, if that’s settled then I think I can say, I think your Daughter will look fine in a Duchess’s Coronet,” the Duke announced proudly.

Crammed underneath the desk, Hecate almost bumped her head when she heard Lady Pippa was to marry her Brother.
Hecate could feel beads of sweat beginning to collect at her hairline and palms, she felt cold and sticky, and suddenly, the thickness of the air made it hard to breathe: all of that only intensified when Lady Pippa addressed her directly for the very first time.

Hecate sat at the window seat of her boudoir, quill and ink fleeing over parchment rapidly. It was a little-known fact that Lady Hecate had a passion for creative writing: when her mind was weighed down by stress like a millstone, one thing that took Hecate far away and relieved some of the pressure, was allowing her hand the freedom to verbalise what her lips could not.

The manuscripts she produced would never be seen by another pair of prying eyes - if the Duke found out Hecate was writing detailed imagery of the morbid reality that was death, then she'd be in Bedlam come morning. No, what Hecate wrote was for her eyes only, no one else would understand, nobody could appreciate the deeper meaning of her text.

By the time her ladies maid arrived to dress her for the evening, Hecate was sure to be covered in dark ink, from wrist to elbow. That is if Georgia ever planned on attending to her before nights end. Unfortunately, Hecate had to share the assistance of a maid with her Sister, and Cassandra took a considerable time primping and complimenting - often, Georgia only had time to help Hecate lace her corset.

Not that Hecate fussed over her appearance much, as long as she was clean and tidy, then what was the problem? But this evening, the Earl of Trenton and his family had been invited for a formal dinner: from what Hecate had observed in those brief minutes at Cassandra's ball, the Earl's Daughter, Lady Pippa, was the height of fashion, and somehow, that made Hecate unusually nervous. There was no way she could sit across the table from a girl so beautiful, wearing a dress that was several seasons out of date. Hecate convinced herself that her reasoning for this was due to the unwanted attention it would direct her way - when placed next to Cassandra and Pippa, Hecate could pass for a corpse. However, deep down, Hecate knew that wasn't all there was to it...

Eventually, with only half an hour to spare, Georgia finally arrived with a bulk-load of apologies. Still, it wouldn't matter how much time they had, at the end of it all Hecate would always grimace at her own reflection - in her high-collared gown of dark brocade, Lady Hecate looked like she was custom made for the shelf.

Twenty-five minutes later, in a mad dash, Hecate descended the grand staircase, trepidation seeping into every step. Thankfully, no guests were yet present - the Duke did not share her views on the matter. "Where on earth have you been, girl? You've kept us all waiting like fools."

"Sorry, Father," Hecate mumbled, eyes downcast as she accepted a flute of champagne from the tray of a footman.
Gaze narrowed and brow set, her Father approached, his tall stature looming over Hecate who suddenly wished she could meld with the dark wood that stained the floor. "You'd better behave yourself tonight, Hecate," growled the Duke. "I'm warning you, embarrass us this evening..." No words were needed at the end of that threatening statement - Hecate knew full well if she disappointed her Father, or her Brother, she'd be very sorry, very sorry indeed.

Hecate was surprised to hear the voice of Cassandra piping up from the corner, "don't worry, Papa, we'll be on our best behaviour." Turning toward Hecate and offering a wink, Cassandra remarked sardonically, "won't we, Sister, dear?"

Before Hecate could voice her wariness at Cassandra's kindness, the Duke looked toward his youngest Daughter and proudly beamed. "Of course, Cassie, I know you will - you look beautiful: whoever would've thought it; a Hardbroom, as perfect as a lily of the valley?" Hecate could see the smugness behind her Sister's feigned blush, it made her blood boil and her heart even colder.

A perfect distraction came in the form of James - the family butler. He entered the drawing room, calling card in hand, announcing the Pentangles in perfect diction.

The Earl looked as jolly as Hecate remembered, shaking her Father and Brother's hands firmly but kindly, and greeting her Sister and her with a customary kiss to the air above their knuckles.

Hecate was surprised to see that the Countess was a woman much taller than her husband. Strawberry-blonde hair perfectly coiffed and held in a simple bun at the base of her neck, her dress of faded, lilac silk complimented her motherly figure in the most flattering light. The air of grace that surrounded the Countess of Trenton must have transferred onto her Daughter, Lady Pippa.

Hecate had only seen the girl for the briefest of moments, and her memory certainly hadn't done Lady Pippa Pentangle any justice. In a gown of ivory tulle, threads of embroidered gold interwove throughout the bodice - matching the hair on her head perfectly - Pippa looked every bit the angel: the blonde was a revelation of pure light in appearance, and it was a shame she was to stand at the altar with a man so heavily shrouded in darkness.

"They'll make a handsome couple, won't they?" Hecate had been too busy studying Lady Pippa, she hadn't noticed the appearance of the Countess at her side. Both of them were staring in the same direction, the other side of the room where Perses was handing his prospective bride a glass of fizz. However, by listening to the older woman's words, Hecate wondered whether they really were observing the same scene - no one thought an angel and the devil were a perfect match. Or did they?

Unable to speak her mind, but unwilling to lie, Hecate settled for a hum of acknowledgment. The Countess then turned her attention to Hecate herself, perhaps noting each of her outward flaws? Like the thread that had pulled loose at her hem, and threatened to trip Hecate if she wasn't cautious. Or the slight stain the laundry maids had been unable to banish from her black, evening gloves. The woman stood before Hecate now, definitely seemed the type to form an opinion based on one's appearance - and if that were the case, then Hecate had no luck.

"I suppose you're Bedford's, eldest Daughter then?" The Countess enquired - her expression was inscrutable, and Hecate couldn't tell if she was genuinely trying to engage in conversation, or if she was attempting to patronise her.

"Yes..." allowing the last syllable to drag out, Hecate was ill at ease when it came to matters of a social nature, and she was unsure of how to progress when speaking to a woman high above her in rank, standing, and age. "I'm Hecate..."
The corner of the Countesses' lips quirked upward, and her bright eyes sparkled with something - Hecate thought it might be teasing, and she cursed her own awkwardness and stupidity for allowing a blush to creep up the side of her neck. "Well, Hecate," the Countess intoned in a voice akin to singing, "very nice to meet you."

Hecate only managed the beginning of a stuttered reply before her eyebrows were raised by an off-handed compliment.

"I must say, you have beautiful hair. How, may I ask, do you get it to shine so?" Hecate opened and closed her mouth like a thoughtless fish - she could see the threatening laughter just waiting to emanate from the Countess. "Well, Hecate, I do believe that's us being called to dinner..."

It was only when the Countess had glided away, that Hecate realised she'd not yet been introduced to the reason she was now forced to endure a ridiculous, three courses, in the presence of her Father and Brother - definitely not how she usually liked to spend her Wednesday evenings.

Surprisingly, she managed to make it through the meal with little to no difficulty. Mindless Chatter flowed between everyone bar her - Hecate Hardbroom was forever on the periphery, someone like her was never allowed to the centre. She couldn't help but notice the instantaneous burst of conviviality that seemed to bloom between her Sister and Lady Pippa: Hecate rolled her eyes as she heard them debate the most masterful dressmakers. It was all down to the triviality and superficial facade of their apparent bond, that's what had her sneering, nothing more.

The gentleman retiring for brandy and cigars, while the ladies were directed into the large drawing-room, did not help matters. Hecate was left to sit beside the Countess - who had suddenly lost her desire of speech - as her Sister and Lady Pippa played the piano with gusto and more laughter than notes. It hadn't escaped her mind that she'd still not said two words to their youngest guest, but what could Hecate and the girl who represented everything she was not, possibly have in common? Perhaps this was one instance where her lack of social flare proved to be an asset?

Fate, however, was never on Hecate's side, and at the exact same moment she'd begun to relax a little, Cassandra's laughing voice caused her muscles to tense. "I'm afraid I'm not much of a musician, but... Hecate is - she was my pianist when I was learning to dance..

"I wouldn't have had you down as a maestro, Lady Hecate," the Countess drawled. Hecate could feel beads of sweat beginning to collect at her hairline and palms, she felt cold and sticky, and suddenly, the thickness of the air made it hard to breathe: all of that only intensified when Lady Pippa addressed her directly for the very first time.

"Will you play for us, Lady Hecate?"

Her name had never been voiced in such a breathy but beautiful tone, and the sweetness of it left Hecate with an unpleasant taste of bitterness. Whether it was the pointed stare of Cassandra, the raised brow of the Countess, or the glimmer of hope in Lady Pippa's, light-brown eyes, Hecate did not know, but somehow she found herself seated at the grand piano, hands poised to play. "W-what shall I-I...-"

"Something I can sing to, please?"

The angelic blonde offered a warm smile as payment, and Hecate had to withdraw her eyes and swallow the considerable lump that had lodged in her throat. She began to play, her breath hitching when the notes of the keys were joined by Lady Pippa.
The pale moon was rising above the green mountain,
The sun was declining beneath the blue sea;
When I strayed with my love to the pure crystal fountain,
That stands in the beautiful Vale of Tralee.

She was lovely and fair as the rose of the summer,
Yet 'twas not her beauty alone that won me;
Oh no, 'twas the truth in her eyes ever dawning,
That made me love Mary, the Rose of Tralee.

The cool shades of evening their mantle were spreading,
And Mary all smiling was listening to me;
The moon through the valley her pale rays was shedding,
When I won the heart of the Rose of Tralee.

Though lovely and fair as the Rose of the summer,
Yet 'twas not her beauty alone that won me;
Oh no, 'twas the truth in her eyes ever dawning,
That made me love Mary the Rose of Tralee.

In the far fields of India, 'mid war's dreadful thunders,
Her voice was a solace and comfort to me,
But the chill hand of death has now rent us asunder,
I'm lonely tonight for the Rose of Tralee.

She was lovely and fair as the rose of the summer,
Yet 'twas not her beauty alone that won me;
Oh no, 'twas the truth in her eyes ever dawning,
That made me love Mary, the Rose of Tralee.

The room went eerily silent as Hecate left the embers of the last note to float through the air. Her eyes drifted to the left, where Lady Pippa stood, chest heaving. The soft swells of her breasts rose and fell, with each inhalation, the soft skin peeked from the top of the blonde's bodice, and Hecate found herself entranced with the seductive simplicity. She'd never thought herself the jealous type, but she supposed any woman sat next to Lady Pippa would find themselves green with envy. There was no way in the world Hecate's tall, thin frame could ever be considered feminine, and especially not when one saw such luscious curves... the hourglass figure of Lady Pippa had to be a preferable option to hold in the dark of night.

A slow thud of a clap came from the doorway behind, Hecate turned her head sharply to see her Father and the Earl of Trenton headed by Perses. "Showing off are we, Sister?" The tall, slim figure of her Brother approached, although he may have looked every bit the man of leisure, Hecate knew very well the wiry strength that Perses managed to keep hidden. As he came closer, Hecate was reminded how mismatched the pairing of her Brother and Lady Pippa would be.

Hecate had observed many women swoon at her Brother's feet; his mop of dark-chestnut hair flopped over his eyes at times - Hecate knew he kept it that way so to entice a girl to stretch up and replace it - he shared her complexion - but unlike Hecate, the rest of Perses' features caused his palour to appear almost sickly.

Perses was a demon! Was Hecate the only one who saw that?

"I was asked to play by our guests," Hecate bit out, her teeth grinding painfully.
"You played wonderfully, dear," the Earl praised as he took a seat aside his wife. "I'm only sorry I hadn't the chance to hear the full performance. Music is always a sought-after skill when one is looking for a girl to wed: I'm sure your husband will be very pleased, Lady Hecate."

Although the comment was meant to endear, Hecate only felt anger - she had no wish to marry, not now, not ever. Surprisingly to most, Hecate had received her fair share of offers; foolish, older gentleman seemed to be her speciality, it was either a withering old crone or a rakish fortune hunter. But spending her days chained to man was Hecate's idea of hell, and she'd scared every, single suitor away - her Father had been livid, but he'd eventually given up, without the promise of a large dowry, Hecate Hardbroom was a hard sell.

The Duke of Bedford had taken up a much easier task, Cassandra had only been out for over a week and already, three, suitable gentlemen had come calling - marrying off the youngest of his offspring would prove to be an easy feat, and if this continued, then Cassandra would have her pick of the bunch. Although, in Hecate's opinion, Cassandra's choices were more a bouquet of thorns without any roses.

Hecate appeared not to be the only one soured by the Earl of Trenton's comment, Perses also seemed offended. Hecate could see the single dimple on her Brother's, right cheek, jump as the muscles of his jaw ticked. "Your kindness is an admirable quality, Lord Trenton," Perses sneered, "but I'm afraid it's lost on my Sister - no need to give the girl false hope. We've tried our best, god knows we have, but I'm afraid poor Hecate is destined to remain a spinster."

The last word was directed like a jab in Hecate's direction, and she could feel her fists curl, getting ready to retaliate. Through the violent, red haze that had swarmed her vision, Hecate caught sight of Lady Pippa's pitying gaze, which only served as a lump of coal to the fire.

"Still," Perses carried on, making his way over to Cassandra, who stood at the opposite side of the piano. If Hecate had been in the right frame of mind, she would have seen the way her Sister flinched as a strong arm came around her shoulder. "I expect Cassie will be glad of the assistance once she gets married and starts a family of her own - I'm sure Hecate would love to read her Nieces and Nephews a bedtime story, perhaps one of those works of fiction you write, Hecate? Or, are they too dark for children?"

It took all of Hecate's strength not to lunge at the tormenting form of her Brother. Had he landed on a lucky guess, or had the evil spawn read her writings? Hecate didn't know which was worse, but Instead of beating Perses around the head (like he deserved), she jumped to her feet, allowing the lid that covered the piano's keys to slam with a pugilistic finality. Tears threatened to escape the corners of her eyes, but Hecate could not (would not) show weakness: so, with the little ounce of self-preservation she still held, she all but bolted from the room.

Only when her head was buried in the safety of her pillow, did Hecate allow herself the luxury of crying - the sorry eyes of Pippa Pentangle still burning away in her mind.

Within moments of seating herself in a comfortable, wing-backed armchair, Hecate found herself lost in the words of Mary Shelley. Captain Walton had just pulled the freezing, Dr. Frankenstein from the ice-cold sea when the door of the library opened.

A small form made its way to the fire, oblivious to the Lady seated in the shadows. Hecate watched for a moment as Mildred Hubble tried, unsuccessfully, to beat down the flames that lay in the hearth. "You are a very trying girl, Mildred Hubble."
The young girl spun around in search of the ghostly voice, she must have lost her footing, and just as her eyes found Hecate's, Mildred fell, sprawling ungracefully onto the rug.

Hands curling in annoyance, Hecate ignored the little voice that told her to help the girl to her feet, "this is the second time you have disturbed me, I do hope you have a good reason?" Hecate had meant to shout, to chastise the young maid, but instead, her voice sounded weary and placating.

Mildred scrambled to her feet, edging closer to Hecate's position tentatively. Hecate registered the exact moment Mildred noticed the swelling of her cheek. Nerves gripped her lungs, she hadn't the energy to divert the girl's attention, but nor had she the capacity for explanation.

Mildred Hubble, however, proved to be surprising. Her expression only displayed the briefest second of shock before the girl smiled warmly: she did not badger Hecate as to what had happened, nor did she voice half-hearted pity, instead, Mildred asked a simple question - "what are you reading, my Lady?"

Out of everything the girl could have possibly said, Hecate did not expect that. She eyed Mildred with surprise, before allowing a burst of soft laughter to escape her lips - the girl before her looked genuinely intrigued. "Frankenstein." Mildred's eyes lit up in knowledge, making Hecate's brow furrow in confusion, "you know this book?"

Mildred gave a small chuckle of her own, "of course, my Lady, doesn't everyone?"

Frankenstein was one of the more popular novels in Hecate's collection, but she hadn't thought it widespread enough to have reached the ears of a servant girl. "You've read it?" Hecate's tone was wondrous, and as she saw the smile on Mildred's face fall, she instantly regretted her thoughtlessness.

"I can't read, Lady Hecate," Mildred mumbled, eyes trained on the scuffed toes of her shoes.

"You can't... but how?"

Still not meeting Hecate's eye, Mildred tried to explain. "I was taught how to cook, how to clean, how to care, but where I come from, it isn't commonplace for a girl to read - there isn't any point really-"

"There's every point!" Hecate breathed exasperatedly. "Change is afoot, Mildred, and I happen to think reading, and all that it entails, is a fundamental part the way society functions."

"I'd love to be able to read and write, I really would," Mildred whispered, close to tears. "I can write my name, and a few other, simple things, but that's about it... I'm sorry, my Lady."

Hecate felt a crushing weight on her chest, and her throat constricted as though it were clamped in a vice, but responding to the young maid's needless apology, proved difficult - impossible even. Instead, Hecate only managed to stutter; "I-I... perhaps it was time we were both in bed?"

"Of course, I'll just see to the fire and then..." Mildred sniffled, quickly turning her back and successfully dampening the fire on her second try.

As the girl gripped the door handle, Hecate knew, this time, she heard a whispered farewell. "Goodnight, Lady Hecate..." Once the room was empty save for herself, Hecate felt able to reply, "goodnight, Mildred Hubble."
Sleep was hard to find that evening, but not because of her Brother's words, or her Father's actions, but because Hecate was tormented by Mildred Hubble expressing her wish to learn.

Chapter End Notes

The 'Rose of Tralee' is a 19th century Irish Ballad written by Edward Mordaunt Spencer. However, rumour has it that the song was in actual fact, coined by William Pembroke Mulchinock, a well-off Protestant who fell in love with his households maid, Mary O'Connor, a poor Catholic girl to whom the song is apparently dedicated to.

Thank you so much to everyone who has expressed their support for this story, it's been a while since I've written an in-depth multi-chapter fic, and this is the first I am writing for this particular fandom, so your words of kindness, kudos, subscriptions and follows have all meant a great deal to me and always inspire my writing.

You can find me on;

Tumblr @ohlookitstomorrowff
Instagram @ohlookitstomorrow

Catch:)

Confusion of The Theatrical

Chapter Summary

Hecate could see the appeal of the ballet as her eyes flitted from the women on stage to the woman beside her. However, she was sure that Lady Pippa would be disgusted if she knew the exact assets Hecate was most appreciative of...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The past few weeks had, surprisingly, been very peaceful for Hecate. Ever since that dreadful dinner, where her Brother had publicly belittled her, and her Father had privately battered her, Hecate had been thoroughly ignored.

She'd been permitted to forgo every ball, every evening out, every social event; for the past fortnight, Hecate had been subjected to the company of no one, apart from Ada and her beloved books.

At the present moment, the townhouse was empty, except for Hecate and the staff in her families employ.

The Duke was seated in the House of Lords, attempting to pass a motion through parliament that would ban the distilling of gin. It was ironic that her Father was championing such a cause, seen as his heir ran a highly successful, highly illegal, distillery of his own. And as Father argued against the poison, Perses plotted to brew more - perhaps, even expand his business?

Cassandra had gone shopping for the day, courtesy of invitation by Lady Pippa - Hecate couldn't help the knot in her stomach as she'd watched her Sister depart that morning, the thought of the girl returning home with her arms laden with purchases and anecdotes made her recoil in distaste. She could hear Cassandra now, going on and on about her new-found friendship, how kind and graceful Lady Pippa was, how beautiful she was...

Hecate hardly knew Lady Pippa, but just imagining the woman through the eyes of her Sister made her opinion less than satisfactory. Hecate had no time for the narcissistic or the fickle.

She'd explained her grievances against her Sister and friend, to Ada several times this morning alone. Sat at the cosy, round table in the upstairs drawing-room, Ada was showing signs of frustration and weariness; the older woman had heard all about the perfect, golden curls of Pippa Pentangle, she'd received a thoroughly detailed description of the young woman's appearance - Hecate had dissected each feature, each characteristic, in a forced, mocking voice.

"...men swooning at her feet, it's ridiculous! Honestly, she's got such a high opinion of herself, you wouldn't believe," Hecate clutched her china teacup tightly as the pitying eyes of Lady Pippa swam before her. Looking across the table, she huffed, Ada was too busy smiling down at the grey cat in her lap, "Ada! Are you even listening to a word I'm saying?"

Bronze-rimmed glasses hit the table with a clang as the housekeeper almost jumped out of her hand-knitted, fuchsia cardigan. "What?" Puzzled eyes landed on the young woman dressed in black...
and turned sympathetic, "yes, Hecate, I've been listening, I've been listening for the past half-hour. Might I suggest you get to know Lady Pippa, it seems to me your prejudices are based on assumption and stereotypes, perhaps you should give the girl the benefit of the doubt, hm?"

"Oh, yes," Hecate laughed dryly, "I can see myself accompanying her around Bond Street, we might even pop into The Ritz for a spot of Luncheon. Don't be ridiculous, Ada."

"Alright," Ada soothed, "so you don't have to be bosom buddies, but can we at least stop this discussion? I've heard that much about the poor girl I might as well have her photograph pinned to my wall."

"Alright, alright, no more about the prestigious Pippa Pentangle."

"Good," Ada smiled, "although, I will say, your Brother does seem taken with her: a little bird told me he's asked her to the theatre this coming Friday."

"Yes, I can imagine Perses appreciating the fine art of the stage," Hecate growled into her tea, she neglected to mention the fact that her heart practically bled at the thought of the delicate blonde being left alone with that monster.

A bump in the hallway perked Hecate's ears, Ada too had heard and was looking pleadingly for instruction. Hecate held her breath as her heart thrummed twice as fast: if anyone - especially her Father - caught her sat with a housemaid as though they were equals, she might as well bid her only friend goodbye.

The door creaked open, and Hecate scrunched her eyes tightly closed...

"Mrs. Hopkins asked me to bring up tea and sandwiches, my Lady," the kind voice of John, the footman, came from the doorway and Hecate breathed a sigh of relief.

As afternoon tea was being laid before them, Ada patted the back of Hecate's hand comfortingly - leaving a cold sensation of guilt in its wake.

Ada Cackle was her equal, in fact, Hecate felt inferior when she remembered all that her friend had achieved while she was merely born into privilege. Still, the characteristically outspoken Hecate Hardbroom had failed to address the matter - Hecate looked up to Ada, she took the woman's advice (most of the time), and it was Ada she went to when she sought guidance. But that was in private, their public facade was very much in line with the social pyramid of hierarchy, and Hecate had failed Ada by maintaining that fact.

Deep down, Hecate knew there ought not to be such a thing as social divisions, the class system was destructive and had been abused by the few for far too long.

Take a girl like Mildred Hubble, for example, the young maid was trapped by circumstance - not unlike Hecate. The only difference, between Hecate and Mildred, was that Mildred's cage was wrought with iron, while Hecate's was garnished in gold.

Mildred Hubble had never been far from Hecate's mind, the admission the girl had made tormented Hecate still. Their paths had not crossed since that evening, and Hecate wasn't embarrassed to say that concerned her.

As John closed the door and Ada immediately reached for a sandwich, Hecate brought up the youngest member of the household staff. "Mildred Hubble - since when have we employed inept children to tame our fires?"
"She's learning, Hecate," Ada placated around a mouthful of bread. "Mildred is very eager to learn... and, I had meant to say to you, but the girl seems taken with you."

"Taken with me?" Hecate squeaked, a splash of tea sloshing from her cup and falling to stain the white linen beneath. "Are you sure the girl hasn't been blabbering about Cassandra and her tanned skin and bright, green eyes?"

"No," Ada half laughed, "I can assure you, it's you the girl's been going on about, she said you talked with her about literature?"

"Yes... I did," Hecate answered mindlessly. Mildred had shown an interest in the written word, and Hecate had been pleasantly surprised when it had appeared the girl knew the story of Frankenstein. She'd been disappointed when she'd learned that Mildred couldn't read, not only because reading and writing could open so many doors for the young girl, but because Hecate had been excited by the prospect of discussion with someone as enthusiastic as her.

The possibility, of hiring Mildred Hubble a tutor popped into Hecate's mind like the flash of a bulb, but that had to be quickly dismissed. Perhaps thoughts of social revolution had gone to her head?

No good could ever come of such a thing, so, Hecate resolved to enjoy the rest of her tea in silence, banishing all thoughts of Mildred Hubble. Images of Lady Pippa, however, proved harder to shift... Hecate almost burnt the roof of her mouth as she recalled the curves of the blonde's breasts - such thoughts were improper, very improper indeed.

Friday began in much the same manner as the rest of the week. Hecate awoke around nine and luckily by chance, she managed to snag her ladies maid before Cassandra even batted an eye.

Once fully dressed, she took breakfast alone in the conservatory, perusing the newspaper as she nibbled on a piece of toast.

A turn around the gardens was a pleasant addition to her morning, the spring air was crisp and peaceful. It was the first clear day England had saw for weeks, and not one to pass up on an opportunity, Hecate made herself comfortable against the bark of a large, oak tree. Today, she immersed herself in the world of Bram Stoker.

She must've dozed off, the sound of a rough voice calling her name brought Hecate back to her senses. A moment ago, she'd been traversing the Transylvanian terrain, but now as Hecate looked into the sky, finding the sun far west, she realised that had been a figment of her imagination: she found herself still in her London garden, playing host to her Father's beck and call. Much like the infamous Count, The Duke of Bedford attempted to drain every ounce of his eldest Daughter's life force.

Hecate returned to the house to find her Father waiting for her, not at all patiently. "I am sending you to the theatre this evening, Hecate." Perplexed, and a little taken aback, Hecate gazed up at the Duke with wide eyes and an open mouth. "Don't give me that look, girl," her Father sneered, "Percy had arranged to take Lady Pippa, but he has been called away on urgent business, so, you shall have to go in his stead."

"There's no way that I'm going! And what sort or 'urgent business' befalls a brothel or a distillery? It must be something terrible if they're having to call on their illicit benefactor." Hecate's words were thrown with bite, how dare her Father attempt to use her as some sort of errand pigeon.

Unwilling to discuss the truth his Daughter spoke, the Duke merely warned; "be careful, girl, or I
might have to confine you to the house and stop the spreading of your forked tongue! Consider this as an opportunity, if you prove that you hold the ability to be trustworthy, I might be persuaded to allow you more freedom."

Still unwilling to go down without a fight, despite her Father's very tempting offer, Hecate pressed further. "And why must I go? Why not send Cassandra? She and Perses' fiancee are like two peas in a pod, both are equally as vapid, I'm sure interpreting the performance would be quite the riddle for them."

The Duke took a step forward, Hecate felt the hot anger in his voice cut her cheek like a blade. "Because. I. Have. Told. You." The man in front of her stepped back once more, and Hecate felt the imminent sense of danger that had filled her, dissipate. "Besides," her Father continued, "Cassie is barely out of the schoolroom, how would it look if I sent two unmarried women off on their own in the dark of night? No, I believe you'll be fit enough to mind the Pentangle girl - and, Hecate, if anything happens to her, even the slightest nick, I shall hold you personally responsible."

Watching the retreating iron rod of her Father's back, Hecate allowed her shoulders to fall in defeat - she had lost the battle, and now it was time for her punishment, an evening alone with Lady Pippa had to be equal to the goings on in the tower's dungeon.

The carriage pulled to a stop with a lurch, almost throwing its only passenger onto the dusty floor. Hecate drew her midnight cloak tight as she tried to steady herself - she couldn't possibly allow the best-dressed debutante in London to see a speck of dirt mar her gown of black crepe and subtle, silver beading.

The door opened, allowing a lovely vision of lilac to enter. Hecate almost offered a hand of assistance - almost - but in the end, she did not, and the woman settled into the opposite squab alone. "Good evening, Lady Hecate."

As Hecate's companion removed her hood, blonde curls tumbled free, and the smiling face of Lady Pippa was clearly visible.

"Good... good evening," Hecate tentatively replied, lifting a hand to rap the roof thrice, directing the carriage to move.

"I'm thoroughly looking forward to this evening, are you?"

Hecate observed the blissful blonde in front of her closely - surprisingly, Lady Pippa showed no disappointment at Perses' lack of presence, nor did she display any outward signs communicating her displeasure at Hecate's company. Perhaps, if Hecate managed to keep her temper in check and maintain a kind manner, the evening would pass quicker: the faster the hand of the clock moved, the sooner Hecate could escape the sweet, floral scent that was all-encompassing - it was addling her mind, making her acutely aware of every detail of her companions dress... among other things...

"I've never been to the ballet before."

"Oh," Lady Pippa squeaked, her whole face lighting up, casting the most marvelous glow - Hecate willed her mind to shoo the light away from her shadow of safety, but it refused to go, dancing around the fringes teasingly, instead. "It's marvellous! I'm sure you'll love it. Tonight's performance - Swan Lake - is my very favourite; it's sort of a tragic, love story, with far more introspection than one would expect from a production many would deem frivolous."

Hecate felt as though a tonne weight had been placed inside her mouth - her jaw nearly hit the floor as she was stunned into silence by the knowledgable, articulate speech of passion Lady Pippa had
just delivered. The woman across from her flushed a deep crimson as she shrank back into her seat in embarrassment, and Hecate could have sworn she felt the tainted emotions of pride and guilt swarm throughout her being.

Hecate's mind was scrambled, trying to work out the cause and meaning of her inner feelings, and, assuage the sense of clawing awkwardness that had filled the carriage. But, just like she'd wished it, time seemed to have sped up, and in a matter of moments the door had opened, and Lady Pippa had flown to the exit.

The first thing Hecate noticed as she peered her head outside, was the abundance of sparkling jewels, gracing the slim necks of more than a dozen women, all alighting the steps of the theatre. Despite the gaudy flash of their partners, however, a horde of gentlemen had turned as Lady Pippa stepped into the night, their gazes fixed only on her.

A coil somewhere deep in Hecate's abdomen drew her to the blonde's side immediately, placing a protective hand upon her arm. Her flesh burned at the first brush of contact as if scolded by a red-hot poker, and Hecate felt as though she stood before the gallows as she waited for Lady Pippa's reaction to her sudden sense of over-familiarity.

But, Lady Pippa's soft eyes showed no signs of chastisement, nor did she slap Hecate's hand away; instead, the blonde interlinked their arms, white and black satin fitting perfectly in the most unconventional way.

Hopefully, Hecate thought, no one saw her lose her footing on the very first step as the magnitude of Lady Pippa's kind smile of thanks hit her like a wave.

Far from a night of ease, as she'd hoped, Hecate now knew this was to be far more difficult and nerve-wracking than any dinner or ball could possibly be: it wasn't finding her way through the crowd that scared her, no, what scared Hecate was navigating Lady Pippa, alone.

It was becoming increasingly aware that Pippa Pentangle was not as one-dimensional as she seemed.

Her Father's box was the epitome of frivolous luxury. Hecate hadn't been to the theatre in a long time - not since her Grandfather passed away - and even then, they'd always sat in the stalls.

Perched beside her, Lady Pippa didn't seem the least bit phased. One hand clutched the programme in her lap, fingers twisting in time with the orchestra; the other gripped the golden rail in front, tightly - her face set in a perfect picture of wonder.

Hecate could see the appeal of the ballet as her eyes flitted from the women on stage to the woman beside her. However, she was sure that Lady Pippa would be disgusted if she knew the exact assets Hecate was most appreciative of...

Lithe, toned figures fitted in white (and black in one, particular case), the dancers moved across the stage like apparitions from a dream. Watching as the principle leads lept in unison, Hecate's stomach twisted - but not in the unpleasant way one might expect. It was the feeling of being caught doing something forbidden: Hecate was witnessing a moment between Odette and Odile she thought ought to be private, yet, she could not draw her eyes away.

The tall woman in black reminded Hecate of herself in a strange way. Although the dancer portraying Odile had an exotic, olive complexion, the physical similarities between her and Hecate were striking - raven hair, dark eyes, and sharp features. But Odile was graceful and exquisite in
her appearance, far from the gangly awkwardness displayed by Hecate.

Although, it was the other dancer that entranced Hecate. The petite, curvaceous blonde, with skin like fresh milk. The Swan Princess was breathtaking! Her footfalls were not as precise, or as perfect, as her opposite number's, but something about the naivety of her movements caused Hecate's breath to hitch and gooseflesh to rise on the sliver of flesh uncovered on her arm.

Hecate hadn't realised, but at some point, she'd moved to mirror Lady Pippa in gripping the railings tightly. Her heart raced as Odette spun in a pirouette before arching and falling to the ground in a way that exposed every single curve of her body. Even from her high vantage-point in their private box, Hecate could see the raised nub atop the dancer's breast.

She could not name the feeling it induced...

When the curtain fell signalling the beginning of a brief interval, Hecate turned to find Lady Pippa watching her curiously. "What?" She snapped defensively.

Jumping slightly at the tone, Lady Pippa reared back before righting herself and allowing a coy smile to settle on her lips. The din that had broken out in the theatre was buzzing, but not intrusive enough that Lady Pippa would have to lean forward and whisper in Hecate's ear to be clearly heard. "Did you enjoy that, Lady Hecate?" The words carried with them an edge something mischievousness that didn't sit particularly well with the straight-laced Hecate Hardbroom.

The truth was that, yes, she had enjoyed it, in fact, Hecate thought she'd liked the first half of the performance far too much! But she couldn't very well tell Lady Pippa that now, could she? The only alternative was a complete diversion. "I'm going to see if I can procure us some refreshments," Hecate jumped to her feet and left the box before Lady Pippa had the chance to object or intervene.

She had no real intention of getting them anything to drink, but as Hecate slumped against a pillar attempting to calm herself, she decided it would look all too foolish if she turned up empty-handed. A glass of wine was the last thing she needed, but apparently, it was all the concierge had to offer, so Hecate had to make do.

When Hecate re-took her place, Lady Pippa smiled sweetly, any hint of the devilish persona she'd adapted before, was gone - and hopefully, made no plans to return. "Thank you," the blonde murmured as she accepted the glass of deep-red - Hecate tried to ignore the way Lady Pippa's eyelashes fluttered as she took a hearty sip of her wine. "I was beginning to think you'd gotten lost, or, that you'd abandoned me in favour of a handsome rake?"

Hecate thanked her maker that she'd not yet taken a gulp of her own wine, as she coughed and spluttered at Lady Pippa's innuendo. "Why-Whyever... whatever would... would g-give you that idea?"

"Well," Lady Pippa chuckled demurely, "your Sister tells me that there's an Earl that's particularly keen on you - he's even written you love letters, apparently - I thought you might've run into him on your little trip..."

When Hecate managed to get her hands on Cassandra, there would be hell to pay. But right now, Hecate had to dispel any sort of rumours. "I am not being courted by Lord Pelham." She enunciated each word with perfect clarity, leaving no room for misinterpretation. The last thing Hecate wanted was for Lady Pippa to carry any stories that might make the Earl of Pelham think he had even half a chance. "Nor have I ever been courted by Pelham: I find the mere notion reprehensible!"

"Hmm, Pelham is a wreck, I did think it odd when Cassie said that you and he... well, anyway, the
point is-" blonde curls whipped as Lady Pippa shook her head as though a particularly annoying fly were buzzing around her ear. "Why have you never married? I find it hard to believe that only one man has ever propositioned you, in fact, Cassie said as much, so why did Percy make out as though you were an aging spinster with no prospects whatsoever?"

The opening of old wounds was always a nasty business, and Hecate had no wish to do it here, or in Lady Pippa's company, but she found dodging the entirety of the query an impossibility. Answering in half-truths would have to suffice. "Pelham and all the other's held no interest in me - the animal itself is insignificant to a hunter who seeks its wares, the same analogy can be applied to those who hunt my fortune."

Hecate watched Lady Pippa's eyes widen, she paused for a moment, expecting the other woman to say something, however, she did not, and Hecate continued. "My Mother's Father was no peer of the realm, he was in no way connected to any sort of nobility, my Grandfather was just a man who'd travelled to London on dreams and a heap of luck. He called his inventions his 'magical potions' really, they were luxury face-creams, but he always said no customer left unhappy.

"By the time his only child, my Mother, was out, my Grandfather had established himself as a wealthy businessman - no party was complete without him. Of course, his sizeable, money pile, meant my Mother came with a dowry that even a Prince, would find difficult to turn down.

"My Father had only assumed his title, but the Hardbroom coffers were nearing empty... you can imagine what happened next - I sit here as primary evidence.

"My Grandfather didn't want to make the same mistake twice. He and I were close - I suppose I reminded him of his Daughter - and when he died, he entrusted his fortune to me."

Hecate saw the gist of the conversation register in Lady Pippa's mind - felt would be a more apt word. For, Lady Pippa reached out, and much like Ada often did, touched Hecate's hand sympathetically. Even though the layers of both of their gloves provided a shield, Hecate felt the tenderness of the touch in heartbreaking clarity. Not one for crying, she found herself quickly continuing her explanation - her hurried words acting as a dam for her tears.

"Thankfully, my procurement of the money does have its clauses. I can't touch it until I'm five and twenty, and, under no circumstances is it to be used as a dowry.

"So, Lady Pippa, apart from my own aversion to marriage, the reason I will 'forever remain on the shelf' is; I have nothing to offer, no man would take me without a dowry, and seen as I don't have one of those, I get to live my life in relative freedom. Although, constantly under the thumb of one's Father is hardly free, is it?"

"No, it's not," Lady Pippa whispered, her eyes downcast.

Hecate had no wish to wallow in self-pity, or, drag Lady Pippa into her veil of shadows. It was with the heavy weight of guilt, Hecate managed to project cheerful sounding laughter, "but I have my ways... whining gets you nowhere, if you want something to happen, then you make it happen."

"But, Hecate, what about companionship? Don't you want someone to just be with? Someone who cares for you above all others?"

Lady Pippa had neglected to use her title, and that was the closest thing to friendship with a girl mirroring her own standing, that Hecate had ever experienced. Suddenly, she felt a rush of affection directed toward the blonde - who really wasn't all that blonde. Pippa Pentangle, someone whom, Hecate had thought, stood for everything she despised, had shown her an act of kindness -
somewhat of a rare feat among the aristocracy.

"I find men idiotic and overbearing," Hecate answered in an attempt to return the conversation to
the light.

Pippa's laugh was melodic, like the chirping of birds carried in the morning breeze, "I can
understand that."

"I much prefer a good book."

"So do I," the blonde agreed with a wink.

Hecate took the sweep of lashes to mean Pippa was being facetious, so she teased some of her own
in return. "I hadn't pegged you for an intellectual, Lady Pippa, tell me; are you a true blue-stockings,
or, are these 'books' actually romantic novels?"

With another chuckle that made Hecate smile, Pippa leaned forward and cupped her hand in a
mock whisper; "Some are... but I have been known to delve into sections of the library that no
debutante who wishes for a good match ever should. I happen to enjoy texts on Greek
mythology..."

The house lights dimmed, and the overture sounded, and as they sat back into their seats for the
second half of their performance, Hecate mumbled - unsure if Pippa could hear; "so did my
Mother..."

Pippa did hear, and in the darkness of the theatre, Hecate allowed her tears to fall as her hand was
clasped reassuringly. The stroke of Pippa's thumb was an embrace Hecate would never forget.

As the carriage rolled away from the Pentangle townhouse, Hecate removed one glove and
massaged the side of her temple. Tonight had been confusing, to say the least.

The Swan Princess hadn't seemed as enchanting to Hecate throughout the final piece of the ballet.
The dancer had not lost any of her beauty, but the blonde seated beside Hecate had shown that she
was more than worthy of her interest.

Pippa Pentangle had just marked herself as a puzzle Hecate was desperate to solve. Whether she
had the skills to do so, was another matter entirely.

Hecate still found her feelings and musings impossible to fathom into context, even as she entered
her own private room of solace. However, her usual chair by the fire in the library appeared to be
occupied. "Enjoying ourselves, are we?"

It really was starting to get rather comical, the way Mildred Hubble startled anytime Hecate caught
her unaware. This time, however, the young girl clutched what seemed to be a book to her chest,
and fell to her knees in torrents of tears.

"Please, my Lady, please, I'm sorry, please don't send me away? Don't tell Miss Cackle, I can't lose
this job, please Lady Hecate, please?"

Was Hecate really that frightening? She sighed and helped Mildred to her feet, "I'm not going to do
any of those things..."

Mildred displayed her shock, or thanks, or whatever it was, in more tears and sniffles. Hecate did
take pity on the poor soul who'd be left to launder her gown.
"I'm pleased you're keen on learning, Mildred Hubble, but I would recommend on brushing up on your manners and etiquette - I don't appreciate my things being handled without care, and I do insist on you asking my permission first."

"I just wanted to be able to read, Lady Hecate." Mildred stared down at the tome Hecate recognised as Frankenstein, with a longing that somehow reminded her of Pippa.

What would Pippa do if she were in this situation? The answer came to her immediately, and despite her reservations, Hecate knew it was the right thing to do. "I will teach you how to read, Mildred Hubble."

Chapter End Notes

Firstly, I know Hecate and Pippa going to see Swan Lake does not ring with historical accuracy - it did not open in London until 1911, it did premiere in Moscow in 1877, so for the purposes of this story, I've fiddled with the dates a little.

So many of you guessed that Hecate would teach Mildred how to read and I hope you'll find their lessons satisfactory, they are proving so easy and fun to write.

Also, when writing the descriptions of Odette and Odile, I definitely had another blonde/brunette couple in mind - tall, strong brunettes and cute, intriguing blondes are my weakness and I just can't help it!

I've toiled with this chapter all week, I only hope that doesn't show. Comments and the like are much appreciated - don't be scared to tell me what you think.

You can find me on;
Tumblr @ohlookitstomorrowff
Instagram @ohlookitstomorrow

Catch:)
Chapter Summary

"You heard him," Hecate snapped, sadness hotting up into anger - anger at the couturier, at the world, at herself, Hecate felt anger toward everyone but Pippa, yet it was the kind blonde who faced its unleashing. "I've not the figure, or the face, to carry off high fashion!"

"I. Happen. To. Disagree." Each word was gruff and spoke in a voice so low, one would have to do a double take to make sure it came from Pippa.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was a most unusual kerfuffle that drew Hecate from her seat in the conservatory - by the sounds of it, a flock of geese had invaded the atrium. And what did a gaggle of gormless geese care if Hecate's morning tea grew cold, or if Wednesday's paper lay untouched?

By the time she reached the source of the commotion, the only culprit in sight was a specimen far too transfixed to be mistaken for a common bird. Lady Pippa Pentangle stood at the foot of the stairs - her pale pink dress and sunny disposition in stark contrast with Hecate's dark and dismal home.

Hecate hadn't meant to stare - well, she hadn't intended to get caught - but the slight flush that graced Pippa's cheeks, along with a bashful expression, caused a sensation in Hecate's stomach that was worth the embarrassment of her own impropriety.

"Lady Hecate, sorry, I didn't hear you - off in a world of my own," Pippa chuckled.

Since their evening at the theatre last week, any time Hecate had thought of the blonde, she'd appeared only as Pippa, no trimmings or garland, and definitely no title. It was Pippa who had started this over-familiar game, it was Pippa who'd dropped all formalities, it was Pippa who'd entrapped Hecate's attention.

But here, now, faced with the object of her thoughts stood in her ancestral home, Hecate sought the comfort of formality, just as she suspected Pippa did too. "Good morning, Lady Pippa, you're here to see my Sister I suspect?"

"Well..." the long pause after the introductory was the perfect fodder for hope, but wishing was for fools, and Hecate Hardbroom was no fool. "I-I am, yes... Cassandra is to attend a final dress fitting and asked if I'd like to accompany her."

It did not escape Hecate's attention the lack of her Sisters title on Pippa's lips, and any thoughts tinted in green were stopped in their tracks when the woman in front of her posed a question that, ordinarily, Hecate would turn down with ease. "Why don't you come too?"

The obvious reply of 'no' got caught in her throat, and Hecate choked on it, trying to force it out in desperation. "I-I'm not... I'm not sure," Hecate stuttered - something other than her mind doing the
"Don't be silly," Pippa laughed as she stepped closer, mere inches separating her from Hecate, who's breath increased with each of Pippa's footfalls. "I'd like for you to come, please?"

Hecate's eyes widened at the softness of Pippa's words, it had been a long, long time since someone had requested her presence for the sheer pleasure. But Hecate couldn't remember anyone ever phrasing it in the same tantalising way as the woman in front of her: butterflies erupted in her stomach as Pippa made it incredibly difficult for Hecate to do the sensible thing.

"Please... come with me?" Pippa's half whisper filled the hallway, drowning out the sound of the footsteps in approach. "Please, come shopping with us?"

A laugh of sickeningly high-pitch cut through the atmosphere like a blazing knife. Cassandra appeared at Hecate's side - far from comforting in presence - and the differences between the two Sisters was put on full display.

"Hecate never goes shopping, Pippa - couldn't you tell? I mean, look at the state of her wardrobe..."

Three sets of eyes were directed to the simple skirt and blouse that Hecate wore, in her customary colour, of course.

Hecate's insides turned to ice, and her body shook, fighting the urge to run upstairs and hide. However, something in her Sister's laugh, or perhaps it was the defensive set of Pippa's shoulders that caused Hecate to raise her chin in defiance; "actually, I think I will come after all."

Sat in the carriage, not twenty minutes later, Hecate regretted her newfound bravery as she listened to Cassandra prattle on - listing off nothing more than petty gossip.

Pippa interjected at the right times, providing snarky, double entendres that Hecate might've found amusing were it just the two of them.

Wit was a form of language completely lost on Cassandra, and the carriage's youngest occupant failed to register the sarcasm that laced Pippa's voice as she described a particularly scruffy Baron as ruggedly handsome.

"Oh, Pippa, you really must have a Doctor check you over - perhaps you require spectacles," Cassandra shrieked sincerely.

"I was only joking," Pippa said in disbelief. Her eyes caught Hecate's on the opposite squab, a joint current of laughter passing between them before the brunette turned her head fixedly on the window and the grey streets outside.

Maintaining eye contact with Pippa felt like a gesture far too intimate for Hecate, it made her want to engage, and study and... feel. Desires that would be most unwanted at the best of times, and especially now, bundled into a closed space with none other than her Sister - a girl that could, despite her lack of intelligence, sniff out any form of gossip. And Hecate having a complete shift in personality was sure to be a tidbit of information, and perhaps a clue leading toward something even Hecate herself was unaware of.

Hecate remained quiet and focused on everything with little colour for the rest of the journey.
The establishment Hecate found herself now situated in, was so far from her comfort zone, even a book would do little to quell her anxiety.

Fabric in all colours and textures draped the walls like tapestries, giving off the feeling of being trapped in a circus tent: the seamstresses in avant-garde gowns could have been substitutes for clowns.

Amongst it all, Hecate could see no hint of black, apart from that which donned her own person. She stood out like a beacon of light where there was none, and that only made things all the more awkward, as she failingly tried to shrink herself while she waited on Cassandra to finish relishing in her couturier's attention.

From behind a curtain that led to an ante-room, Pippa appeared like a ship in the night, immediately pulled towards Hecate's tall stature. "Are you alright?" Pippa's whisper was a caress of concern - when partnered with a soft hand on Hecate's arm, the effect was anything but comforting.

As Hecate fought with her own treacherous words, which longed to voice the truth of the chain-reaction that Pippa produced, a small man with an exaggerated, waxed moustache, wedged himself between the two women, staring at Hecate's appearance in horror.

"Oh dear, so thin, so lifeless," the man said in a pitying voice.

Trying her best to keep composed, Hecate righted herself poker straight and levelled the gentleman (if one could class this male as such) with a narrow stare that didn't carry its usual potency. Over the top of red hair, slick with pomade, Hecate thought she saw a flash of red-hot ire corrupt Pippa's features - it was understandable, Lady Pippa Pentangle could not be used to any man (even one more concerned with dressing a woman rather than the opposite) failing to notice her presence.

"I'm afraid you do not possess the, shall we say, je ne sais quoi, to wear my gowns: however, I do feel pained that you should have to walk the streets in..." the man took a long stare from the tip of Hecate's collar, right to the heel of her shoe and back again, before gulping, "...that."

Each word felt like a bullet, and by the end of the couturier's analysis, Hecate found her appearance thoroughly assassinated - even one with renowned control as she, could not cease the sob that gargled in her throat like clotting blood.

It wasn't that Hecate had never heard another synopsis of this before, on the contrary, she'd heard it many a time, from many a source. Hecate had a mirror, she knew she was no beauty: her outward appearance marked the dark, and lonely cave of her soul.

None of that bothered her in truth, but the first time in, what felt like, forever, Hecate was reduced to the shallow shell of a woman she often mocked. What upset her about her current predicament was that each and every one of Hecate's obvious, visible flaws had been marked with an 'X' and Pippa had been there to witness it all.

But Pippa, quite the opposite of Hecate's initial judgment, did not laugh or join in like so many others would (had) no, instead, as if she floated on nothing but light, Pippa moved to stand in front of Hecate defensively. The couturier's eyebrows were hard to find, they'd jumped so far up his forehead and met the camouflage of curls.

"Lady Hecate - Daughter of The Duke of Bedford - will not be requiring your services," Pippa bit out around the little space available between her clenched jaw. "I wouldn't dress my maiden Aunt in your ridiculous, horrendous gowns, let alone a woman such as this!"
Shrinking in on himself like a tortoise in its shell, the couturier moved back, unable to string even a few syllables due to the severe shaking of his bottom lip. "I-I didn't m-me-mean to offend... I'm... s-sorr..." Hecate could see his eyes flicker frantically, looking for an out. "I-I think that's another cus-customer, L-ladies, if... if you'll excuse... me..." Swivelling on his heal, the man left, and Hecate released a breath of air she did not know she'd been holding.

"Hecate-" Pippa turned and moved her hand an inch, reaching to offer a comforting touch. But Hecate back jumped back immediately, her skin felt as though it had been burned by the coldest block of dry ice, she couldn't allow Pippa, or an ounce of her warmth, anywhere near.

Pippa's face fell for only a second - if Hecate had blinked, she'd have missed the crestfallen look that tugged somewhere deep in her chest.

She had to turn her face away, and a soft, earnest voice ensured that Hecate lost the last shred of respect Pippa may have held for her - the blonde's next words caused tears to well in her eyes, something that had been quiet unfamiliar until she'd met Lady Pippa.

"One day, I'll take you to my favourite dressmaker, and he'll make you a gown that, he, could only dream of."

"You heard him," Hecate snapped, sadness hotting up into anger - anger at the couturier, at the world, at herself, Hecate felt anger toward everyone but Pippa, yet it was the kind blonde who faced its unleashing. "I've not the figure, or the face, to carry off high fashion!"

"I. Happen. To. Disagree." Each word was gruff and spoke in a voice so low, one would have to do a double take to make sure it came from Pippa.

Hecate felt her pulse race and her breath quicken, in something that was definitely not anger.

In the slow moments that passed, undisturbed by noise or movement, both Hecate and Pippa adopted the same blush high on their cheekbones. Hecate didn't know whether to slap or hug her Sister when Cassandra finally joined them declaring she was finally finished, rather parched, and in need of some refreshment.

Pippa had directed their carriage to a reputable establishment, not too far from Bond Street.

Despite the high, painted ceilings, and luxurious decor, Hecate felt as though the four walls were closing in on her, leaving her fighting for air.

The sense of claustrophobia only intensified for Hecate when, halfway through luncheon, two women approached their table and greeted Pippa with an air of familiarity.

Something, right from the off, niggled in Hecate's mind like a stone in a shoe. These women were too perfect, too poised, too much - they mirrored Pippa in every way, yet at the same time, they were nothing like the golden-haired angel Hecate had come to know.

They were introduced to Cassandra and Hecate as Lady Ursula Hallow, and Miss Abigail Greaves: the smallest of the two, Lady Ursula, had her head decorated, in what looked like, a pale-blonde wig - along with that, her face held the resemblance of a colt, and she'd attempted to stuff her boxy frame into a sickening, unflattering, lime gown. If it hadn't been for Lady Ursula's whiny, false, voice, that giggled and exclaimed at every word Pippa spoke, Hecate could have seen her as comical, instead of extremely irritating.
Miss Abigail Greaves, however, was dressed plainly in purple and held herself in a much more refined manner. Although engaged in conversation with Cassandra (who seemed besotted by Miss Abigail's long, Auburn hair) the young Miss kept eyeing Hecate surreptitiously at every interval. Miss Abigail's severe expression lit a spark of prideful defensiveness in Hecate, and she stared back impassively, raising an eyebrow in the invitation of battle.

Her emotions had been up and down, and all around, in the space of this one day alone, and Hecate did not believe she could take much more.

Luckily for everyone seated in the dining hall, Miss Abigail chose to keep her lips sealed, not without a snigger, as if rejecting Hecate as insignificant - a feeling which, at this point in time (and perhaps most of the time), Hecate very much shared.

Cassandra fit right in with the table's occupants, yet Hecate was left to lurk in the shadows, as always. It confused her doubly; first, Hecate was confused as to how she had enjoyed Pippa's company at the theatre so much, and yet today had felt like the vice of a thumbscrew. Secondly, Hecate was confused at her own confusion, why did she care so much? Why did it hurt so much?

Hecate had no place in this, Pippa's world, and she'd been foolish to think there was any hope of them ever becoming friends. The realisation caused headless roses to bloom inside of her chest - their thorny vines twisting violently wild.

"I... if you'll excuse me," Hecate stood unceremoniously, fending off her Sister's mock concern by saying she was popping into the bookshop across the street.

The fact that Pippa sat silently was only confirmation. And Hecate shut the door on everything the could have been but never would have.

Long fingers traced numerous spines, dark eyes looked upon many titles, but Hecate saw nothing - instead of the interior of the dusty, old bookstore, Hecate's minds-eye was clouded in the dark of night. Bereft of any light but a single lantern that moved further out of reach with each forward step.

"I must say, while most gentlemen would turn their heads away from a blue-stocking, I find intellect in a woman rather attractive - it poses a nice challenge, does it not?"

The icy drawl crept down the length of Hecate's spine, and she felt herself being wrenched into reality - she need not look to know that Lord Pelham now approached her.

"Good afternoon, Lady Hecate." Pelham invaded her vision like the plague, taking the book she had clutched like a lifeline in his presence, the man flashed her a smile he may have thought dashing: to Hecate, it held far too many teeth.

One could see how Lord Pelham had garnished himself the reputation of a rake; his tall, muscular frame, tanned skin, soft, brown hair, and bright, blue eyes were quite irresistible to the average woman. But, as the world had a habit of pointing out, Hecate was quite unlike the others of her sex. When she thought of Pelham, the warm longing of lust was replaced by the pins and needles of revulsion.

Pelham's inviting facade flickered for a moment as he surveyed the glower Hecate presented, but soon enough he regained the use of his silver tongue. "You look lovely, my Lady - what a coincidence I should run into you here, I've just had coffee with your Brother. According to him, you were at home today, and he invited me to pay you a visit."
"Lucky for you then, that I should be here, unlucky for me, however - for if you'd have come calling, there's no way I'd have received you!" Hecate's growl turned into a mild shriek as Pelham grabbed her wrist roughly, dragging her into his space and leaning down to hiss into her ear.

"Your Brother as good as promised me you, and I will have you, Hecate..."

The sound of the bell tinkling above the shop door stopped the furious reply that had bubbled on Hecate's lips like molten lava. She wished the ground would swallow her up whole, as there on the threshold, stood Cassandra and Pippa - Hecate knew she'd been caught in, what would appear in their eyes, as a compromising position. But far from Cleopatra and Anthony, this situation was reminiscent of the serpent torturing Eve into what was perceived to be a temptation.

Pelham still held Hecate in his clutches, and under the guise of sweet nothings he whispered words of poison into her ear; "you're a foolish woman, Hecate. I could have any Lady I desired, and you'll never get a better offer."

As Hecate finally managed to wrestle her escape from the devil's hands, an unknown figure stepped between them. "Is this man bothering you, Miss?" From the man's appearance, attire and accent, Hecate could tell he was from a more working-class background than she, but unlike the aristocrat stood in front of her, Hecate sensed no malice from this gent.

"Excuse me, who do you think you are?" Cassandra barged into the fray with her hands on her hips, making every effort to over-enunciate her vowels. "This is my Sister's beau, and do you realise you are speaking with the Daughter of The Duke of Bedford?"

The working-class man gave no indication that he'd acknowledged Cassandra's interruption, except the darkening of his eyes, which Hecate did not miss as her Father's title was mentioned.

He maintained perfect calm as he kindly asked Hecate; "are you alright?"

"Yes," she replied.

Out of the corner of her eye, she registered the sad demeanor of Pippa. Hecate quelled all feelings of pity or remorse, but still, she could not shake the urge to comfort Pippa, as the woman had once done for her.

"In that case," the gentleman interrupted Hecate's internal struggle, "I shall bid you good day, Lady Hecate." And he exited the bookstore without a backward glance.

"It is a great convenience for him that you Ladies were present," Pelham bragged, "for had you not been, I fear we'd be drawing pistols at dawn."

Hecate didn't bat an eyelid at Pelham's speech, her gaze was still fixated on Pippa, who was now looking very hardened and refusing to meet her eye.

"Would you like me to escort you home, Ladies, I can imagine you might be unnerved after that little debacle?" Pelham offered.

"No," Pippa snapped in reply - it was a tone Hecate had never heard her use. "My footman will do," she turned on her heel and marched toward the door, Cassandra following in her wake like a little puppy.

As Hecate reached the door, she heard Pelham deliver a low warning that caused her joints to stiffen for a second too long. "I am a determined man, Lady Hecate Hardbroom, and I am not one to be trifled with."
When Mildred Hubble entered the library later that evening, Hecate was thoroughly drained. But, a promise was a promise, and Hecate had promised to teach the girl to read.

"Are you ready for our first lesson, Mildred?"

Biting her lip, the maid wrung her hands nervously and took a deep breath. "Please don't be angry at me for saying this, my Lady, but you look rather tired... would you prefer I leave you alone, and we can start lessons tomorrow?"

Hecate felt the chill that even the fire had failed to warm, dissipate at Mildred Hubble's words. Perhaps the day's events had momentarily softened her?

"I am tired, Mildred Hubble, but I like to keep to my word. Might I suggest that this evening, we read together?"

"I'd like that very much, Lady Hecate."

If an onlooker passed by, they would see the most unusual sight: Mildred Hubble curled up in the chair beside Hecate, and from a book of old fairy tales her Grandfather had gifted her, Hecate read aloud late into the night until they both drifted off into sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for missing last weeks update, I've not had a great week and I sort of lost and flare I had for writing. But thanks to all of you who sent me in song recommendations on tumblr, they were a great help to me and I think they'll inspire my future writings also.

Comments, questions and the like are much appreciated, and you can find me on;

Tumblr @ohlookitstomorrowff
Instagram @ohlookitstomorrow

Catch:)
"I'm not here to see Perses, or your Sister, or your Father for that matter, I'm here to see you, Hecate, not anyone else."

Thoroughly taken aback, Hecate stuttered; "m-me?"

"Yes, you," Pippa laughed, "although, perhaps I should be a bit more specific? There is an art display being held at the Dulwich Picture Gallery this afternoon, I've planned to go, but I thought it would be much more fun if it were the two of us."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mornings spent alone, the house unoccupied save for herself and the staff, were by far, Hecate's favourite way to start the day.

The drab lounge, with its outdated furnishings and sickly, pastel colour-scheme, felt as close to peaceful as was possible. Sat straight-backed, on a floral settee, Hecate peered over the rim of her cup, through the net of the curtains, she could see the sun's rays begin to peak from the clouds.

Hecate almost tempted fate and described her mid-morning, as 'pleasant.'

But of course, nothing was ever as such in the Hardbroom household: just as she'd allowed her posture to recline an inch, Hecate was returned to absolute propriety by the sound of the brass knocker on the front door being knocked.

She'd expected her butler to inform whoever was calling that the person they were looking for was not at home, offer to take a message, and then bid them 'good day.'

Ada, a woman, answering the front door, was most irregular, and not at all fashionable; Hecate knew that if her Father had been at home, or Perses, Ada may well be receiving her books.

Hecate couldn't hear what was being said, only Ada's laughter accompanied by a softer, more pronounced, feminine voice. It almost sounded like...

"Pippa!"

Dressed in a faded blue, that would wash all colour from anyone else's complexion, Pippa beamed from the doorway, a mischievous looking Ada at her side.

Hecate hadn't seen her since that day in the bookstore - when Pelham had very nearly accosted her! Pippa had seemed far removed, almost angry, during the return carriage journey that afternoon, Hecate thought it would be a while before they met again - before Pippa wanted to meet again.

She'd forgotten how beautiful Pippa was.

How it felt to be near her.
To see her.

Hecate must've been going soft in her old age, perhaps this was an indication of her affirmed spinsterhood?

"Good morning, Hecate."

"I- good morning, was Cassandra expecting you? I'm afraid she's gone to luncheon... with someone - I can't remember who-"

"I'm not here to see Cassie," Pippa cut in.

Brown eyes sparkled a precious topaz, and Hecate only grew more confused, her brain finally caught up, motivating her to offer Pippa a seat and a cup of tea; "I shan't be staying long," Pippa said as she sat down, Hecate following the lines of her skirt as her legs moved beneath. "But seen as it's you," deft fingers moved to help themselves from the tea service, "I suppose I'll have to accept."

"I-I... if you're not here to see my Sister, then... Perses is also out-"

"Hecate," Pippa interrupted once again. And to tell the truth, Hecate was thankful she did: the thought of Pippa being here to see her Brother, made Hecate's skin crawl with unease, and something else, something she couldn't name (or wasn't willing to).

"I'm not here to see Perses, or your Sister, or your Father for that matter, I'm here to see you, Hecate, not anyone else."

Thoroughly taken aback, Hecate stuttered; "m-me?"

"Yes, you," Pippa laughed, "although, perhaps I should be a bit more specific? There is an art display being held at the Dulwich Picture Gallery this afternoon, I've planned to go, but I thought it would be much more fun if it were the two of us."

At a complete loss, and suddenly, very frightened - frightened of Pippa, of herself, of being alone with Pippa - Hecate said the first thing that came into her mind; "I don't like art..."

The arch of Pippa's brow was comical, but Hecate didn't laugh, she couldn't, the pounding of her thunderous heart wouldn't allow it, only gasping breaths seemed to leave her.

This whole situation - Pippa, here, here to see her -had been so unexpected, but, given the time, Hecate realised that Pippa's apparition had brought a sense of relief, almost as if she'd been longing for this moment since the last.

In Pippa's presence, especially when they were alone, Hecate felt what others referred to as 'happiness,' or the closest thing to it that her cold, unknowing heart could comprehend.

Ada was her friend, the only one who'd set time aside for her since her Mother's death, but her relationship with Ada felt different somehow... Sometimes, Hecate felt as though she was being Mothered by the older woman, and, although she'd never admitted it out loud, not even to herself, it was something she cherished, something that felt right.

Ada was more of a Motherly figure than a friend.

But ever since that evening in the theatre, Hecate had yearned for someone; someone to be close to, someone who understood her, someone... someone like Pippa.
She wanted to call Pippa her friend, but she had thought it an impossible wish, as wishes often are. She had lost all hope, until, the whirlwind that was Pippa knocked on her door carrying a calling card with her name.

In the last few minutes, Hecate had come to understand a great deal - the puzzle had been all-encompassing, and only now when the final piece had been set into place, did she remember that Ada had been the one to answer the door.

Hecate scanned the room for the familiar figure, finding her skulking in the corner of the room, pretending to examine a large fern-plant when she caught Hecate's gaze.

"Ada..."

An intrusive thought had entered Hecate's mind, what if Ada had planned this? What if Ada had asked Pippa to come, persuaded her to extend Hecate an invitation?

"I know what you're thinking, Hecate - I know you too well," Ada huffed as she came to take up the seat beside Hecate, immediately reaching for the other half of Pippa's scone. "And no, I had no hand in this: although, I think you should go. Go with Lady Pippa to the art gallery, and stop growing old and miserable inside this house."

"But."

"Your Father and Brother may consider you a spinster, Hecate, but you are not. Don't play into their hands any longer - go out and live, prove them wrong."

An hour later, Hecate found herself staring up at the high-vaulted ceilings of the Dulwich Picture Gallery, and she blamed it entirely on Ada Cackle!

Hecate was, of course, free of any guilt: she'd practically been coerced by her housekeeper, and her relaxed morning had allowed her to be easily bewitched by golden hair and pastel blue.

She couldn't really fault Pippa, it wasn't her fault she was so... beautiful... ethereal... alluring... attractive?

When Pippa dragged her by the hand to see a painting of two, ancient-Greek women, sat side-by-side, arms clinging to one another, Hecate felt less alone in the world.

The thought had crossed her mind, that her approach to her burgeoning friendship with Pippa was abnormal, but seeing this depiction, seeing the fondness in the brunette subjects eyes as she admired her friend, put Hecate at ease.

"Do you like this painting, Hecate?" Pippa's soft voice came from her left, but Hecate could not draw her eyes away from the canvas, nor it seemed, could Pippa.

Hecate had never much cared for art - she'd sat alongside her Brother when she was small, for a whole day as a ludicrous, old man hummed and hawed over their portraits. After that awful day, most of which, Hecate had spent being prodded by Perses when their governess wasn't looking (or choosing not to), she'd vowed never to partake in such a thing again, leaving the updated version, with both of her Siblings, and her Father, free of her presence.

Thankfully, that had been much to everyone's pleasure, except, perhaps, Cassandra, who, Hecate suspected, only wished her unbecoming, older Sister to be in the frame to offset the light of her own
beauty.

She did cherish the miniature of her Mother, it was a perfect likeness from what she could remember, and until now, it was the only work of art that spoke any kind of meaning to her.

"I think I do," Hecate responded, allowing her lips to curve minutely. "It... it speaks... I know that sounds odd, but-

"No, no," Pippa breathed, her hand once again finding its way into Hecate's. "It's not: the way Solomon has captured them, it's... it's very telling."

They turned to face each other, hands still clasped, Pippa knawed on the supple flesh of her bottom lip, as if choosing her words very carefully, and Hecate could only wait, a willing captive in this moment between them.

"This painting... when I first saw it, I was but a girl of fifteen - still in the schoolroom, and on an outing with my governess, in fact - from that first glance... I think I knew..." Pippa's words seemed to falter, she bowed her head, attempting to regain composure, and when she lifted her chin, Hecate felt as though Pippa were staring right through to her very core. "I knew something." It was little more than a whisper, but Hecate knew that Pippa had just let her in on a revelation, one that she'd, possibly, not spoken of to another soul.

Hecate didn't understand it then - couldn't grasp the weight of its magnitude - but she would, in the fullness of time, she would, and when she did, its significance would be irrefutable.

Regaining her usual, light and airy tone, Pippa added; "this painting, it's one of my favourites."

It was as if she'd suddenly gained an interest in art, for now, Hecate wanted to know all, she wanted Pippa to show her everything. "Are there more of your favourites?"

Pippa raised a brow in a bid for elaboration, and Hecate blushed as she acquiesced; "here, I mean. Are there more of your favourites here?"

"Why, of course," Pippa chuckled, the vibrations of the sound only intensifying the heat that had settled on the apples of Hecate's cheeks. "Come - I've one to show you that I think you might appreciate."

Following Pippa up a narrow corridor, Hecate gave a backward glance to the subjects of the painting she now felt she had an affinity with, and as she rounded the corner, and the Greek Goddesses were out of sight, Hecate mourned their familiarity.

Pippa stopped in front of a large canvas: a nude woman lounged on a velvet chaise longue and the whole image screamed seduction.

"It's Venus," exclaimed Pippa, "isn't it beautiful?"

Directly above, a large chandelier bestowed the light of a dozen candles, displaying the blonde woman below in the effect of chiaroscuro.

The form of Venus paled in comparison.

Around a formidable lump in her throat, Hecate swallowed; "she is..." Her words were raw, her tongue felt like sandpaper, but still, they fell from her lips like they were the most natural, the purest, most honest, words she'd ever spoken.
The electric charge that passed between them was palpable - Hecate was close enough that she could see Pippa's pupil's dilate inch by inch, and uncharacteristically, Pippa was lost for words.

As silence enveloped them, Hecate started to grow fraught with nerves, her hands twisting in front of her, her feet shifting side to side.

She couldn't take her words back, even if she wanted too, which she most definitely didn't, but did Pippa?

If she did, she chose not to say. Instead, Pippa stuttered out the most unexpected of statements; "Hecate: Goddess of magic."

Taken aback, Hecate felt herself stumble even though she was still - like falling in a dream, she was falling, and falling, and falling... "H-how... how did you know that?"

"I have a penchant for Greek mythology."

Hecate inhaled deeply, a sense of deja vu brought with it the gleam of tears; "so did my-"

"So did your Mother," Pippa interrupted. "Yes, I remember - you told me that night at the theatre - your Mother named all three of you after the stories she read... Yet, it is only the Goddess of Witchcraft who should be immortalised in the way... in the same way... in the same way as the Goddess of love..."

Like a shard of glass, Hecate broke; tears that had long been suppressed, ran like a stream, leaving their tracks on the pale skin of her cheeks. Pippa stepped forward, and with no defences, or weapons, left in her arsenal, Hecate allowed herself to be wrapped in surprisingly strong arms.

Pippa smelled like sweetness, there was no other description, Hecate was enveloped in the safety of warm sweetness. She felt like a wayward traveller finally finding a home, and Hecate never wanted to leave.

Pippa was kindness at its purest, beauty at its finest, and wit at its sharpest.

More than anything, it was the intelligence of Pippa Pentangle that surprised Hecate the most. How many debutantes immersed themselves in ancient literature?

For all their differences, Hecate believed Pippa had a mind that could challenge, and, probably, outsmart her own - it was a connection, a bond that she never dreamed she could find.

It came from the works of art Pippa so loved.

Pippa came from the pages Hecate turned so often - a beautiful enchantress.


Although the art gallery had been dotted with other patrons, Hecate felt as though she were leaving a secluded world that had been created just for them, as they stepped outside sunlight glittered across the Southbank of the Thames.

She didn't want this day, their day, their time together, alone, to end. Much like the evening at the theatre, Hecate felt more alive; she felt the blood coursing through her veins, her eyes visualised each spec of light as though she could reach out and touch them, her skin hummed with a powerful
energy that she longed to expel, it was magical!

Pippa had brought her to life, and Hecate dreaded their inevitable moment of parting. She had no wish to return to a shell, a woman with intellect and intelligence, but very little emotions.

"Well, did you enjoy yourself?"

Pippa stood on the step below, her neck craned, so their gazes were locked. An errant breeze lifted a tendril of spun gold, carrying it to cover the warm-chocolate of Pippa's eyes - Hecate felt her fingertips twitch with that magical power, itching to replace the curl, just to feel its heavy weight.

"I guess it wasn't awful..."

Melodic, like the song of a hummingbird, Pippa laughed, loud and full: "oh, Hiccup, you're such a cryptid."

"What?"

Confused by Hecate's serious tone, Pippa proceeded cautiously. "A cryptid: a being whose existence is whispered of, but unsubstantiated-

"I know what a cryptid is," Hecate breathed, "I meant, you called me... you called me Hic-hic... what did you call me?"

"Hiccup."

Hecate couldn't help the warmth that bloomed in her chest at the sound of Pippa's silvery tones.

"It's my nickname for you. You see, now that we're best friends, 'Hiccup,' is your new name."

Despite the childlike nature of her words, Pippa spoke them with such reverence, Hecate could not question their ridiculousness. She'd never had a nickname before, never had anyone to give her one: everything with Pippa was new, new and wonderous.

"You should think of one for me," Pippa said, breaking the silence.

Hecate couldn't acknowledge the fact that Pippa had just cemented their friendship, it meant more to her than it should, and right now, in front of Pippa, she had no wish to make herself look a fool.

Swallowing, she replied evenly; "I shall have to think on it."

Embarrassingly, it took Hecate no less than half an hour to realise Mildred Hubble was late for their lesson. Their nightly meetings had been scheduled for the 23rd hour since the first time they opened a book together, and while Mildred was an unusually clumsy, and at times, a forgetful young girl, her enthusiasm when it came to literacy more than made up for it: she had not missed a single session.

Mildred seemed to be thoroughly enjoying her lessons, often recounting them to Ada in the morning, and begrudgingly, Hecate had to admit, she enjoyed spending time with the girl - even though half of it was spent in needless chastisement, Hecate felt a strong sense of pride each time Mildred correctly identified a word.

Tonight, however, Mildred Hubble had been far from her mind.
She'd returned from the art gallery in a most un-Hecate-like manner - 'floating on faintly pink clouds', according to Ada. The dying sun had beckoned, and Hecate had gone to perch underneath her favourite tree, although, this time, her Father had not interrupted her, fate hadn’t necessarily been on her side - she'd been tempted to write, perhaps captivated in an artistic moment - but words would not flow from her mind through her pen.

Hecate found it difficult to enter her self-made world of death and darkness when all she could picture was Pippa, and the way her lips had curled as she'd called her 'Hiccup.'

After supper, she'd given in to her newfound contentment, enjoying the crackle of the fire on her skin and the sweet burn of sherry on her tongue. By the time she even thought to look at the clock, Mildred was already half an hour late.

It was displeasure that carried her below stairs, or, at least, that's what Hecate told herself. It was much easier to admit feeling disgruntled by a maid standing her up than it was to admit concern for a young girl.

Yes, her mind had been elsewhere, and otherwise occupied, but Hecate believed she was still lucid enough that she'd have heard the apparent bomb that had struck the kitchen, go off!

She coughed slightly, waving her hand in front of her eyes, trying to clear a mysterious white smoke from her vision: every surface, every inch of the room was caked in it, and of course, in the middle of it all, there just had to be a young girl with two, long braids by her ears. Mildred Hubble shuffled her feet guiltily; "good evening, my Lady."

"What on earth has happened?" Hecate hissed.

The only response she received, was a faint meowing, her eyes narrowed, Hecate looked into the smoke of flour more closely, was that... it couldn't be... "Mildred Hubble, is that a cat in your arms?"

Silence.

"Nooo-"

"Mildred?" Hecate lowered her tone threateningly - just enough to have the girl be honest with her, she wasn't as cruel to intentionally want to upset, or, frighten young Mildred.

"Alright, his name is Tabby, but please, Lady Hecate, it wasn't our fault-" Mildred moved forward, standing right in front of Hecate, and conspicuously wiped her eyes; ":honest..."

If it had been any other day, Hecate knew her fury would have hit the roof by now, but, her reaction was far from anger, as she looked upon Mildred, and her cat, Hecate had to bite her lip to stop herself from smiling - there was no need for the girl, or feline, to know that, however.

Remaining expressionless and aloof (something in which she had enough practice) Hecate questioned dryly; "if it wasn't you, Mildred, and it wasn't-" she had to pause as she eyed the cat, laughter bubbling in her throat, ":Tabby? Then who was it?"

"A mouse, Lady Hecate."

"A 'mouse,' you say?" Hecate mused.

"Yes! A great, big mouse, on the table - he was nibbling on Mrs. Tapioca's cheese, and Tabby was just sitting there, minding his own business, when the mouse frightened him-"
"Tabby, your cat, was frightened by a little mouse?"

"Not little: big! He chased Tabby all around the room."

As the cat meowed pathetically in Mildred's arms, Hecate could not hold her smile any longer. It spread across her face like the look of confusion that washed over Mildred. "Come, I suppose we'd better tidy the wretched, mouse's mess before Mrs. Tapioca sees it."

Still standing mouth agape, Mildred didn't move an inch, only when Hecate handed her a damp wash-cloth, did she utter a word; "y-you're not going to shout at us?"

"No," Hecate muttered, "is that what you'd rather I do?"

"No!" Mildred answered quickly. "And you're going to help, h-help me clean up, I mean?"

"Yes, but I'm not going to be doing all the work, Mildred Hubble. Now-" Hecate lifted the thin cat from Mildred's arms and placed him on the white-covered stone, "Tabby can help too- he can do the floors."

Unexpectedly, Mildred burst out in a fit of giggles, they caused Hecate to jump and pause for a moment, before she too, was laughing along.

"Thank you, Lady Hecate, for helping me, and for not shouting at me. And I'm sorry I missed our lesson..." Mildred kept her head bowed, her small arm working furiously to scrub the table clean.

For the second time that day, Hecate felt the unsettling bubble of affection, it really was starting to give her whiplash, all these changes in emotion. "Apology accepted... and although I'm not going to shout at you, Mildred Hubble, I am going to give you a stern lesson about punctuality... I'm rather strict when it comes to timekeeping."

Hecate awoke in the wee hours of the morning after a fitful bout of sleep. Cold sweat, matted her hair to her forehead, and the burning warmth underneath her skin made the caress of her nightgown almost unbearable.

She fell back onto the bed with a stifled moan. After trying to get up, the slight brush of her thighs against one another, had her hurtling backwards, breathless as she reached down, past the line of her underwear - to soft, sensitive flesh.

It wasn't a sensation she'd never experienced before, but it wasn't one that was frequent enough for Hecate to be accustomed to it, and the few times she had touched herself, Hecate had never felt like this!

She turned her face into her pillow as her fingers started to circle a sensitive bundle of nerves.

"It is only the Goddess of Witchcraft who should be immortalised in the way... in the same way... in the same way as the Goddess of love..."

The memory of Pippa standing before a nude portrait of Venus (one that Hecate was sure, Pippa would far outdo in the same light) imagining Hecate beside her, posed in much the same manner... it was far too much.

The feeling of release crashed into her like powerful waves against a cliff's edge. Hecate shook violently, the metallic taste of blood filling her mouth as she bit her tongue, maintaining her silence, stopping her from crying a precious two syllables in pure ecstasy.
But when she came down, she was back in her room, alone, and for Hecate, that wasn't enough, it never would be... but it was all she'd ever have.

Destined to grow old in her spinsterhood, Hecate Hardbroom would never share this experience with another. Not even Venus - the Goddess of love - herself, could change that.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, I'm back (I think)...

Thank you to everyone on tumblr, and on here, who has sent me kind messages and encouragement, I definitely wouldn't have been able to complete this chapter without you. I hope to get back into my schedule of posting a sizeable chapter every week fairly quickly, buuuuut, I don't want to rush anything and have my writing suffer as a result.

The painting of the Greek Godesses that Hecate is so enamored by is 'Sappho and Erinna in a Garden at Mytilene' by 'Simeon Solomon.' As with most things Sappho, the painting screams 'GAAAY' and that's why I included it, also, both Godesses remind me of Pippa and Hecate - if you've not seen it, you should look it up, it's a beautiful piece (coming from someone who knows feck all about art...)

Anyway, thank you for taking the time to read this chapter, and don't be afraid to tell me what you think, comments and the like are always very much appreciated.

You can find me on;
tumblr @ohlookitstomorrowff
instagram @ohlookitstomorrow

Catch:)
Hidden In Plain Sight

Chapter Summary

Hecate didn’t understand, not at all. She could not fathom how someone like Pippa - someone who had the world in the palm of her hand - could think someone as insignificant as Hecate was special. Hecate, plain, insignificant Hecate, was held in high regard by an angel - stigmata would've been easier to believe in.

"I like that..." Hecate rasped.

Pupils dilating, Pippa inhaled a deep breath, and leaned forward, resting her head on Hecate's shoulder. "Hiccup." Whispered into the darkness, it was a secret between them, and them alone.

Unable to help herself, Hecate grasped the soft fabric covering Pippa's back, clinging to her like a lifeline. Pippa had entered her life so unexpectedly, and immediately, she'd laid down a marker that would never be erased - Pippa was the one splash of colour - the only source of light - on the dark and desolate road that Hecate was forced to travel.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For the first time in her life, Hecate hardbroom entered a crowded ballroom with something akin to nervous excitement.

When a footman announced The Duke of Bedford and his companions, his eyebrows shot up into his powdered wig. It was a rare thing, to find 'Lady Hecate,' scrawled underneath the majestic letters of Cassandra's name. A few older Gentlemen at the bottom of the stairs looked around in confusion, and as Hecate passed by, she was sure she heard a plump man with a ridiculous monocle mutter to his companion; "I didn't know Bedford had another Daughter, did you, Giles?"

However, despite the unwanted attention, Hecate's mood remained calm. It was as though she was experiencing her coming out for a second time - although, this time, in a far different light.

She'd heard the way her peers had described their first ball; unable to sleep the night before, tingling with anticipation 'til they were draped in satin, lost in the experience, meeting a young man's eye and falling in love. Hecate had thought them fools - frivolous young girls, living in a fantasy that would one day crash around their ears. But stood there, in a dress of midnight-purple lace that had once belonged to her Mother, her dark hair held in elegant twists, Hecate finally understood the childlike whimsy - she had been unexpectedly cast in a fairytale, and whether an old witch wished to curse her or not, she couldn't care less.

Hecate almost smiled at it all.

"That colour, it suits you, Hecate," Cassandra said, passing her sister a glass of fizz.

"Th-thank y-you," Hecate stuttered, she couldn't remember a single time where her Sister had
complimented her - she almost expected to see the laughter in Cassie's eyes.

But the younger girl was nothing but honest, playfully nudging her Sister with her elbow; "it's almost as though you've been dressing like a dowdy, old maid on purpose - I had no idea you had any sense of fashion at all!"

"It's not mine..." Hecate swallowed a large gulp of champagne before turning to Cassandra and attempting to soften her features as much as possible. "It was Mothers..."

A flash of sadness appeared in Cassie's bright, blue eyes - like a brief sighting of a ghost - but it was quickly replaced by a genuine smile. "It's beautiful, and I'm sure she looked as lovely in it as you do," Cassandra said, patting the older woman on the arm.

It was the most Sisterly moment the two had shared - comforting in a way that only familial bonds can be - and Hecate allowed herself to be warmed by the moment, until Cassandra spotted a couple on the dance floor, pointing them out enthusiastically.

"Look! It's Pippa, and she's dancing with Percy: I think they'll make a lovely couple don't you?"

Cassandra's voice, along with the orchestra, and the mindless chatter of revelers were muffled in Hecate's ear. Her eyes were firmly fixed on the center of the dancefloor, where her Brother held the loveliest girl in the room as though she were a prized, china doll - something to be protected, and perhaps even admired, but only for its appearance: precious china could be found on display, much like a trophy, or the head of a large buck.

The sight made Hecate's blood boil; her fists clenched, her nails curled into her palm leaving the indent of five, perfect, crescent moons. A whisper in her mind told her to step forward and take Pippa's hand in her own. Hecate flushed when their eyes met: and when a smile worth a thousand jewels was bestowed in her direction, Hecate allowed herself to melt into the caress of the butterflies in her stomach, but only for a moment.

When the dancing couples spun one last time, the warmth of Pippa's smile was replaced by the searing hellfire of Perses' glare. The cruel reality prompted Hecate to tuck every hint of newfound emotion deep within herself. Her anticipation, and dare she say it, excitement, quickly morphed into the blank, cold expression that had become her trademark.

"Now, Pippa, dear, while I am grieved at leaving you in the deathly silence that is my Sister's company, I have a persisting matter to discuss with my Father, but at least I know Hecate will keep you out of any mischief as you await my return."

Hecate couldn't decide between shock or anger as she heard the patronising way her Brother addressed his supposed 'bientôt destiné,' and the battle within her kept her silent.

Pippa, too, seemed to be struggling with a similar conflict: while her features remained impassive, the tick of a small muscle in her cheek gave away her ire - to those who looked at least.

Cassandra had no such problem, however. "And what about me?" If there wasn't an underlying current of seriousness in the air, Hecate might've laughed at the unladylike stance her Sister adopted when facing their Brother in public; hands on her hips, chest puffed out, neck craned upwards as she forced Perses to answer.

The Duke of Bedford's heir did not take kindly to questioning, especially coming from a woman, and Hecate almost stepped in front of her Sister as Perses stepped closer, only the slight shake of Pippa's head stopped her.
"I'm sure your dance card is full, Cassandra," Perses snarled lowly.

Before Cassandra could cause herself any more trouble, Pippa interjected; "that's more than fine Percy, I happen to enjoy Hecate's company - I'm sure we'll find something to occupy ourselves that is mischeif free."

Hecate settled slightly at Pippa's kind words, but her shoulders soon again stiffened when Perses chuckled humourlessly: "oh, Pippa, you really are too kind, I'm sure my Sister very much appreciates your charity."

Tears blurred Hecate's vision, she could barely make out the silhouette of her Brother kissing Pippa's hand before disappearing, Cassandra quickly following, mumbling something about a young army corporal in full uniform.

"Hecate-"

"No, He's right," Hecate whispered, shrugging off the soft, warm hand that brushed the exposed skin of her arm - Pippa had forgone gloves this evening. Instead, a floaty capelet fell around her shoulders, crystals glittering elegantly against the lightest shade of Pippa's customary pink.

Pippa dragged her to a small, deserted anti-room, and Hecate soon found herself held captive, back pressed firmly against a large pillar, Pippa, more than a few centimetres shorter in height, pinning her there with a simple look.

"Hecate Hardbroom, you listen to me now," Pippa said strongly. Hecate felt her breath being stolen in spurts with each point of Pippa's forefinger against her breastbone. "You are in no way, shape or form, a charity case to me! In these last few weeks, you've become such an important figure in my life, how can you not see that? I wasn't lying when I called you my best friend - no one has ever made me feel the way I do when I'm with you, Hecate. You empower me! With you, I'm worth something. I can never repay what you have given me, do you understand me, Hiccup?"

Hecate didn't understand, not at all. She could not fathom how someone like Pippa - someone who had the world in the palm of her hand - could think someone as insignificant as Hecate was special. Hecate, plain, insignificant Hecate, was held in high regard by an angel - stigmata would've been easier to believe in.

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All manner of words became caught in her throat, the only sound able to escape was that of a stifled sob: Hecate, choked with emotion, cried like a child in Pippa's arms.

The memories of hateful insults in the voices of her Father and Brother rushed through Hecate's mind, but with Pippa as her anchor, they seemed far off, muffled in the distance. As they got further and further away, Hecate opened her eyes, her lashes heavy with the remnants of tears.

When she regained enough composure, she registered the soothing patterns being drawn on her back, all at once, she felt gratefulness and embarrassment. Pippa was kind at heart, but what must
she think of Hecate in such a state?

If she hadn't felt sorry for her before, then she surely would now.

"Pippa, I-":

"Shh, it's alright." Still holding Hecate in a tight embrace, Pippa maneuvered herself so that they were face to face.

"But-":

"Shh," Pippa reiterated. "We don't need to talk about it, not now."

As she went to duck her head in an attempt to hide her horribly tear-stained face, Hecate felt her movement barred by the presence of Pippa's forefinger beneath her chin.

The world stopped.

Pippa stood in front of her, her expression unreadable, and Hecate felt as though she'd suddenly been thrown into scalding heat. She couldn't tell who's breaths were laboured, or who's heart was beating the fastest, all Hecate was focussed on was Pippa.

Pippa, who was inching her face closer and closer, 'til Hecate could feel the tingle of magnetic energy that seemed to be drawing them both together.

An agonising few seconds went by, and then, finally, she felt the press of Pippa's lips against her cheek.

The soft, sweetness of it all was enough to render Hecate immobile for more than a minute, and when she finally scrambled backward, clawing at the wall for purchase, her reaction was far too belated to be considered genuine.

"Hecate," Pippa started, unwilling to let go.

But Hecate needed her to let go, she couldn't reveal the treacherous responses her own body was producing at Pippa's simple act of friendship. "I-I... she stuttered, her mind racing to find an escape. "I... I can't go back in there..."

Pippa turned her head, following the direction of Hecate's gaze to the crowded ballroom only feet away. "Me neither..."

Pippa's voice was so small, Hecate wondered if she'd imagined it, she turned to face Hecate once more and smiled, the corners of her mouth rigid in a way that told Hecate it was all but a mask.

"let's have some fun," Pippa declared.

Eyebrows shooting upward in surprise, Hecate questioned; "what?"

Smile much more real now, Pippa darted forward to take Hecate's hand. "Fun, Hiccup."

Happy that all between them seemed to be well, almost as if the last few minutes never happened, Hecate allowed Pippa to drag her further and further away from the noise of music and mindless chatter.
Of course, if Hecate had to pick a hiding place, she'd find herself cloistered somewhere familiar. Despite never having been here, in this particular house, before, Hecate came across the high shelves of books rather quickly.

Unlike her own library - old, dusty, and very much lived in - the books lining these walls were pristine, the armchairs soft and cushioned - one could tell, this room was not one used frequently.

The light-amber glow of the fire welcomed the centre of the room but banished the outskirts into the shadows. In the darkness, Hecate found a large bay window guarded by heavy, satin curtains - the perfect place to hide from a seeking Pippa.

As she slotted her slim frame out of sight behind the curtains, Hecate laughed in disbelief at her own childish behaviour. This version of herself was so far removed from anything that could have been termed recognisable, Hecate wondered if she was Hecate at all.

A woman even Ada would describe as 'overly serious,' Hecate Hardbroom was now engaged in a game they called 'hide and seek.' Perhaps Pippa was a witch? One would have to hold some sort of magical ability to persuade Hecate into such frivolity, and if Pippa wasn't a creature found in folklore, Hecate wondered what it was that made Pippa so...magnetic.

She wondered although she knew very well.

The rattle of the door handle, followed by a fumbling thud, echoed through the silence, Hecate stood perfectly still, focusing all of her energy on quietening her breathing - lest Pippa find her without even looking.

Except, it didn't seem to be Pippa who'd entered the library.

A sickly-sweet, high-pitched giggle caused the hairs on Hecate's nape to stand on end; "oh, Percy, you scoundrel, what if someone should catch us?"

Percy? As in-

"And what if they do? I'd like to meet the fool who thinks he could challenge me to a duel.

As in Perses. As in Hecate's Brother - of course, it was, no other man was so ill-advised, so full of himself.

The only reason Hecate did not reveal herself, before announcing to the entirety of the ballroom that she'd just witnessed her Brother and another man's Wife embroiled in a lover's tryst, was Pippa. Sweet, pure Pippa; betrothed to a man she did not know, an evil, demonic man who wouldn't even remain faithful to her, never mind treat her with the reverence that Pippa so deserved!

Hecate went from boiling over with fury, to as cold as ice in the split of a second when she realised that Pippa was, at that very moment, roaming the halls in search of her, and while Hecate had made use of the library as her hiding place, so it seemed had her Brother. What if fate decided to be exceptionally cruel and have Pippa open the door hoping to find Hecate, but instead coming face-to-face with the man she was soon to marry committing adultery?

And of course, as soon as Hecate had finished that thought, she heard Pippa's distinct voice calling for her; "Hiccup? I give up, okay... I'm no good at this game, and I'm lonely now. I miss you so you can come out now? Hecate?"

From the other side of the curtain, Hecate heard as her Brother hissed vehement curses before scrambling to his feet. "Get up, woman!"
"But Percy," the paramour whined, "who is that? Why not just lock the door, or relocate? Why be so dismissive of me?"

The woman cried out in a way that told Hecate that her Brother was now utilising some sort of physical force, and despite having first-hand knowledge of exactly what that meant, Hecate willed herself to stay rooted to the spot, hands curling uselessly into fists.

"How dare you question me? That is my ticket out of this mess," Perses announced evasively. "And she cannot find me rutting inside of you: now get up, I said!"

Hecate didn't even cringe at the crudity of her Brother's words, too swamped by anger and heartbreak at hearing Pippa being referred to as though she were some inanimate object. Tears cascaded down her cheeks for the second time that evening, but this time the thought of Pippa was no comfort. This time, it was the source of Hecate's pain.

Perses and the woman only managed to escape in the nick of time. Moments after Hecate heard them rush through a door on the opposite side of the room from the one Hecate had entered from, Pippa called for her once again; "Hiccup, Hecate, are you in here?"

The soft pad of footsteps drew near, and although Hecate clamped her hand over her mouth, she knew her efforts had been futile.

"Found you!" Pippa whipped back the curtains, a bright smile on her face, but immediately, as she saw Hecate standing before her, her expression fell. "Hecate, what... what's wrong? What's happened?"

She couldn't answer, not with the truth at least.

Hecate shook her head, tears continuing to fall as Pippa wrapped her arms around her and maneuvered them both to sit on the couch.

"Is this about earlier?" Pippa asked, and when she received no answer, she only wrapped Hecate up tighter. "Oh, Hecate, I'm sorry... I shouldn't have... I shouldn't have suggested we go off on our own - this is all my fault -"

"No," Hecate rasped. "It's not, I just... I-I..."

Soft hands lifted to cradle her face, warmth spread throughout Hecate as Pippa wiped her tears with the pads of her fingers, staying like that even when Hecate's face was dry.

"I'm here, Hiccup," Pippa said softly, "and I'm not going anywhere. I'll listen if you want to talk."

She couldn't help it, Pippa had lowered her defenses and Hecate was powerless, so out it came; "are you sure you want to marry Perses?"

Pippa's features remained impassive as her eyes bore into Hecate's, still looking for the real cause of her friends upset. And then, unexpectedly, she burst out laughing, leaving Hecate to stare in bewildement.

"You mustn't worry yourself over me, Hiccup," Pippa said once her laughter had subsided. "But I will admit to being rather nervous, and more than a little sorry at the prospect of constantly living in the city..."

Wistfully, Pippa turned her head toward the window, her eyes welling with sadness at whatever lay beyond. "I love the country; the freedom, the fresh air, the minimal constraints... oh, Hiccup, it's..."
beautiful, and I'll miss it so.

The only memories Hecate had of rolling green hills and fresh lakes, was from her early childhood when she'd spent but a few weeks on her Grandfather's Norfolk estate.

"I've not been to the country since I was a child..."

"Then you must come with me," Pippa exclaimed excitedly, clasping Hecate's hands tightly.

Hecate felt her lips quirk at the hopeful pout on Pippa's lips, her mood much improved, she found herself accepting; "you do make it sound nice... alright then, come with you, I shall..."

She didn't think Pippa had meant the invitation in earnest, but as usual, how wrong Hecate was to underestimate Pippa Pentangle.

The following evening, Hecate and Cassandra sat alone together at the dining table, hardly two words were spoken as both Sisters pushed their stew around their plates, their minds far away from the cold house they called home.

As a footman began to clear the table, clearly understanding that neither of his Mistresses had much of an appetite, The Duke came striding into the room brandishing what appeared to be a letter.

"What is it, father?" Cassandra asked, while Hecate merely raised her head minutely - after all, it wasn't as if her Father was here to see her.

"You've been invited to spend five nights at The Earl of Trenton's country residence in Hertfordshire."

"Oh my! Did you hear that, Hecate?"

Hecate merely hummed, trying to retain a grip of her mask, attempting to curtail any signs of disappointment.

"I can hardly send two Daughter's with one ladies maid between them, can I?" The Duke mused, "I suppose you'll just have to make do with a housemaid."

It took a few moments for her Father's words to register, but eventually, Hecate looked around the room just to make sure... to make sure that The Duke was actually addressing her...

"Me?"

"Yes, you, girl. Unless I've another Daughter named Hecate?"

Hecate blanched as The Duke referred to her as his Daughter, her stomach coiling uncomfortably. Disgust dissipated quickly, however, as Hecate heard the footnote of The Earls letter; "my Daughter, Pippa would be overjoyed if your two Daughters could join us. It seems Pippa is thoroughly taken with them, especially Lady Hecate - hasn't stopped speaking of her since they attended the theatre together," her Father read.

"I don't know what's wrong with her, but Lady Pippa seems to look on you as some sort of friend, you've done what I've told you for once, Hecate, and thus, you may go."

Hecate could hardly believe any of it - both her Father's words and Pippa's. She almost thanked the
man in front of her, *almost*.

"Keep it up, don't let me down now, Hecate," The Duke called as Hecate rushed from the dining room.

She couldn't stop smiling as she made her way directly to the library and poured herself a generous glass of wine. Although Mildred wasn't to arrive for her lesson for another three hours or so (probably more, considering the girl made lateness a habit) the quiet afforded Hecate the opportunity to bask in her happiness.

And, the spare time allowed Hecate to assess the possible hazards at asking Mildred Hubble to accompany her to Hertfordshire. The girl was hardly adept in her current position, but Hecate thought the country air might do her good.

Also, she wished to take Mildred because she thought the girl might actually enjoy it... a thought she'd never have entertained before Pippa.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, I'm not dead...

Thank you for your continued support, and although I've not replied to all of your comments (I do intend to at some point) they are the reason I continue to write, despite hitting a generously sized wall called 'writers block.'

As always, comments and the like are much appreciated, and you can find me on tumblr @ohlookitstomorrowff

Catch:)
A Mime For Company

Chapter Summary

"So, let me get this straight," Hecate said menacingly. She backed Pippa against the wall, stalking her like her prey, pleased when the blonde made a small squeak of shock when she realised there was no escape. "You told my housekeeper I would be attending a soiree, and yet, coincidentally, neither of you sought fit to inform me?"

"If you want to put it so bluntly, then... then I suppose, yes," Pippa shrank, relaxing slightly into the wall. As her breath left her lungs rapidly, the movement caused her considerable chest to rise and brush against Hecate's own. Pippa was still clad in her riding attire, and beneath the damned silken blouse - that Hecate was sure would appear see-through in the right lighting - Hecate could tell, no, Hecate could feel that Pippa was unbound.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Bedford carriage trundled along a narrow, winding road in the heat of mid-July, jostling its occupants to and fro as the large wheels dipped in and out of the numerous potholes.

Cassandra and Georgia had initiated a game of cards, but that had soon gone up in the air - quite literally - and now both women were left to huff over the weather (a very English pastime) and lack of entertainment. Their companions, on the other hand, sat in relative silence, the only sound coming from Mildred turning the page of a weathered copy of 'Pride And Prejudice,' and incoherent breaths as the young girl tried to sound out particularly challenging words.

Mildred Hubble's enthusiasm was something that had been sparking a feeling of pride inside Hecate as of late. Their lessons were going surprisingly well - the only downside, for both participants, being the lack of time spent together. Neither was able to admit such sentiments, of course. Mildred out of fear. And Hecate out of a lack of knowledge.

Apart from glancing toward Mildred from time-to-time, Hecate kept her gaze fixated on the small window, catching glimpses of the world beyond. They'd barely cleared the London smog, but seeing the expanse of blue sky flecked with pillowed clouds, and the tall trees budding green and housing birds, Hecate could understand the draw that had Pippa tied.

Pippa was vibrancy personified, in her personality and her wardrobe, Hecate could picture the scene clearly; Pippa dressed in bright pastels, running through the tall grass barefooted, the sun's rays bestowing its blessing on her bronzed skin, finding a companion in the golden shine of her hair.

She was a gift wasted on the darkened streets of Victorian London.

"I've always preferred Mr Wickham," Cassandra stated, invading her Sister's private dreamings.

Luckily, Hecate could blame her red cheeks on exasperation at Cassandra's narrow view. "And why's that?" Hecate questioned, her cold, clipped voice causing Mildred and Georgia to flit their
eyes between the Sisters nervously.

"Mr Darcy is so dour and serious," Cassandra said, distaste curling her upper lip in a sneer. "Whereas Mr Wickham," she continued much more cheerfully, her voice sounding breathy and overexaggerated, "is so handsome, and fun."

"You do realise Wickham is the villain of the novel?"

"What's life without a little risk?" Cassandra retorted.

"Yes, I suppose one could consider de-flowering young girls a little risky," Hecate replied sardonically, her brow raised in mock humour.

A shocked, stifled laugh came from Mildred trying to hide her red face behind the book that was becoming the subject of controversy inside the carriage.

"I like Mr Bingley," Georgia intoned meekly, trying to avoid a needless row between the Sisters.

Cassandra chose not to take heed of her Maid's pitiful attempts at calm. Instead, she fixed Hecate with a smug look of her own; "I suppose you would be sympathetic towards Darcy, Sister, dear. You being his female counterpart, after all."

"Hardly," Hecate said with finality, flicking an invisible piece of lint from her dark skirt.

"Well, you do remind me of him a little, my lady," Mildred whispered.

Hecate's face turned to stone; "I shall, perhaps, consider you fit to make that comparison when you have read the entirety of the book, Mildred Hubble."

Mildred quickly buried her face in the book once more, a small smile still playing at the corners of her mouth: it seemed she wasn't as afraid of Hecate as she had been the first few times they'd met. Hecate supposed she should do something to rectify that, if only she cared enough to.

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The Trenton estate was hidden away at the end of a long drive, thick trees standing at either side like a guard of honour. The house itself looked very much like the cottages in the village of Hertfordshire a few miles down the road, except on a much larger scale.

The rugged, sandy-coloured stone, the large, weathered oak door, the overgrown side garden with its sunflowers and wild daisies. Even the bronze statue of a gnome didn't mar the picturesque view. Everything about the scene in front of Hecate was homely, idyllic, and relaxed. Pippa hadn't been lying when she said it was beautiful.

Hecate closed her eyes and tilted her face toward the sky breathing deeply, the fresh scent of the country air revitalising her senses. She almost threw her arms wide and spun on the spot like a girl, and perhaps she would've, if not for the urge to sneeze crept upon her out of nowhere - it didn't seem like her senses were revitalised after all.

The sound of horses hooves coincided with Hecate's delicate sneeze, followed by a familiar, jovial greeting; "ah, Ladies, how wonderful it is to see you!" The Earl of Trenton trotted towards them, his stature improved sat atop a majestic, brown stallion.

All four of them curtsied in unison, Hecate and Cassandra brightly offering; "and you, my Lord, thank you for inviting us."
"Not at all," the Earl replied, skillfully dismounting his steed. "We just caught sight of your carriage as we were finishing our hack - I offered Pippa to race, I think it's clear to see who won."

"You cheated!" Pippa cried, cantering toward them on a snow-white horse.

Hecate gasped as the blonde came to a stop. Far, far removed from what she had seen her friend dressed in previously, Pippa had forgone the traditional riding habit of a Lady, and instead, had chosen to wear a pair of skin-tight, light-brown breeches and a flowing white blouse. Her hair, too, was different, free from any pins or adornments, windswept and held from her face in a simple twist at the back of her head.

Pippa looked so unconventional, the fact that she was not sitting side-saddle shouldn't have been that much of a shock. But Hecate thought the world and his wife must've heard the trembling sound that fell from her lips when Pippa gracefully threw her left leg over to join her right before jumping from her mount.

Her whole body shook as Pippa raced to throw her arms around her, whispering, "Hiccup, I've missed you," into the crook of her neck. It had only been a week since they'd last saw one another, and in that time, they'd managed to exchange three letters a piece, but still, Hecate had to agree, a week was more than enough time to feel the aching want of loneliness. In fact, she missed Pippa as soon as the blonde pulled herself from her arms and made her way to greet Cassandra - much more formally, Hecate smiled to herself.

After all the noise, Lady Trenton was quick to join them in the courtyard - the Pentangle matriarch still very much retaining her appearance as a Lady, complete with pearls and everything.

"We're so pleased to have you here, Lady Hecate," the older woman said as she and Hecate led the way into the house.

"My Sister and I are very grateful of your hospitality, Lady Trenton."

"Not at all," Lady Trenton tutted, patting Hecate on the arm. "My Daughter was very insistent on yours and your Sister's attendance," she turned towards Hecate as they came to a stop at the foot of the stairs in the entrance hall. "Especially yours," she winked.

Hecate was unsure as to why the statement, or the gesture that followed, should make her blush, but it did. Profusely. "She... she is a good f-friend," Hecate stammered.

Lady Trenton just hummed, a knowing look in her eye, before turning to address everyone. "A light luncheon has been prepared, and then I suggest we all retire before this evenings festivities," she looked back at Hecate, "I do hope you've brought a suitable gown - you and Lady Cassandra are to be the guests of honour at our annual ball this evening."

"You never said anything about a ball!"

Hecate had been anxiously pacing her guest quarters, her hands wrung dry and raw when Pippa had sheepishly interrupted her.

"I might've forgotten to mention it," Pippa offered, biting her lip and avoiding Hecate's eyes. "Hiccup, what's the matter?"

When Hecate's shoulders deflated in defeat, Pippa rushed to her side, worry and regret lacing her voice; "I'm sorry... I should've known - you don't like balls, or dancing, or... I just thought we
could... that is, I wanted to-

"It isn't that," Hecate murmured, "I don't have a dress."

"Oh," Pippa said dumbly, her expression looking far guiltier by the second.

"Pippa, what have you done?" Hecate asked slowly, her voice neutral and cold.

Shivering as she stepped backwards, Pippa attempted to justify her actions. "Now, Hecate, please don't be cross with me, but I may have... I may have corresponded with your housekeeper-

"Ada?" Hecate's eyes widened - if Ada and Pippa were in cahoots, that did not bode well for Hecate. Not at all.

"Yes - she's a lovely woman, by the way, extremely fond of you-"

"Pippa," Hecate warned.

"Right, well," Pippa gulped, "as I said, we've written to one another, and I may have let it slip to her that my Mother had planned a party of sorts-"

"So, let me get this straight," Hecate said menacingly. She backed Pippa against the wall, stalking her like her prey, pleased when the blonde made a small squeak of shock when she realised there was no escape. "You told my housekeeper I would be attending a soiree, and yet, coincidentally, neither of you sought fit to inform me?"

"If you want to put it so bluntly, then... then I suppose, yes," Pippa shrank, relaxing slightly into the wall. As her breath left her lungs rapidly, the movement caused her considerable chest to rise and brush against Hecate's own. Pippa was still clad in her riding attire, and beneath the damned silken blouse - that Hecate was sure would appear see-through in the right lighting - Hecate could feel that Pippa was unbound.

Beneath her shirt, Pippa wore no corset, her breasts soft and swaying and free.

Hecate recoiled, jumping backwards and into the air, as though she'd been thrown by a sudden strike of lightning.

"Hiccup?" Pippa inquired breathlessly.

Had she felt it too?

Hecate could not -would not - address what had just happened, and instead submitted to the inevitable. "I suppose you've instructed Ada to pack me a suitable gown for this evening then?"

Pippa might've felt as awkward, or just as affected, but Hecate far more suspected that her friend was simply oblivious to what had just transpired. While Hecate remained dazed and on-edge, Pippa reverted back to normality, admiring the dress that Ada had surreptitiously packed enthusiastically.

When the charade of normality became too much for Hecate to handle, she tried to rectify the situation by implementing honesty. "I do like to dance," she whispered.

"What was that?" Pippa hummed, her back to Hecate, still far too busy admiring the dress - even Hecate had to concede that Ada had done well. Although, Hecate hadn't the faintest idea where her housekeeper had sourced such a tasteful, yet beautiful, gown.

Midnight brocade that seemed to shine, patterns embroidered in navy, straight-cut, and high-
collared, a single keyhole cutout at the base of the neck that would be the only hint of skin on show.

So much skin on show for Pippa to see.

"Dance," Hecate inhaled, "I do dance - that is, I can dance, I just...I-I..." Pippa's eyes sparkled with mirth, a thousand glittering diamonds that, somehow, made Hecate want to cry; "don't tease," she pleaded, her voice hoarse.

"I'm not," Pippa soothed, edging her way into Hecate's personal space. "I could never," she iterated more forcibly.

"You think I don't like to dance-"

"Only because I've never seen you do so," Pippa quickly explained.

"Well," Hecate gulped a shuddering breath, "I... perhaps that is because I don't get many chances..."

"Hecate..." Her name was a mere breath on Pippa's lips, and Hecate wanted to be enveloped between the soft petals of a rose as Pippa cupped her cheek, her thumb swiping away a tear that Hecate didn't realise had fallen.

"There's never been anyone whom I've trusted enough. There's never been anyone I've wanted," Hecate admitted, her eyes fixed on Pippa's. Belatedly, she realised she'd left her previous statement open-ended; "to dance with," she added hastily. Firmly. Hecate didn't want to give Pippa the wrong impression, or herself, for that matter.

"Perhaps..." Pippa's gaze dropped low as she collected her thoughts. "Perhaps you might like to dance with me?"

"Tonight?" Hecate questioned dumbly, her mind trying to play catch-up with her heart.

"Yes, tonight."

Regaining any form of control was difficult when Pippa smiled so blithely, lighting up the dark corners of the room that proved hard to reach.

"I should very much like to dance with you. Tonight, Hiccup."

As always, Hecate found comfort on the edges of ballrooms, sat beside someone's maiden Aunt, or an elderly Lady who might've thought herself in a different decade. But tonight, Hecate was almost sure the still of calm waters that had settled inside of her was all to do with Pippa, and nothing to do with where they were situated.

The set Lady Trenton had put together was not nearly as frightening as Hecate had expected - only a few dozen guests waltzed their way around the polished, hardwood floor, and none of them seemed to be as unapproachable as the London patrons Hecate was used to. Not that Hecate intended to be in the company of anyone other than Pippa, of course.

Hecate might've thought her Sister out of place with the toned-down audience, but Cassandra was as vibrant as ever, perhaps even more so.

The fact that she was staying at an old, country house didn't seem to have hampered the youngest
Hardbroom's choice of attire - Cassandra could have been part of the court in her billowing, emerald satin dress and austentatious diamonds. Hecate watched on as her Sister's tiered necklace sprayed fractals of light across the dancefloor while she spun in the arms of a rather plain looking gentleman.

"That's Mr James Rippley," Pippa offered discreetly, her gaze following Hecate's toward the couple.

"You mean, he doesn't have a title? I'm surprised - I've never seen my Sister dance with a man who wasn't a peer or overly handsome."

"You find the men your Sister cavorts with handsome?" Pippa's expression was one of confusion, but her tone was very much flat.

"In a fashion," Hecate offered as a means of stalling the crux of her answer. It would be unseemly to allow herself to be portrayed as an unmarried woman far too interested in the physique of a man - and it was definitely not a picture Hecate had ever seen herself in, nor did she wish Pippa to look at her so.

The thought of Pippa thinking that she was a lonely spinster who longed to throw herself at any willing man, caused bile to rise in Hecate's throat, and her head to spin.

She took a gulp of champagne and a few deep breaths to allow the sudden feeling of nausea to pass. All the while, Hecate was aware of the relentless inquiry of Pippa's stare - it burned the side of her face, she could feel her blood rising until the heat became almost too much.

Her voice was pained and dry when she finally spoke; "I believe one can measure a man's - another person's - physical appearance without actually feeling any sort of attraction toward them..."

Pippa's eyebrows continued to be raised in confusion and on impulse, Hecate found her eyes darting around for the nearest exit.

She made a fumbling step forward before slim, steady fingers closed around her wrist. "Hecate?" Pippa had gone from questioning, to frightened, to hurt so fast that Hecate could picture herself on a small ship, large waves knocking her from port to starboard.

"I can tell you that the footman who dragged my luggage to my room is physically attractive, but that doesn't mean that I am attracted to him, or that I have any inkling of romantic or sexual feelings towards him." Hecate's speech was hurried, worry quickening the snap of each vowel - she feared that Pippa was reading too much into this conversation, she feared Pippa wasn't looking hard enough. "And... and, let's say your Mother, for example," she awkwardly continued, too unsettled by the thought of even a moments silence passing between them. "I think she's elegantly beautiful, but that's... I mean, I don't... I'm not... It's nothing more than an observation."

"And me?" Pippa whispered. "Do you think I'm 'elegantly beautiful'?

It was the last question Hecate wanted Pippa to ask: she couldn't lie, saying Pippa was anything less than the epitome of beauty must surely be a cardinal sin, but she couldn't tell the truth either. How could she tell her only friend that she found her more beautiful, more elegant, more appealing than anyone she'd ever come across? How could she tell Pippa that even Venus herself, paled in comparison?

How could Hecate answer the inevitable question that would follow?
She thought Pippa beautiful, but was there something more?

"Any man in this room would give an arm to have you by his side, Pippa," Hecate said softly, although her mind was sent reeling at the vision.

Just when Hecate thought the torturous discussion was over, and she and Pippa had gone back to sipping their drinks and surveying the surrounding merriment, Hecate heard the heartbreaking whisper that was sure to haunt her as she tried to sleep; "that wasn't what I asked you."

After a while of awkward avoidance, Pippa had slipped away from Hecate's side, and Hecate begged off to her rooms, feigning fatigue.

She'd forgotten that Mildred would be waiting for her, book in hand; "would you like me to go, my lady?" The young girl asked as she heard her mistress' tired sigh.

Hecate thought for a moment, but quickly dismissed Mildred's proposal - the idea of being left alone in self-made torture, dispelling any longing for rest. "No, no, there's no need for that. Just allow me to undress and then we can begin."

"Of course, Lady Hecate."

"And, Mildred?" Hecate called as she slipped behind the changing screen.

"Yes, my lady?"

"I'll need you to help me out of this ridiculous thing."

"I think it's a beautiful dress..."

"Yes," Hecate whispered, her eyes closing as she remembered Pippa's similar words, "I suppose it is. But it's not very practical, is it, Mildred?"

"No, my lady," Mildred agreed, her small hand working the last button running down Hecate's spine free. "But I suppose it wasn't made for that - a dress like this is for dancing."

Dancing.

Pippa had wanted to dance with her.

Hecate allowed a single tear to fall to the ground along with her dress.

In her nightgown and robe, Hecate reclined on the soft chaise longue at the foot of her bed, a glass of wine perched at her side and pen in parchment in her hands. Silence, in the presence of another, had never been her friend, but with Mildred sat at the makeshift desk practising her longhand, Hecate felt at peace - even when it became apparent that Mildred's script was utterly dreadful and barely legible.

It was clear to see, even through the haze of sadness, that asking Mildred to stay and complete their lesson had been the right idea.

As Hecate paused, her pen hovering above the parchment, her mind searching for the correct phrase to depict a scene of violence, one hand moved to twirl a long lock of her dark hair. It was one of her few indulgences in relaxation - the feeling of, after a long day spent as straight as a pin, allowing her curls to tumble free from their tight confines.

Keeping one's hair so long was taxing, especially when fashion and decorum favoured restrictive
styles - a proper Lady must never be seen in polite society with her hair let down. But Hecate felt attached to her deep, black waves - and not just in the literal sense - the rest of her features she found unbecoming, but her hair was something she'd always taken pride in. She admired its shine and its many hues, and when she let it down at night, she felt the stress of the day tumble along with it.

When she was a child, her nanny had braided it in two plaits before she went to bed, much in the same way that Mildred now wore hers. In the sentimentality of the moment, Hecate was tempted to offer her assistance in brushing the young child's hair, and just as she opened her mouth to do so, the door clicked open to reveal a very sullen looking Pippa.

"Hiccup," Pippa whispered wearily. Taking small, tentative steps into the room, Pippa set delicate eyes on Hecate, until the quiet cough coming from the corner interrupted her fixated approach.

"What? Oh, goodness, is that a child Hecate? Who?"

Before Hecate could answer any of the quickfire questions, Mildred stood, and true to herself, poorly executed a fumbling curtsy in Pippa's direction. "Mildred Hubble, m' lady - Lady Hecate's ladies maid - well, not really, I'm a parlour maid usually, but her ladyship asked me-"

"Mildred!" Hecate hissed, her eyes flashing in a warning for Mildred to cease talking immediately.

"A parlour maid, really, Hecate? None of the usual French ladies maids up to your high standards?" Pippa's words were spoken in jest, a mischievous smile passing between her and Mildred Hubble, and suddenly, Hecate no longer felt quite as at ease.

"Cassandra's maid normally attends to me also," Hecate mumbled in embarrassment.

Pippa hummed disapprovingly, before turning her attention back on Mildred. "Well, Mildred Hubble, acting ladies maid, how old are you?"

"I'm fourteen, ma'am."

"Fourteen?" Pippa's eyes widened in shock. "I've never... so young..." Pippa shook her head, schooling her features into a look of interest. "Mildred, I wonder, do you enjoy your job?"

Biting her lip, Mildred looked to Hecate for permission to speak, but her mistress paid no attention, her eyes, instead, bore holes in the soft satin of her slippers.

If Pippa had been anyone else, Hecate would have called her out at once and admonished her thoroughly for having the gumption to even dare and question her staff in a manner so outright. If it had been anyone else, there would be no war raging between Hecate and her feelings.

But Pippa wasn't anyone else, and perhaps that was the root of Hecate's whole problem. So, she stayed silent and allowed Mildred to answer.

"I-I... I don't hate it," Mildred shrugged. "It is hard, and sometimes I feel so tired... but I wouldn't change it."

"You wouldn't?"

"You wouldn't?"

Pipp and Hecate expressed their surprise simultaneously, and Mildred had to suppress a small
smile as she reiterated; "no, I wouldn't."

"And why's that, Mildred?" Pippa asked.

"Because, my lady," Mildred said softly, "if I didn't work as a parlour maid in the Duke of Bedford's household, then I wouldn't have met Lady Hecate."

A sizeable lump formed in Hecate's throat at Mildred's words, she could barely breathe let alone speak. Pippa, too, appeared touched at the girl's sentiments, looking fondly upon Mildred and then Hecate before stating; "I'm glad Lady Hecate has someone so nice to help her around that stuffy, old house."

Mildred furrowed her brow in confusion, "I think Lady Hecate thinks I'm a bit of a nuisance when it comes to my cleaning duties anyway, but it is she who has been helping me."

"Oh?" Pippa said in surprise, before moving to sit in the free, straight-backed chair to Hecate's left.

Hecate, still muted, kept her eyes trained ahead as she felt the whispered breeze of Pippa crossing her legs - it had not escaped Hecate's attention that Pippa had also changed into her nightclothes, and the pale pink melding with soft, bronze curves made withstanding the awkward situation even harder.

She tried her best to re-focus on her own writings while Mildred informed an enthusiastic Pippa all about their nightly lessons. If anyone noticed the redness of her cheeks, then Hecate would irrefutably blame it on the heat of the fire, and most definitely not on the flattering words that fell from Pippa's lips.

"I only wish I had received tutelage from someone so... interesting - someone who could so easily inspire me and retain my full focus - Hecate? Hiccup?"

Neck cracking as she was drawn to attention, Hecate was met by Pippa's hand atop her forehead in jest. The movement caused Pippa's robe to slip an inch off her shoulder, revealing the soft lines of her collarbone and the start of the wonderful valley of her chest.

Hecate jumped back from Pippa's touch, every inch of her skin ablaze, her heart racing beneath her breastbone. "I-I'm sorry, h-have I-I missed something," she stammered.

"Nothing of note," Pippa said offhandedly, concern clouding her face. "Although, you now have me intrigued as to what it is that has stolen you from us?" Pippa gestured to the book of parchment in Hecate's shaking hand.

As Hecate moved to hide the book behind her back, suddenly aware she was revealing its existence to anyone, other than Mildred, for the very first time, her young maid chose the opportunity to explain for her.

"It's a manuscript. Lady Hecate's always writing it, but she never does tell me exactly what it's about."

"You're writing a novel?" Pippa asked.

Fearful she could not tell read Pippa's thoughts from her expression, Hecate allowed a wave of anger to overtake her. Was Pippa laughing at her? How dare Mildred reveal something so deeply personal? Something that could, possibly, be so detrimental.

She was shouting before she even realised.
Towering over Mildred like the big bad wolf from the book of fairytales she'd gifted the girl. Her breaths were laboured, her lips snarling, and her words, biting.

Mildred shook with the effort of containing her own emotions, but like Hecate's, they overtook her in a flash. Tears cascaded down her cheeks as she ran from the room, dodging Pippa's attempts of comfort along the way.

As soon as the door slammed, Pippa spun to face her in an animalistic move, and, for the first time in her life, Hecate truly felt fear: she feared the painful blow that was imminent.

Her Father had stood before her, his fists raised, and so, too, had her Brother. But Hecate had never mourned the loss of blood - only Pippa held that power over her.

"How could you," Pippa rasped, fury emanating from every pore, "how could you? She's just a child!"

Hecate felt her anger dissipated as quickly as it had come, leaving in its wake a deep feeling of self-loathing and regret.

What had she done?
To Mildred.
And to Pippa.
Two of the only people she'd ever cared about.
Two of the only people she'd ever-

"Hecate, answer me!"

"Go," Hecate cried. "I need you to go."

"Hecate-"

"Go! Now!"

And Pippa turned on her heel and left, perhaps to find Mildred and console the poor girl - at least, that's what Hecate prayed for as she sank to her knees in despair, a crumpled mess of darkness, in a room full of light.

The wait for Mildred Hubble the following morning was, of course, fruitless. Hecate had never considered herself an overly emotional being, often trying desperately to hide any hint or sign of it, lest she be considered week, but sat alone in her guest suite, absorbed in total silence but for the ticking of the ornamental clock, Hecate felt every feeling, re-lived every thought, re-played every image.

By 9 o'clock, she was positively drained. Shaking with the effort of keeping it all together.

Despite her own experiences with elders in a position of power, Hecate had inflicted that pain onto another, and to hurt a soul as kind and giving as Mildred Hubble, Hecate knew herself to be nothing less than monstrous.

She had to escape the gloomy silence, even if that meant seeing Pippa - Pippa, who'd likely never
speak to her again.

The conservatory was shrouded in the grey clouds of early morning, and the lack of sunlight very much belied the atmosphere at the intimate, round table. Only the Countess turned, aware of Hecate's presence, however, her smile didn't quite reach her eyes as she patted the empty place beside her; "come and sit, dear, you must be famished."

Hecate demurely thanked her, grasping the white linen napkin like a babe seeking comfort.

"Tea?" The Countess offered.

"Please."

Like a dutiful hostess, the Countess poured gracefully, passing Hecate a slice of toast along with the china cup and saucer. "Eat, dear, you're much too thin."

Used to off-handed comments on her appearance around the dining table, Hecate hid the slight curl of her lip perfectly, indulging in the warm familiarity of burning her tongue just to keep quiet.

At least something in the room held a sliver of warmth. While the Countess could easily slip into her socialite facade, it seemed her Husband and Daughter, and Hecate's own Sister could not.

Cassandra appeared to have taken up the reading of tea leaves, staring wistfully at the dregs in the bottom of her cup. But Cassie forever lived with her head in the clouds, too wrapped up in herself and her own mind to pay Hecate a fleeting thought. That's how they'd always been, that was what they were used to. And Hecate was no saint in the matter either; each time her Sister had tried to break down her walls, Hecate had firmly shut the door, mocking Cassandra's whimsical and fanciful personality. Although the last month or so, ever since Pippa had come into their lives, their relationship had improved, they'd become more like Sisters. She shouldn't have felt hurt by her Sister's lack of acknowledgement, but she did.

The fact that the Earl was hidden behind a large broadsheet was of no concern. Living with her Father and Brother, Hecate had come to know that men, more often than not, found conversing with women to be tedious and dull, avoiding it unless absolutely necessary, or, when in company. It seemed the Earl of Trenton did not believe Hecate or Cassandra to be up to his calibre - either that or the Pentangle patriarch was not much of a morning person.

In truth, it was only Pippa's behaviour that truly struck like a knife. She sat in complete silence and moved not a muscle, Hecate had no right take offence after the fiasco she'd created last night, but Pippa's sad eyes and cold demeanour sent a chill straight through Hecate's spine. Pippa was so much more than the porcelain doll that she was made out to be but had she been made of glass, Hecate felt as though her actions would have shattered her, damaged her beyond repair.

"Would you care to take a turn around the gardens with me?"

Hecate, like the rest of the table, shot her head towards Pippa in surprise - everyone was certainly paying attention now.

Pippa remained unreadable, and Hecate had to fight to control the quiver of her lip as she answered a breathless 'yes'.

Although the sun had no place in the bleak sky, the air was clammy and covered by her shawl, and Pippa's flickering eyes, Hecate could not dispel the considerable heat.

The path they walked was overgrown, bluebells, buttercups and daisies scattered amongst the tall
grass like rainbows. Pippa stopped as they neared the sound of running water, plucking a sprig of lavender and rolling it between her fingers, permeating the air with its scent.

"I adore the smell of lavender," Pippa muttered softly, as they continued onward. They stopped in a clearing, a large, marble fountain occupying the space. "Who could have thought Mother nature was so complex, that she gifted us with a simple plant that could instantaneously make us feel relaxed."

Well, Hecate mused to herself, she was not relaxed at that particular moment, nor was she able to converse so lightly with Pippa without attempting to remove the proverbial elephant from their friendship.

"About last night," she began haltingly, stopping Pippa in her tracks as the blonde looked toward her with glassy eyes. "I-I was... perhaps I was... I didn't mean... I thought you might not want to be my friend anymore?"

She felt like a child begging to be loved. Her heart slowed as she awaited the confirmation that would draw last breath.

"Oh, Hecate," Pippa said solemnly, reaching upward with the soft pad of her thumb, wiping away a single tear and leaving behind the unmistakable scent of lavender.

Hecate breathed shakily, trying to quell the sudden urge to draw Pippa near and hold her tight, never to let go.

Trying to stem the gravity of the situation, Pippa let out a soft laugh, much too meek and watery to hold any weight; "oh, darling, don't be so silly." "You're my friend, Hiccup, my best friend," Pippa emphasised as Hecate's cheeks darkened and her gaze lowered at the use of the word 'darling'. "And you always will be, nothing will, or ever could, change that - and certainly not something as simple as an argument."

"I was embarrassed," Hecate admitted, "I've never... my writing, I've never let... no one..."

"You needn't have been," Pippa soothed, her hands holding the upper of Hecate's arms tight, "not now, and not ever."

Hecate sniffled, nodding until Pippa wrapped her in her arms and she could bury her face in the silk of golden curls.

"I'm sorry," Hecate whispered.

"Me too. Although," Pippa pulled back, her honeyed eyes surveying Hecate cautiously. "I will admit to being rather curious as to your writings?"

"They're nothing really... dark musings about death, and other, such light, topics."

"I should like to read them sometime." Although Pippa laughed slightly, Hecate could not deny the sincerity in her voice, so she merely nodded as they continued their venture around the garden. The sun begging to make an appearance, and this time, when they set off, they were hand-in-hand.

"But, Hiccup," Pippa ventured after a few minutes.

"Yes," Hecate cautiously replied.

"I do think you should apologise to Mildred - she thinks the world of you, she really does, and with
good reason-
"I don't think-

"No, Hecate, you listen to me. You're wonderful, you're smart and funny, and kind, you're beautiful! Of course, the girl looks up to you, she's never met someone so eloquent and interested in her, in her entire life."

Hecate felt the blood thrumming in her veins as her heart stuttered: she'd been touched by all of Pippa's words, but one, one she'd never associated with herself, reached deep within her and turned her stomach into knots.

**Beautiful.**

A word so simple Pippa might've said it just to help improve her friend's spirits? Perhaps Pippa didn't mean it at all? Whatever the reason, Hecate was willing to take it; to cling to it like a raft in the middle of the ocean. Hold it in her heart like it was her only hope.

"I don't know how," Hecate voiced, the words sounding dry and clipped as her head swam in a drowsy state of too much emotion. "I want to apologise, I just don't know how..."

"Leave it to me," Pippa said with a wink.

---

"Where, exactly, are you taking me, Pippa?"

Just before luncheon, Pippa had, unceremoniously, dragged her friend (who hadn't eaten any breakfast, and was looking forward to the smell of roast beef) across a field, through a thicket of long, tangled grass - and more than a few nettles - and now, was literally cajoling her up the considerable incline of a hill on charm alone.

"Come on now, Hiccup! We're nearly there."

"Where is there?" Hecate grumbled sardonically.

Reaching the crest, Pippa beamed while motioning her friend toward her; "Here," she said simply, directing Hecate's gaze toward an old oak tree. Its curved and winding branches cast a welcome shade, and the blanket laid beneath it looked far too inviting, thanks to her now blistered heels.

Except, it seemed their spot had already been claimed.

"Good afternoon, Lady Hecate," Mildred muttered performing her usual curtsy - which was neither far more polished than usual.

She really had hurt the girl's feelings.

"Good afternoon," Hecate replied, her voice just as stilted as Mildred's greeting had been.

"Well, this isn't at all awkward," Pippa observed as she joined Mildred under the tree.

Narrowing her eyes at the thought of a conspiracy, Hecate warily inched forward, allowing herself to sit where Pippa patted the ground next to her.

"I had a picnic prepared for us-" Pippa pulled a wicker basket onto her lap, ignoring the nervous atmosphere of her companions. "And don't worry, Hecate, I made sure there were enough savouries included, just for you," Pippa smiled, forcing a small tea-plate filled with cheese sandwiches and
scotch-eggs into Hecate's hands.

"And plenty of sweets for us," she winked toward Mildred, offering the girl a similar plate laden with jam sandwiches and pastries. "Now, are either of you going to talk, or am I to find a mime for conversation?"

'Leave it to me.'

Of course, this is what would have happened when she'd left Pippa to arrange her apology to Mildred. How had Hecate not foreseen?

But the thought, on Pippa's part, was there. And on Hecate's, so was the opportunity.

She swallowed the lump in her throat, along with her pride, and forced her lips to move; "I believe I owe you an apology, Mildred."

Mildred's eyes turned glassy as Hecate continued, the warmth radiating from the woman next to her, providing her with all the courage she needed. "I reacted very badly. I was embarrassed, and I deflected that onto you... please, believe me, Mildred, when I say this... but I-I... I have been glad of your..." Hecate sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose, racking her brain for the right words. "I have been glad of you, Mildred Hubble. And I don't wish you to detest me... or-"

"I think what Hecate is trying to say," Pippa interjected, "is that she cares for you, and she's very sorry she's not been able to convey that in a more productive fashion."

Hecate blushed profusely at the flowery sentimentality of Pippa's words, but, tellingly, she did not refute them.

"I'm sorry too," Mildred tearily whispered, "I shouldn't have told Lady Pippa about-"

"It was careless, yes, but I forgive you," Hecate interrupted, unwilling to see the girl so upset.

"I've ruined it, haven't I?" Mildred questioned meekly. "Our lessons - they are what I look forward to most, and I've gone and ruined it."

"No, Mildred," Hecate said, as softly as her low voice could muster. "I, too, look forward to our lessons and see no need for them to be discontinued. That is unless you don't want to-"

Hecate had the words, literally, knocked out of her as a small bundle charged toward her, hugging her waist tightly.

"Thank you," Mildred whispered.

And Hecate only managed half of the girl's bravery, mouthing the words to Pippa as her friend reached out to take her free hand smiling through her tears.

Later, as Hecate watched Pippa re-enact the fairytales which Mildred read, she had one thought: everything, the ups, and the downs included, it was all rather domestic.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, this is long overdue, and I feel like my apologies for that have gotten rather old,
so I shall stop. But just know, that I have no intention of abandoning this story, it will be completed as quickly as I can.

I don't know why, but I'm starting to love Pippa so much, she's so easy to write, and although our personalities are wildly different, I find I can relate to her. Which is odd because my disposition is far more akin with Hecate's. I don't know what I'm trying to say, it's late, and I'm confused...

As always, thank you for your continued support, and comments and the like are much appreciated - I will, eventually, get 'round to replying to them all, I do read them and they make my day.

I'm on tumblr @ohlookitstomorrow

Catch:)

Veiled In Darkness: Ensconced In Feeling

Chapter Summary

"What? Just what?" Pippa whispered a finger under Hecate's chin forcing their eyes to meet.

"You... you're you, and I'm, well I'm me - I didn't think you would... that it would be something you," Hecate huffed, the words refusing to leave the tip of her tongue. "Pippa, you're every man's fantasy! Do you realise that?"

"What has that got to do with anything?" Pippa said dryly. "I've never met a man whom I would like to kiss... not as much as-" with clenched fists and a stamp of the foot, Pippa mirrored the actions of a frustrated child. "I never got the chance to tell you earlier - to explain," she sighed deeply, reaching for Hecate's hands before stepping back, coaxing her friend into less cramped conditions - and hopefully into calmer waters as a result.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

True contentment had been something that had evaded Hecate for longer than she could remember. She could scarcely recall a time when she'd felt so at ease: it was more than just happiness, it was something that filled her entire being, filtered through the very air she breathed.

And that was how her days were spent.

In true contentment.

Happiness.

Bliss.

She returned to the old oak tree often, Pippa and Mildred in tow, and there the stayed, for hours and hours, until the sun had begun to bleed its light into the sky, creating hues of orange, purple and pink. Pink that fitted Pippa perfectly.

Hecate wasn't the only one who seemed to blossom under Pippa's attention - Pippa had brought a new lease of life to Mildred's lessons, interactive and imaginative, Pippa had a knack for inspiring, making teaching no task at all. It had Mildred and Hecate enthralled.

They laughed as they learned, full and bright and real.

It became more than reading and writing and the art of literature, for Hecate at least. She grew more in those few, short days than she had in the last decade, her own mind became less of a maze, and more important than anything, she now had the knowledge and security to allow her self-loathing to decrease. Ever so slightly, but still, Hecate had never once looked in the mirror and not longed to crush the reflection into shards that matched the crumbling of her heart.

Perhaps, that was the reason she didn't realise the end was nigh? That her time with Pippa, far from
prying eyes and poisoned tongues, and with Mildred too, was not made to last. Her last night in Hertfordshire was upon her within a blink of an eye.

It was fitting that it fell on the summer solstice: when the sun went down on the 21st day of the 6th month, darkness set upon its path to encompassing the light of day.

Sat in front of a bonfire; Mildred at her side, a slice of bread forked into the flames until it went crisp, watching Pippa flit to-and-fro amongst the villagers and their celebrations, Hecate resolved to put their parting from her mind. Til morn came, she would pretend she had all the time in the world, and watching the firelight dance in Pippa's eyes was an everyday indulgence.

While revelry paraded in symphony around her, Hecate had been gifted the grandest view, the royal box, watching the conductor's masterful movements and completely losing herself in a trance.

Mildred eventually moved away, joining in with the village children and their games, but Hecate stayed rooted to the spot, basking in the grand, splendour of beauty.

"It's nice to see her so happy."

The smooth voice floated from her left, where the Countess of Trenton perched herself elegantly on the log beside Hecate - at least, as elegantly as one could when seated on an upturned tree.

Hecate had met many a grand Lady that navigated the Queen's court and prestigious ballrooms, but none of them carried the mantle of grace and beauty as well as the Countess: a woman who never seemed to put a foot wrong but was always at ease, the straight set of her spine was laced with confidence. She may have held the appearance of snobbery and her aura untouchable, but were it for the twinkle glinting in her bright, blue eyes belying her sense of fun and mischief.

Perhaps, given the fullness of time, her Daughter, too, would share these attributes? Grow to perch at the very height of society - beguiling all manners of crowds?

But that would come at a cost. Pippa was vibrant like flowers emerging from the mist of a spring morn, her exuberance for life and her generous capacity to love and care, emanated from her and touched any who crossed her path like the first rainfall of July. Hecate couldn't bear the deep sadness she would feel if Pippa was hidden, contained within the twinkle of an eye.

"She's always happy," Hecate replied.

The Countess hummed, her eyes moving from her Daughter to Hecate, "she is adept at finding the smallest sliver of light in the darkness. She can make so much from nothing, yet, sometimes, I wonder how real her smile is... Do you understand where I'm coming from, Lady Hecate?"

"I... I-I think so," Hecate answered unsurely. The gist of the Countess' words was plain enough, but Hecate failed to see what she'd missed: she thought she knew Pippa, but like a jigsaw puzzle that was nearing completion, Hecate was starting to realise there may be one piece missing.

Ducking her head low, the Countess fixed Hecate with a look of severity; "my Daughter would be happy to live the life she is expected to - she would make the most of it and live it to the full, but why should she have to make do? Pippa might appear to be like every beautiful young girl lined up for an eightsome reel, but she's not, not really."

"I know," Hecate breathed, tears needlessly pricking her eyes as she recalled her first impressions of the girl she'd grown to care for so much.

"I know you see her as I do," the Countess smiled, "perhaps even more clearly. I think, like the
stars and a cloudless sky, you bring the best out in each other, despite your vast differences..."

"What are you trying to say, Lady Trenton," Hecate asked, her heart hammering beneath her breast. Had the Countess discovered what Hecate had tried so desperately to tame? Was she nearing closer to the truth, closer than even Hecate herself had dared venture?

"Nothing more than any old Mother feeling sentimental," the Countess patted Hecate's hand. "But I will say, in all seriousness: convention be damned, I want my Daughter to be happy, and at the moment, she truly is..."

"And?" Hecate gulped nervously.

"And that is all, Lady Hecate. Life is not as complicated as we often make it, sometimes, we just need to close our eyes and listen to our hearts - the mind, conscious thought, is the most divisive tool, but it can often wound us beyond repair... Don't let it." And with a final smile, the Countess disappeared, like a goddess bathed in amber, she manoeuvred through the thicket of trees where Hecate could see her Husband and the loving smile he bestowed upon her appearance.

"What did my Mother want?"

For the second time that evening, Hecate was startled by the voice of an apparition. Except for this time, although Pippa's company was much more welcome, Hecate was eclosed in a bubble of nervous energy that crackled in tune with the flames. The conversation with the Countess had shed new light, while managing heighten her confusion at the same time, and Hecate balanced on the edge of a knife as she fought with which one she should side with.

"To talk about you," Hecate offered in honesty.

"What did she say? I do wish she wouldn't meddle." Pippa's tone was full of jest, yet, Hecate could feel the edge of fear fall in line with her own.

"Nothing of note... just to say how much she loved seeing you happy."

"Oh," Pippa mused simply, her brow furrowing in confusion.

They settled into silence, neither awkward nor comfortable, each of them absorbed in their own thoughts, unaware of the similarities racing through their minds. Until: "it's so romantic," Pippa whispered, staring into the fire.

Hecate felt her stomach drop right into the depths of hell; "I wouldn't know romance," she snapped tersely.

Almost as though she'd forgotten Hecate was there, Pippa blinked up at her, mulling over Hecate's words. "But there must have someone over the years who's caught your eye?"

Hecate's memories recounted over the years of their own volition; the milkman's Daughter, who smiled at her every morning when she was a girl of 14. The seamstress who fitted her for her first ballgown, her hand accidentally brushing the backs of Hecate's breasts, causing Hecate to wrench herself away. The lithe ballet dancer, who twisted and turned on the stage and caused Hecate's skin to itch with want. And Pippa, who did nothing more than look past the wall of granite and fall deep into the broken ruins of Hecate's heart.

"No!" Hecate growled forcefully, unwilling to admit out loud what she'd only just realised. An awful feeling settled in the pit of her stomach as she witnessed the reaction of her callous response.
Pippa recoiled slightly, a look of hurt and disappointment crossing her face briefly. "What about the first boy you kissed?" She asked tentatively, trying to return the situation to calmer, friendlier waters.

Little did Pippa know, friendship had grown and blossomed long ago, twining Hecate in its vines alone. Always alone.

Disgust preceded embarrassment: the thought of ever coming so close to a man causing bile to rise in her throat, Pelham's smug smile looming behind her eyelids, delaying the flush of embarrassment when Hecate realised she was a fully grown woman who'd never actually shared such an intimate experience with another.

"I've never... I've never..."

"You've never been kissed?" Pippa half-shouted in shock.

"No," Hecate hissed, her eyes begging for quiet, "I've never been kissed, It's never been a top priority," she said with finality.

She regretted her admission as soon as she'd said it, but now even more so, as Pippa sat in silence on their way home, unable to meet her eyes. And after a quick nightcap, Hecate clenched her fists in anger over her own stupidity as Pippa rushed off without so much as a good night.

It was to have been their last evening like this, so free and away from the strict constraints that London shackled them to, and now, Hecate was to spend it alone, fearing she'd painted herself as a laughing stock in Pippa's eyes.

But as she climbed the stairs of the Trenton country estate one last time, she remembered she wouldn't even be afforded the comfort of indulging in her self-pity alone. No, she had a lesson with Mildred to oversee, and due to the girl's progress and the pride Hecate took in it (and certainly nothing more) she was loathe to let Mildred down.

Waiting for Mildred's arrival, Hecate changed into her nightclothes, periodically checking her chained pocket watch: really, it was a ludicrous waste of energy, by now, it had become apparent that Mildred had no care or concept of time.

As she sat down in front of the dressing table mirror, reaching for the first pin holding her curls, Hecate heard the latch of the door opening; "you're late," she said monotonously, making no effort to turn and offer a warm greeting.

"I had a few things to take care of."

Hecate spun around so fast she almost lost her balance, her head whipped toward the soft, distinct voice that reached deep within her- a voice that, definitely, did not belong to Mildred.

"Pippa," she painfully enunciated, her throat suddenly raw and dry. "Forgive me, I was expecting-"

"Mildred," Pippa interrupted. "Yes, I know," Pippa, dressed in the same sheer nightgown that had haunted Hecate's nights, stepped nervously into the room, into Hecate's space, coming to sit on the quaint sofa, her hands wringing in her lap. "I've given both of you... you and Mildred... the evening off..."

There was something strange in the air, a thinning of the atmosphere that was making Hecate's
head spin. She couldn't put her finger on it, her skin heated and cooled repeatedly, her pulse rushed through her veins, and her head reeled as she tried to deduce what was so different about Pippa. What had changed within the last hour?

Hecate had the feeling she was reaching a culmination, something that had begun months ago when she'd first set eyes on Pippa in that crowded ballroom and was only now coming to a head.

"I hadn't expected to see you this evening," Hecate offered pathetically.

Pippa hummed, her eyes fixed on her hands, deliberately avoiding her friend.

"Pippa?" Hecate questioned, worriedly moving to sit beside her. "Is something wrong?"

"You're my best friend, Hiccup," Pippa rushed. "I-I... I just can't bear to think of... to think of you never having been kissed."

Unlike the sinking feeling of earlier, Hecate was now filled with red-hot ire - how dare Pippa return, garner her hopes, and then mercilessly taunt her!

She stood stiffly, pacing up and down the small confines of the room, acutely aware of Pippa watching her every step.

"Hiccup, say something? Please?"

"You're laughing at me," Hecate said roughly.

"What? No!"

Paying no attention to Pippa's rebuttal, Hecate continued to pace, her thoughts flooding from her mind; "you're no different from anyone else, you think I'm some sort of charity case - poor Hecate Hardbroom, who could ever want her?"

"Hecate, No!"

"Yes!" Hecate growled, "why else would you be here? You've had your fun, I'm sorry, you don't need to befriend me out of pity any longer."

"Hecate!" Pippa yelled, shooting forward and stopping Hecate in her tracks. "Stop! You have this all wrong. I'm not laughing at you," she reached up with shaking hands, framing Hecate's face. "Oh, darling, I'm not laughing at you, far from it... oh, Hiccup, how could you think that?"

Tears tracking down toward Pippa's warm hands, Hecate shuddered at the wild change of emotions running through her. "But... but... I've never... no one's ever wanted to... kiss me..."

"I want to kiss you, Hecate," Pippa whined, "I want to be your first kiss."

Hecate recoiled as if she'd been slapped in the face: disbelief widened her eyes, and her nimble fingers pinched the skin of her arms, expecting to be awakened to find out this was all just a blend of a dream and a nightmare.

There was nothing more that Hecate yearned for than for Pippa to kiss her, for Pippa to want to kiss her, but this couldn't be real, it had to be some sort of terribly expressed humour.

"It's not, Hiccup, it's really not..."

Unbeknownst to her, Hecate had vocalised her internal shock, she'd nearly backed herself into the
corner, retreating further with Pippa's every step of advance. "But... but, you're... you're my friend," Hecate shook.

"Yes, but-

"But we're both women," Hecate breathed, curling in on herself as Pippa stopped within inches of their skin connecting.

"Does that... does that disgust you?" Pippa's face fell, almost hiding the tremble of her upper lip from Hecate's view.

"No, of course not," Hecate answered if a little too forcefully. "I've... I've read about such... such... p-practices-"

"I might've known," Pippa tried to make light, ignoring the deep flush and intense look of embarrassment that befell her friend's face. "It's not so unusual, Hiccup."

"I-I understand that... It's just... It's just..."

"What?" Just what?" Pippa whispered a finger under Hecate's chin forcing their eyes to meet.

"You... you're you, and I'm, well I'm me - I didn't think you would... that it would be something you," Hecate huffed, the words refusing to leave the tip of her tongue. "Pippa, you're every man's fantasy! Do you realise that?"

"What has that got to do with anything?" Pippa said dryly. "I've never met a man whom I would like to kiss... not as much as-" with clenched fists and a stamp of the foot, Pippa mirrored the actions of a frustrated child. "I never got the chance to tell you earlier - to explain," she sighed deeply, reaching for Hecate's hands before stepping back, coaxing her friend into less cramped conditions - and hopefully into calmer waters as a result. "My first kiss... it was with a girl..."

Hecate's mouth opened and closed like a goldfish before finally, she uttered; "oh."

"Oh?"

"I-I... yes, oh..."

Pippa raised an eyebrow nervously; "can we sit down?"

They retired to the sofa, which all of a sudden, seemed to have shrunk in metres, leaving their knees to brush ever so slightly. Hecate seemed to wait forever for Pippa to settle and begin to paint a picture - one that Hecate tweaked in her mind ever so slightly.

"I was a girl of 15, we used to spend the month of May up here, not even my Father returned to London - it was just the 3 of us, spending time as a family, and as a child, it was my favourite time of year - after Christmas, of course."

Melancholy filled Hecate; after her Grandfather passed away, she had no reprieve, no pleasant memories - she certainly hadn't the same familial ties as Pippa, and until she'd spent time enclosed within the Pentangle household, it had been something Hecate hadn't missed.

"Anyway," Pippa continued, "I spent most of my days riding - sometimes with my Father, or one of my cousins if they happened to be visiting, but I much preferred the days when I would go alone.

That summer, we'd hired a new stablehand, he lived in the village and had twin Daughters my age.
They often came with him, my Mother encouraged their visits - apparently, I'd become too embroiled in less than feminine pastimes, I think she thought some female companionship would draw me closer to the perfect debutante I was destined to be.

One of the girls, Elizabeth, wasn't particularly friendly, however. She preferred to spend her time teasing her Sister and me, and flirting, less than covertly, with the footmen.

I avoided her as much as could, obviously, holing myself up in the stables grooming my horse or galloping across the fields - places I knew I was less than likely to run into dear, old Elizabeth.

Apparently, I wasn't the only one to do so, Margaret, Elizabeth's twin was often dressed in breeches far too big while helping her Father with his duties. I always thought it strange that two girls who looked so much alike could be so vastly different in personality and temperament.

I found her intriguing; she didn't conform to societal norms or seem to care, she was brash and bold and exciting, but extremely kind. Eventually, if I was alone, I got up enough courage to ask Margaret if she'd come riding with me - we'd race up hills, or jump fences like we were at Ascot. We had great fun, she was great fun... and I rather liked her.

She was tall and slim, with shoulder-length red hair and an abundance of freckles. Not your typical beauty, but I think that was half the attraction... my girl cousins, and Margaret's Sister, were always talking about boys; what it was like to hold hands, to share an embrace, whispered kisses. I wanted that... I wanted to share those experiences...

We were out on a hack late in the month, I remember the weather being so overwhelming, the sun was so warm, and the air so humid, we stopped by a lake, and there we stayed for a while.

I hadn't yet discovered how comfortable breeches could be, and so, I was dressed in full riding habit - you can imagine how warm I was, so I took off my stockings and lifted my skirts, dipping my toes into the water.

I don't remember how, or why - in fact, I don't think there was a why - but suddenly Margaret took a run and jump, splashing into the lake and half drenching me into shock.

She found my reaction incredibly hilarious, coming to sit beside me while still laughing... she looked so handsome... so carefree... so unique... and I just kissed her.

I thought she'd be angry, or think I was some sort of circus freak, but she didn't, she was the one to deepen our kiss, and she was the one to initiate each one there on after."

Hecate drew a short, ragged breath, unable to ignore the pang of jealousy at Pippa's words. "What happened to her?" She asked gruffly.

"Margaret? Her Sister caught us kissing one day," Pippa laughed genuinely, "safe to say, the following summer, her Father no longer worked...

"And that was it?"

"Well, we wrote to one another a few times afterwards, but we never really had much in common - we chalked our friendship up to your typical, teenage, 'summertime romance."

The fact Pippa was no longer in contact with this Margaret, gave Hecate a slight boost, until she realised; "is that what you think of us? Have I been misreading this the whole time?"

"What? Hecate, no!" Pippa clasped Hecate's face in her palms, her voice, pure and sincere. "I've
told you so many times, and I'll say it many more until you realise it's the truth: you are my best friend. I've never felt so strongly about anyone else. My only desire is for you to be happy, and to know how much I care about you, to see yourself how I see you, to realise your own self-worth."

"Okay," Hecate said, tears cracking her voice.

"Okay?" Pippa whispered, grasping Hecate's hands tight, her eyes pleading in question.

"Okay," Hecate reaffirmed, "I'd like for you... for you to... to k-kiss me. I'd like to kiss you, Pippa, please?"

"Oh, Hiccup," Pippa breathed reverently, lifting her hand and closing her fingers around a loose curl. "Are you sure?"

Hecate had never been so sure of anything, anything at all. Nor had she wished for anything more in her entire life. "Yes."

Each millimetre of distance closed between them increased Hecate's heartbeat considerably. Each second that passed until they came together, felt like an eternity all on its own. And then finally; finally, after so long in denial, after so many hours spent at night in secret longing, Hecate had the soft, supple feel of Pippa's lips against her own.

Like the ridiculous romantic novels she tried to swerve, fireworks exploded behind her eyelids: Hecate saw the shooting light amongst the sea of black, purple, red, blue and pink - of course, pink would be there, and of course its hue would be the most prevalent, even within the recesses of her own mind.

The realisation that this was real, that this was, in fact, happening, that Pippa was kissing her and she wouldn't wake up suddenly, a cold sweat overtaking her wracking form that begged for release, caused Hecate to open her mouth in a gasp of understanding.

Pippa responded dramatically in turn; one hand reaching for the slight, protruding curve of Hecate's hip, and the other grasping the back of her neck, allowing no space to come between them as Pippa brushed her tongue tentatively across Hecate's bottom lip.

When Hecate let out a small squeak of surprise before pulling back, she immediately felt every ounce of her resistance and pretence crumble. Pippa, still holding her close, looked up at Hecate with hooded eyes, darkened and shrouded with what could only be described as hunger.

Allowing her own want, her own need, to lead her, Hecate inched forward before slowly placing a chaste kiss on Pippa's burning cheek. Far from a deliberate act of sensuality, the moment of affection was far more intimate, far more meaningful, than anything they had shared thus far, and Pippa appeared to agree wholeheartedly: a strangled moan filled the air before she positively launched herself forward, pressing Hecate into the arm of the sofa and covering her body with her own.

Desperately, Pippa brought their lips together once more, wasting no time before licking the seem of Hecate's lips, pleading for entry. And Hecate had no mind to deny her. Their tongues met in a passionate dance, teeth occasionally clashing in the excitement of it all.

Hecate was too far gone for any thought of coherence, but if she hadn't been, she would have, most definitely, catalogued every minute detail, for this was a moment, perhaps the one moment, that would come to mean the most.

How long they stayed like that, neither of them could tell - not that either of them cared - but finally
their kisses slowed to the tender placement of lips on every inch of available skin.

When they calmed, Hecate couldn't tell if Pippa's eyes were drowning in tears, or if that was simply a reflection of her own state, for she could feel the wetness on her cheeks, and she shook as Pippa kissed them away.

"Hi," Pippa whispered, unable to contain a smile as she began removing the pins from Hecate's mussed hair. "How do you feel?"

"I-I... I don't... I-" Hecate looked away, embarrassed that she was making a fool of herself when Pippa was perched above her, so beautiful and enticing.

"It's alright," Pippa soothed, her palm smoothing over Hecate's cheek, "I'm sorry if I was too forward... I just, well," she laughed nervously. "For someone who's never done this before... you're quite... you're not so bad - the complete opposite, actually."

"You weren't," Hecate croaked.

"What?"

"Too forward. I didn't mind... I-I... It was-"

"Enjoyable, I hope?" Pippa smiled.

Blushing profusely, Hecate nodded; "yes... I-I liked it..."

Pippa chuckled devilishly, the movement sending subtle vibrations through the furnace that had become Hecate's form; "Hiccup?" Pippa questioned as Hecate fidgeted beneath her, "are you alright?"

"Yes. No. Maybe. I don't... I'm not sure..."

"Talk to me, darling?"

The strange need to unburden herself, coupled with Pippa's use of such an intimate term of endearment, prompted Hecate to disclose. "I feel empty- like there's something more... I want something more," the last four words were breathed, barely audible, Pippa might not have heard them had they not tickled the shell of her ear.

"More..." Pippa gulped, staring intensely at Hecate's mouth.

"What does it feel like," Hecate asked impulsively, wantonly, "more, what does it feel like?"

"I-I wouldn't know from personal... experience," Pippa stumbled. slightly taken aback.

Hecate jolted in shock-horror when her mind finally caught up, she tried to move, to run away from Pippa and her disgust that was soon to be expressed.

"No! Hecate no, I didn't mean... not like that," Pippa pleaded, struggling to pin Hecate in place, to rectify her own bad judgement. "I wouldn't know from personal experience, but... I do know what it's supposed to feel like..."

Hecate stillled, gazing up at Pippa with confusion and intrigue.

"I can show you," Pippa's voice, reverent and gruff, shook with every syllable, "if you'd like?"
It was sure to lead to heartbreak, for Hecate at least, that was an inevitable fact, and although Pippa viewed such a liaison in a different light, the prospect of one's deepest desire becoming possible, no matter how bittersweet that may be, was far too tempting for Hecate to resist.

She was only human after all, and even the gods would fall to their knees in front of Pippa. Hecate might've been named after the goddess of witchcraft, but it was Pippa who embodied the real magic.

"Please," Hecate shakily tangled their fingers together, "yes, please."

Bringing their foreheads together, nudging Hecate's nose with her own, Pippa asked; "are you sure?"

If this was to be the only time Hecate was to experience something so otherworldly, she vowed to grasp it with both hands and treasure Pippa like the gift she was. Gaining a new lease of confidence, she claimed Pippa's lips, her chest becoming tight when Pippa made a small noise of delight and met her just as eagerly. "Yes, I'm sure... Pipsqueak... I'm so sure..."

They moved together on the cramped couch, kisses neverending - each one's completion initiating the next's beginning - their hands roving over clothed flesh, not venturing further than arms, backs and hips, but each touch felt like the strike of lightning, sounds of pleasure clashing into one another like clouds, leaving thunder to ring throughout the room.

Wordlessly, they mutually agreed the sofa was not the perfect place if they wished to continue, to depart the realms of typical friendship. "Perhaps we should relocate to... to your bed?" Pippa suggested.

"I think that... that would be wise."

Pippa smiled reassuringly, taking Hecate by the hand and leading her to the grand four-poster, which managed to appear comfortable and inviting and imposing and frightening at the same time.

As she moved to join Pippa in the centre of the bed, Hecate was forced to bite her lip in an attempt to stop the loud moan building in her throat from escaping. As she walked, her thighs brushing together with her movement, Hecate could feel the wetness that had pooled at her centre, the inside of her legs were slick, and her flesh was left throbbing with need.

Laying on her side, facing Pippa, Hecate wondered if she, too, was experiencing something similar - the mere thought of Pippa warm and needy, desiring her touch, was too much for Hecate, and this time she was perilous to stop the moan escaping.

"Oh, Hecate," Pippa shuddered as she wrapped herself around Hecate's lithe form. She fingered the tie of Hecate's dark dressing gown nervously; "Hiccup, may I take this off of you?"

"Can I?" Hecate grasped the sheer material of Pippa's dressing gown in return.

"Yes," Pippa moaned, "God, yes, Hecate, please..."

Pippa's nightgown was much shorter, much flimsier, and much more erotic than Hecate's, her curves were clearly visible through the sheer material, Hecate's mouth watered as she noticed the hardened buds of Pippa's nipples peeping through.

Kissing Pippa clumsily, was the only distraction Hecate could possibly think of - despite their current predicament, a part of Hecate continued to feel guilty and seedy for looking upon her friend with such unadulterated want.
A stream of provocative hisses and moans slipped from Pippa's mouth in between heated kisses, her hands tangling in Hecate's mass of curls, pulling and directing, almost reaching the border of pain - almost.

The fine line separating pain and pleasure heightened the sensation Hecate experienced as Pippa slipped a thigh between her own. She could feel the firm, burning, flesh against her centre, even though the dense material of her plain nightgown stood in the way - the moment of contact was so intense, so great, Hecate nearly fell off the precipice there and then.

"Pip-Pip... Pip-aah," Hecate growled, her body betraying her, rutting helplessly against Pippa's thigh. "Pipsqueak..."

"Oh, darling," Pippa breathed, increasing the pressure, moving her leg and flexing her muscles. "I need... I want... everything, Hecate... Hiccup, can I... can we take this off? Now? Please?" Pippa's fists clenched on the material of Hecate's nightgown, right between her breasts: her eyes were so dark and blown, Hecate was in disbelief this was all because of her.

Of course, Hecate's physical reaction to Pippa was to be more than expected, but for Pippa to seem just as moved, it was so non-sensical and wild, that Hecate couldn't comprehend.

"To-together?" Hecate stuttered, slipping a single finger underneath the strap of Pippa's nightgown, wanting and hoping.

"Together," Pippa smiled, waiting for Hecate to remove one strap before raising her hem. As Pippa lifted higher, exposing the softest, creamiest skin, her smile transformed into a grimace of frustration; "Hecate, do you know how you make me feel?"

"How can you say that," Hecate half-cried as Pippa's breasts bounced free, "how can you say that when you're so beautiful?"

"You, think I'm beautiful?" Pippa breathed, pausing halfway up Hecate's torso.

The disbelief in Pippa's eyes, and the inflexion on the word 'you,' pained Hecate deeply: she knew what Pippa referred to - the night of the ball, when Hecate deflected a similar question, point blank refusing to tell the truth. Pippa had always been beautiful in her eyes, even when she didn't know the woman behind the mask, but only now could Hecate admit to herself just what that attraction, infatuation, really meant.

Although she couldn't fully articulate her feelings, Hecate laid her thoughts bare; "I think you are magnificent," she said gruffly, moving her hands to caress the softness of Pippa's cheeks. "Inside and out. Pippa, you are the definition of beauty! Sometimes, when I look at you, I feel my thoughts cloud, and my knees weaken. I'm sorry I did not make it clear, but, Pippa, I have never seen another as beautiful as you. If I closed my eyes now, never to open them again, I would not long for heaven or an afterlife, for how could I when I have come face-to-face with something so pure and angelic?"

"Hiccup," Pippa gulped, kissing Hecate sloppily and leaving behind the taste of tears. "You are that and more-"

Hecate opened her mouth to interrupt, but Pippa quickly cut her off with another kiss, silencing all forms of protest. "No, Hecate, you are... I want to show you, will you let me show you?"

"If I can show you - if we can show each other together."

"Together," Pippa confirmed for the second time that evening.
Somehow, in a tangle of arms and legs, cotton and satin, Hecate and Pippa lay together entwined, skin to skin, exposed, nervous, and filled with anticipation.

Pippa moved first, taking Hecate's hand and placed it atop her breast; "touch me, Hecate, touch me, please?"

Shaking so hard her vision lost all focus, Hecate allowed her other senses to take over. She heard their laboured breaths, syncing with each other and in tune. The scent of them permeated the air; Hecate could distinguish the familiarity of her own, earthy and muted, but Pippa was sweet, sweet and potent, and Hecate flared her nostrils, allowing the essence of Pippa to filter through slowly, causing her head to rush. She felt the heavy weight in her hand, perky and unbelievably soft, like a handful of diamonds, Pippa's breasts were precious, and kingdoms could lose themselves to their power.

"May I?" Pippa asked, slightly breathless, her hand paused above the peak of Hecate's breast. With a nod, Pippa allowed her hand to fall, sending a spark straight to Hecate's core, increasing the flaming heat between her legs. Hecate wondered if Pippa could feel the pounding of her heart, full of life having completed its slow resurgence.

Even if Pippa could feel it, Hecate was unable to convey that Pippa was its catalyst, Pippa had, unknowingly, gifted her a new lease of life. Telling Pippa that her heart belonged to her, would surely leave Hecate staring at its pieces, burning to ashes in the hearth of the fire.

"This feels so good, you feel so good," Pippa's head lolled into the cradle of Hecate's shoulder, her breath tickling the soft skin at the crook of Hecate's neck as she spoke. "I can't believe we've never done this before..."

Unable to help herself, unable to banish every dream where they had, indeed, 'done this before,' Hecate drew Pippa flush to her body, both of them hissing at the contact. "Don't tease," Hecate begged, "please, don't tease me, I don't know if I can bear it any longer..."

"Shh," Pippa soothed, her fingertips trailing south, stopping just above where Hecate needed her most. "Shh, darling, I'll take care of you, I promise I will."

"Pippa..."

Downward, past the mess of sticky curls at the apex of Hecate's thighs, Pippa went, and after agonising moments, finally came into contact with the wet, swollen flesh, left throbbing beneath her touch.

As they'd been together from the start, Hecate followed suit, pausing briefly, waiting for Pippa's nod of consent. Who moaned louder as Hecate's fingertips slicked their way toward Pippa's entrance, neither of them could determine.

"Oh, Hecate..."

"Yes?"

"Yes. God, Hiccup, yes..."

Slowly, Hecate allowed the tip of her finger to enter Pippa's wet heat. The feel of Pippa's walls clenching around her, trying to keep her there forever, was almost too much, and Hecate was forced to take deep breaths to regain some semblance of self-control.

Pippa responded by hooking one of Hecate's legs onto her hip, allowing her better access to
reciprocate; "not without you," she commanded.

Hecate uttered Pippa's name on a shaky exhale, locking their gazes as Pippa entered her for the first time, the uncomfortable stretch subsiding when a thumb quickly focused on the engorged little nub hiding high above her entrance. It was the most curious of sensations: intense pleasure, not so far away from the feeling when she touched herself, yet, completely different.

Taking time, sharing kisses, caresses and breaths, they both became accustomed to the feel of one another, totally and utterly beguiled by this moment. As seconds ticked by, Hecate was overcome by the need to move, the desire for more - to move within Pippa and to have Pippa move within her.

Perhaps, in such situations, the human body and mind form an unspeakable connection, a simple shift or tilt of the head communicating everything to one's partner - at least, Hecate believed, that was what had happened in this instance. Here. Between her and Pippa. Perhaps this act was the lock of their souls interweaving, even just for the night.

There were no words spoken as fingers began to explore, the first sound echoing as Pippa curled her forefinger in a particular way, leaving Hecate panting and pleading. As Pippa pressed on a nerve, something, within her, Hecate felt an inexplicable jerk behind her navel, as though she was being pulled, pulled into a kaleidoscope of bright lights.

At that point, all conscious thought separated from her person; Hecate felt her hand continue its ministrations, she felt each spasm of Pippa's muscles just as clearly as she felt her own, but her mind floated high above, left in a state of fire and ice, Pippa's name carving itself deep in her psyche.

The indent of something sharp biting into the flesh of her shoulder brought her back, and when Hecate opened her eyes, she witnessed a ritual of witchcraft: Pippa's body levitated from the mattress, forming a perfect arch, the cords of her muscles drawing tight, her mouth opened in a silent scream, still, all the while, she clung to Hecate. And as Pippa fell onto her back, she drew Hecate above her, thrusting her finger once more, along with the flick of her thumb, Pippa pulled Hecate apart piece-by-piece.

As the night-air cooled their flushed skin, neither of them wished to be parted an inch, Hecate manoeuvring them under the sheets as though they were one person.

"I felt it," Pippa said as they relaxed once more, her voice rough and foreign in the darkness - the candles had burned out long ago. "I felt it, Hiccup, did you?"

Lifting her head from its pillow on Pippa's breast, Hecate closed her eyes and saw through the veil. "Pipsqueak..." she said before closing the distance with a kiss.

She had felt it, and like a man who loses a limb, Hecate would feel it always.

Chapter End Notes

I have no words. I have written and re-written this chapter more times than I can count, I just wanted this moment to be so perfect, and in the end I just had to close my eyes and write what I saw. I hope I've done a decent job of communicating their first time?
From here on in the story really picks up pace, and I'm really, really really, hoping to have the last 6 chapters up before I start college in August - as I'll be so busy memorising the classics I'll have no energy to write. Side-note, when studying English lit in Scotland you need to spend a considerable part of your course focusing on Scottish texts... something I'm not looking overly forward to. The last time I dissected a Scottish text, was in high school when I had to memorise far too many of Carol Ann Duffy's poems. Not disissing the literature of my country, it's just I've already spent so much time in school going over it, I don't really feel passionate about revisiting that..

Anyway, pointless rant you don't care about over, I'm nervous to hear your thoughts and opinions on this chapter, but, as always, comments and the like are very much appreciated.

You can find me on tumblr @ohlookitstomorrowff

Catch:)

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Catch:)
The thought of Pippa looking at these women, in the same way as she had, caused a cloud of green to surround Hecate needlessly. Although beautiful, none of these women had touched Pippa the way Hecate had, felt Pippa the way Hecate had.

Perhaps Pippa read her mind, or maybe Hecate was just so predictable, as Pippa leaned forward and placed her hand just above her friend's knee. "But I must admit, I find your darkness, and mysterious air much more... intriguing."

A week had passed since that fateful evening. Seven nights with little sleep. One-hundred-and-sixty-eight hours since Hecate had seen Pippa in the flesh; since she'd been in her presence, since she'd kissed her, since she'd felt her.

Her body thrummed in remembrance, her heart hammered, and her mind was lost.

Pippa's letters were of little comfort. On the contrary, skimming the perfectly crafted lines portraying days without her, Hecate only felt pain.

She wished she was there, or that Pippa was here, it didn't matter - all that did, was for them to be together. But they were not, and would not be for another fortnight at least.

The gaping hole Pippa had left was like an abyss. And no matter how hard Hecate tried, spending her days pouring over her writings and her early evenings in education with Mildred, nothing came close to filling the gaping void.

Then, in the hours of darkness, when sleep failed to take her, and she was left alone, Hecate relived her night in Pippa's arms. It thrilled and scored her flesh in equal measures: like the touch of a phantom, it only left her needy and wanting, poised on the brink, trying to reach the finish but tethered back by some invisible force.

Hecate Hardbroom had known loss, she'd known pain, and she'd known loneliness, but nothing hit her quite as hard as the feeling of missing Pippa.

"Lady Hecate, are you alright?"

Hecate re-focused her eyes, batting her treacherous thoughts away. Not so violently, for like a butterfly, the images were so bright and beautiful, and she had no wish to lose them forever.

Mildred had abandoned her studies, crossing the library to peer at her mistress with concern. Hecate looked worn; not at all like her usual air of poise, her heart had aged her. But the tremble of her lip and the roundness of her eyes could have belonged to a girl.

"M'lady," Mildred said, a few octaves louder this time, "are you alright?"
"What? Yes, yes, of course... why wouldn't I be?" Hecate attempted to palm Mildred off, halt her in her tracks and have the girl return to what she ought to be doing; perfecting the correct format of a piece of correspondence.

"You... you look tired..."

Hecate fixed the girl with a poignant glare, demanding she desist.

But Mildred, brave or foolish, did not - her very nature made it so that she could not. "Miss Cackle said you've not slept well since we returned from the country..." said Mildred, averting her eyes guiltily at the last moment.

"Did she now?" Hecate kept her voice low and dry, a little bit of steel returning to her spine. "I didn't know that gossiping about your employers was a part of the job description, Mildred Hubble, and Miss Cackle should certainly know better, perhaps I should-"

"No!" Mildred interrupted, a frightened look of shock stealing her young face, "please don't, I-It was my fault. I shouldn't have... I'm sorry, Lady Hecate." Mildred said, training her eyes on the floor.

"Be that as it may, Miss Ca-"

"She cares about you," Mildred blurted, her face reddening as she took a deep breath, "she's worried..."

Hecate felt her throat constrict, her irritation shrink, and immediately, she wordlessly cursed Pippa.

Once, she'd paid no mind to the feelings of others - how could one when they had so little care for themselves?

Damn Pippa! Damn Pippa and her powers of bewitching! And damn her for holding Hecate's heart without even knowing.

It wasn't that their friendship had changed Hecate, or fashioned something completely new. Pippa's presence, her influence, her care and affection, only enhanced what was already there. Like coal in an engine, Pippa gave Hecate the power to be her, to be true to herself and offer the world the best version.

And Ada... Ada only ever wanted what was best for her. Throughout every miserable moment of Hecate's life, Ada had been there; as a reassuring smile, a pot of hot tea, and a handful of times, even a shoulder to cry on. Since Hecate's return home, the housekeeper had flittered around in the periphery. Ever watching. Ever on hand. She'd bustled Hecate with questions, she'd over-burdened her with concern, and each time, Hecate had willed her away, unable to talk and unwilling to express emotion.

Guilt, a foreign concept to Hecate, overtook her senses, it weighed like a boulder in the pit of her stomach and drove heat into the apples of her cheeks.

"No," Hecate said quietly, "I haven't been sleeping."

With the feeling of a wise, old soul, Mildred hopped up to join Hecate in the large armchair, "do you want to talk about it?"

Hecate looked towards the girl fondly, a small smile playing on the corners of her lips.
Perhaps a little embarrassed by her forwardness, Mildred gave a humourless laugh, before her eyes glazed over as she stumbled over an explanation. "My Mum... she always said 'a problem halved is a problem solved.' When... when silly, little things upset me, we'd talk... talking to her made everything seem so small, I always felt better. I-I just thought... if you... if you needed to... it was silly of me."

The skin of Hecate's brow tightened, a strong urge to reach out a hand presented itself as she mulled over Mildred's anecdote. She knew little of the girls' life before her employment in the Bedford household, it had never dawned on her to ask - not so much out of ignorance, Hecate was well aware she'd lead a privileged life herself, and her circumstance was sheer luck, but because of the fact she wished to preserve herself from the inadvertent pain.

The thought of listening to the tales of anguish from a girl so young, so good, and brimming with potential, Hecate could scarcely bare thinking about it, especially when she hadn't a magic wand that could change the past or influence the future. Apart from offering Mildred the comfort of stable, hard-earned income, and a safe place to lay her head, Hecate felt there was little she could do. She wasn't even permitted to vote, or walk the halls of parliament, much less re-write society and the hierarchical pyramid.

For all their differences, Hecate and Mildred had one thing in common, both of them had lost their Mother's. And, a lack of Motherly love was far more impactful on one's life than a ridiculous title granted before birth.

Hecate suited the drab black of grief. But not Mildred; the tears staining her cheeks were not pretty, and the cries from her lips were no organs tune. To see Mildred so sad, to see her as anything other than overly-cheerful and annoyingly exuberant, was almost sacrilegious, and Hecate could be a bystander no longer.

She placed her slim fingers on the girl's shoulder, temporarily shocked at the rough and itchy material beneath, and patted twice, as gentle and heartfelt as she could be.

Hecate had not expected small arms to wrap tightly around her middle, she froze, struck dumb for a few seconds, unsure what to do. Her arms stayed outstretched like a depiction of Christ's crucifixion, until Mildred raised her head, her eyes red and puffy, and sniffed; "if you don't want to talk, maybe you could write it down?"

Hecate thought for a second, her heart twinging uncomfortably, and Mildred just smiled reassuringly before tucking herself back into her previous position.

Motherly love. Something neither of them had but desperately craved. Unconventional though it may be, and certainly a pale substitute, but perhaps they could find that bond within each other.

The uncomfortable twinge returned, only this time, Hecate could give it a name; maternal instinct - a fierce protectiveness she had never felt before.

Having children of her own had never been something she'd wanted, even as a girl, when her Grandfather had gifted her with dolls, Hecate stared at them uselessly, abandoning them in favour of a book.

Mildred wasn't her child, and Hecate wasn't her Mother. But, she couldn't deny she was fond of the girl... Might she not be able to guide Mildred, to offer a constant in her life?

She gave in, and in turn, let her arms fall, cradling Mildred to her chest.
I long for her.

A deep longing: hunger is but a tickling sensation in comparison.

How could I not? I am at the mercy of a goddess, and she haunts me. She stalks the corridors of my mind, every waking moment is plagued by the vision of her beauty. The hours of my subconscious are spent in the throes of passion.

Such smooth skin, bronzed by the sun and completely bare to my gaze. My mouth waters at the sight of her. Surrounded by a world of black and white, a beacon of colour she lies on a bed of roses, her golden hair tangled in thorns.

She bathes in the scent of petals, soft fingertips trailing over a shapely thigh, circling the visible hardness of a nipple. I feel my breath quicken, her wicked teasing causes my knees to tremble, my hands itch to caress. She maintains her facade, pretending that I am not there, I know, I can tell, as her eyelids drift closed, I catch the wry smile on perfectly painted lips.

She shall be my death.

My Undoing.

The only heart I long to possess.

As the telltale sounds of Georgia's footsteps nearing her chambers, Hecate closed her book with a quick snap and shot upright from her position flat on her front on the bed.

She internally winced when she caught sight of herself in the looking glass - long, brown curls spun around her head like a messy crown, dark circles under her eyes and an overall dishevelled appearance took any brightness she'd felt re-reading her writings away.

Sleep had, once again, been far from her mind, and quite unlike her obstinate self, Hecate had implemented the advice of a fourteen-year-old girl and exorcised her inner torment through pen and paper.

And she had written, from sunset to sunrise, her hand had sped its way across the page, led by some invisible force, instructed by powerful magic. Her eyes had burned, weary and red, but unable to tear themselves away: reading between the lines, Hecate saw them between the sheets, her and Pippa, entangled and feeling.

She still felt it. Like a dull ache that would not dissipate, despite the many times she'd tried by using her own fingers.

As Georgia helped her dress for the day, Hecate minutely examined the pale expanse of her neck, hoping and praying to see the faint outline of a bruise where she knew there would be none.

Breakfast in the Hardbroom household, like every other meal set at the long, cold dining table, was a sombre affair. So, it was with great skill that Hecate managed to maintain her non-plussed facade when reading Pippa's latest piece of correspondence.

Darling Hecate,
Do forgive my messy scrawl that can barely pass as legible, but I'm afraid I'm in a bit of a rush.

My Father has been back in London for the past week, and due to some sort of immediate business, fears he will not be able to return to Hertfordshire. Without him, Mother is terribly lonely, and, as
you know, since you left, so am I. Thus, I have the most fantastic of news - we leave for London, this afternoon!

I'm awfully excited to see you, and if all goes to plan, we should be reunited this coming Friday.

Sorry for the shortness of this note. As I said, I'm in a bit of a rush to return to London, and to you.

Yours
Pippa

Friday. The day after tomorrow. Pippa would be home in, approximately, 48 hours, and Hecate could look upon her once again.

If she were alone, Hecate knew she'd have squealed like a child in delight, but the presence of her Father and Sister quelled that impulse dead in her chest. She held her excitement close to the fast-paced beating of her heart.

"Who's words have caused you to blush, Sister?"

Hecate snatched Pippa's letter close to her chest just in time to evade Cassandra's teasing lunge. The closeness of the parchment gave her the briefest scent of Pippa's sweet perfume, igniting a ball of protective fire within her. "Mind your own affairs."

"Affairs?" Cassandra laughed in disbelief. "So you are admitting it's a love note then? Whoever is it from? Is it Pelham?"

Crushing her hands into fists, Hecate lowered her voice into a menacing growl, while holding back the majority of her ire; "it's most definitely not a love note from Lord Pelham!"

"A good man, Pelham," The Duke said, addressing Hecate from the head of the table for the first time that morning. "You'd be lucky to have such a gentleman court you, girl, I don't know why he'd want to, mind you, but if he is making attempts, you will do well to accept them."

Unable to reply out of sheer anger, Hecate, for once, was glad of her Sister's selfish streak. She tried to hide the tears as Cassandra indignantly tried to re-assert her popularity.

"I've been corresponding with The Duke of York's equerry, Father. He's a terribly nice young man, and I do believe he's become rather fond of me..."

"My Daughter will not cavort with some equerry," The Duke said scornfully, as if such a status lower than his left a bitter taste in his mouth. "It's only your first season, there are Earls and Marquess' flitting around you, and I'll be damned if you think I'll hand you to one of them, let alone some commoner!"

When their Father finally finished his breakfast and disappeared, it was a strange occurrence that the two Sister's were left stranded in the same boat.

Timidly, Hecate reached over and patted Cassandra's hand, interrupting the girl's quiet snifflies; "Lady Pippa returns on Friday," she said in the hopes of improving the tangible atmosphere.

"Was that who your letter was from?"

Hecate nodded bashfully, feeling the heat rise up under her collar.

Cassandra gave a watery smile, "you needn't be embarrassed - I'm happy for you, it's nice that
you've finally got a friend, someone you can let into your life, if only a little."

"Thank you," Hecate said honestly, her throat suddenly very dry and raw.

Her Sister smiled again; "It'll be nice to see Pippa again, make sure to invite her to tea at her earliest convenience."

As had become her new routine, Hecate found herself curled up in the soft armchair in the library, depicting a whole host of titillating dreams onto paper long into the hours of darkness.

The rest of the house was quiet, as it always was, and just as she paused for a moment, biting her lip as the images of Pippa became less than clothed, the silence was interrupted.

A faint crash, followed by clumsy, thudding footfalls, proceeded throughout the labyrinth of hallways, getting closer and closer, but eventually passing Hecate by.

Implementing all of her focus, Hecate picked up mumbled grunts and moans of pain. The kerfuffle was far enough away that no one would notice the sliver of amber glow as she opened the heavy door just an inch.

Slumped against the wall, and half supported by an unknown male figure, was her Brother, battered and bruised and covered in blood. Hecate watched on as Perses lifted his hand to knock lamely on her Father's study door, the movement cajoling a venomous hiss from his lips.

"And he just came from nowhere, boss?" Perses' companion shifted into the light, giving Hecate the view of a dishevelled appearance; his accent, along with his clothing, hinted that he was not an associate her Brother would be seen with during the day. That, along with the strong smell of gin leaking through the small gap in the doorway, gave Hecate a good idea about the root of the two men's perceived friendship.

"I've told you multiple times, you imbecile," Perses replied, holding his side while slowly panting, "I left the still and he was there. I don't know where he came from - it was dark, and he hit me on the back of the head before I knew what was happening."

"How'd you know it was him then?"

"Because," Perses raised himself up with great difficulty, even in his state, Hecate could feel his imposing presence of self-righteous power. His voice seethed with anger as he addressed the other man; "he said her name, and told me he'd make me pay!"

Before the man could question Perses further, the door opened to show the furious features of The Duke; "what is the meaning of this? What have you done now, boy?"

A tremor of fear rolled through Hecate, she slid backwards, slowly shutting the door before her Father could catch her eavesdropping and leave her in a much worse state than her Brother.

The ‘tick, tick’ of the ornate Grandfather clock fell in perfect sync with the continuous, nervous jump of Hecate’s leg.

Sat in the sparsely decorated day room, Hecate had tried (and failed) to write. Instead, she'd only managed to stare at the words that had come before.

The descriptive phrases of a beautiful woman and a subtle, golden glow only increased the beating
of her heart to the point where Hecate was sure her Sister could hear from where she sat halfway across the room.

Pippa had been here before, in this very room, tempting Hecate from her mundane life and plunging her straight into a whirlwind of desire.

And now, Hecate sat once again, about to feel that blustering gale. This time, however, Pippa’s presence was expected, anticipated, even, and Hecate felt each and every nerve in her body awaken as something magic approached, closer and closer.

Part of her thrilled at the prospect of being enveloped in Pippa's company, and on the other side of the coin, Hecate trembled in fear. What if they came face-to-face and Pippa was repulsed? What if Pippa declared their transgression a mistake? What if Pippa no longer wished to be her friend?

"Lady Pippa is here."

Her lower lip still trembling from the sudden plague of intrusive thoughts, made it so Hecate had no time to reign in the small shriek at Ada's announcement.

Cassandra looked at her with a mixture of befuddlement and humour, placing the wooden hoop and needle of her embroidery off to the side with exaggerated care, she raised her brow in mocking; "well, Sister, are we to let her in? Or have you grown disillusioned in the past hour and wish dear Pippa to stand on the stoop with no reception?"

Hecate glanced at Ada, attempting to convey her plea for help and receiving a partially hidden smirk in return.

In the silly, lust-filled musings of a teenager, Hecate hadn't actually prepared for this moment. How would she greet Pippa now that their relationship had taken a considerable shift? What were the appropriate words to say? How was she supposed to navigate this situation while maintaining propriety?

No, Hecate was definitely not ready to let Pippa in, but her Sister held the social graces she did not, and therefore took charge, leaving Hecate be with a vague sense of pity.

"Do show her in, Miss Cackle."

"Certainly, my lady."

Moments later, Hecate felt her heart leap into her mouth as Pippa was gestured into the room. Blonde hair as soft and sleek as it had been before the light of the bonfire, and an indescribable quality that had been there from the very beginning, and never failed to draw Hecate in and long to pull the other woman close.

"Good afternoon, Cassie, so good to see you." Pippa embraced Cassandra friendly with a brief kiss to each cheek, before slowly turning to face Hecate, who had clumsily stood the moment she entered the room.

"Hecate..." Pippa said softly, moving gracefully toward her friend.

Hecate opened and closed her mouth repeatedly, like a frightened colt she shook, wedged between fight or flight, only the warm clasp of Pippa's hands kept her steady.

She longed to lace their fingers together, to steal some of Pippa's warmth and keep it with her always. But two pairs of eyes were focussed upon them, and Hecate was left at a complete loss.
Awkwardly, Pippa lent forward momentarily, bussing her lips against Hecate's cheek with little to no feeling, before almost tripping over herself in retreat.

"I'll ready the tea service," Ada said once Pippa fell into the setee beside Cassandra.

"Oh, won't you join us, Ada?"

The look on Cassandra's face was almost comical, her mouth fell open, and her eyebrows disappeared into her hairline. Whether it was the use of Ada's given name or the invitation extended to the housekeeper, the youngest Hardbroom could not hide her complete shock that had been born from years of prejudice.

Ada, too, look baffled and unsure, but with Hecate's silent, subtle nod, she quickly smiled and bowed her head in Pippa's direction. "I would be most honoured, Lady Pippa."

The long wait for tea was agonising, she needed something to occupy her hands, for they were currently drawn to spun gold like a magnet. Meanwhile, Cassandra bored their guest with non-consequential gossip, and the occasional, overtly obvious, question about The Duke of York's equerry. Pippa, with all her grace and kindness, listened intently with a smile upon her face. The sight made Hecate feel stifled - as if trapped in a box with the four sides closing in, and the possibility of escape ebbing away with breaths of air.

Flashes of moments filled her vision; of Pippa in her arms and the night of passion already shared. Of wishes and dreams that had her wringing her hands and clenching her thighs. Words that she had written, and scenes that had yet come to pass.

When Ada finally returned, Hecate had been on the verge of losing consciousness, her head felt light, spinning like a child's toy, and she gratefully accepted the steaming cup of black tea as though it were a vial of smelling salts.

"Are you attending the Mayweather's ball this evening, Pippa?" Cassandra questioned.

"No, I'm afraid not," Pippa said regretfully, brushing the crumbs of a jam tart from her fingers, "I have a prior engagement, although I believe my Mother and Father will be there."

Hecate was hit by the sudden feeling of disappointment, and only hoped it did not show when her eyes found Pippa's.

"Pity," Cassandra said, "I'm sure Percy would've been thrilled at the prospect of filling your dance card."

Silence echoed around the room, and Hecate could feel the ice in her veins at the mention of Pippa and her Brother in the same sentence.

"I doubt I'll be missed too much," Pippa said slowly, "and I'm sure it won't be long before I see your Brother's name on my dance card once again."

The conversation quickly turned boring then (everyone seeming comfortable bar Hecate) until a footman appeared in the doorway with a note for Cassandra.

"Tell her I'll be straight up, William," Cassandra said, reaching the end of the short letter. "Georgia," she offered over her shoulder in explanation once William had bowed his leave, "she's trying something new with my hair tonight - she wants to leave herself enough time to re-do it if it's not to my liking."
"I hope all goes well," Pippa said as she hugged Cassandra goodbye.

And then, as Ada quietly followed Cassandra from the sitting room with the used tea service, Pippa and Hecate were left alone.

Neither of them moved, Hecate hoped the fear of being caught was the only preventative, although she knew the lump in her own throat was down to fear of rejection.

After a few moments, Pippa whispered softly across the room, the few feet of distance between them growing like a chasm; "I've missed you, Hiccup."

It was strange, Hecate thought, she had missed Pippa terribly while they were parted, but now that she was physically here, right before her eyes, her feelings doubled, tripled even.

"I-I've missed you... too..."

Pippa smiled and bit her lip, as though she wanted to say something, but ultimately, knew it to be unwise. And it left Hecate with a mixed basket of juxtaposing feelings; she dreaded what could have been, yet she anticipated it with fierce desire.

"I may have told a slight fib earlier..." Pippa said.

"Oh?"

"I don't actually have plans for this evening - well I do, but I don't..." Pippa huffed, stumbling over her words before taking a deep breath for composure. "My plans remain unfinished, there's something rather important missing, and I think you can help me with it."

"How can I help you?"

"I have two tickets for the ballet - one for me and, if you'll accompany me, one for you."

"For me?" Hecate asked in disbelief.

"Yes, Hiccup, for you," Pippa laughed.

"I've laid your dress out on your bed, and Mildred jumped at the chance to act as your ladies maid once again, seen as Georgia is indisposed."

Hecate hadn't noticed Ada re-entering the room, but at the sound of her voice, Hecate spun toward Pippa's co-conspirator with narrowed eyes.

"Now, dear, there's no need to look at me like that," Ada said placatingly, "I'm merely an accessory to Lady Pippa's surprise."

"Have I overstepped, or misjudged?" Pippa asked, taking Hecate's silence as a negative.

"No," Hecate said grudgingly, "I just wish you wouldn't use my housekeeper to gang up on me."

"Perfect!" Pippa clapped her hands and squeaked with excitement. "I'll have a carriage collect you around half-past-seven. And no one is 'ganging up on you,' darling," Pippa laughed, "we're just working as a team-"

"To coerce me," Hecate interrupted, unable to hide her smile at the prospect of a night spent by Pippa's side, and thus, losing her desired stony effect.
"To encourage you," Pippa said, "to enjoy yourself."

"And have fun," Ada added with a wink.

Ascending the front steps of the theatre and admiring the sheer opulence surrounding her, Hecate was just as full of nerves and awe as she had been a few months prior. But circumstances had changed, and her outlook had altered: Lady Hecate Hardbroom felt like a whole other person, no longer was she a raven entrapped in thorny vines.

The Earl of Trenton's private box was not as large, or, as decorated as her Father's, nor had it the best of vantage points, but here, Hecate felt far more comfortable, and, at the same time, more on edge and aware of herself, and those around her.

This evening, Pippa had chosen a dress like no other; so far removed from her usual, sweet pastels, the deep-red velvet was sinful at its core. The sleeves were but a puff of smoke slipping off of smooth shoulders, leaving the rest of Pippa's arms bare, naked to Hecate's gaze. Layers of chiffon and tulle beneath the velvet allowed the skirt to billow out from Pippa's shapely waist, and Hecate shivered each time the course material brushed against her hands accidentally due to their confined seating arrangements. But, above all, the biggest distraction, the one thing that had Hecate chanting a silent prayer for the house lights to dim, was the low-cut bodice, and the way it was designed to draw attention to the wearer's decolletage.

The corset Pippa wore beneath was doing little in the way of support, and Hecate almost whimpered each time Pippa moved slightly - it seemed as though the most beautiful bounty would fall into her waiting hands.

They hadn't yet the chance to discuss what had happened that evening, and perhaps that was only an addition to Hecate's present complex - she feared that, at any moment, she would lose all sense of restraint, and despite the vast crowd, pull Pippa near enough to kiss, before ravishing her breasts with nips of her teeth and licks of her tongue.

Thankfully (for what little reputation Hecate had), at that moment the light was snuffed, and the orchestra thrummed to life.

As The Willis summoned Giselle from beyond the veil, Hecate felt her heart quicken with the crescendo of the music.

The dancers moved across the stage effortlessly, their long legs, perfectly sculpted and tantalising in their precision of twisting turns. They were all so beautiful, so seductive, yet, they were faceless, and unlike last time, Hecate found no appeal in the women on stage - not in them in particular at least.

Like a blank canvas, she painted her imaginings onto the stage: copying the dancers' movements and attire, Pippa came out of a pirouette to stand straight and still, burning eyes trained on Hecate, and Hecate alone.

Everything grew too warm, the air seemed charged and oppressive, like the seal of an envelope locking her in place. Her eyes stayed wide open, unable to blink or stray an inch, and her mind grew bolder in its wonder.

Pippa splayed out upon the stage, her chest heaving and her cheeks pink, a dark figure emerging from the shadows, carefully peeling the tight costume from her body.

Just as the figure in black was about to reach forth, a pale hand inches from a pert breast, Hecate
jumped as words were whispered in her ear; "I knew you liked to watch them... I saw the way you looked at them on our first visit, and I could only guess what you were feeling... what you were thinking...

Hecate squirmed at Pippa's words, the uncomfortable, yet, erotic, weight of them. The movement caused her thighs to brush, and an audible moan to escape her lips.

Pippa chuckled darkly. "Oh, darling, don't worry, I like them too," Pippa breathed the last four words into the back of Hecate's neck, her lips ghosting what felt like a kiss.

The thought of Pippa looking at these women, in the same way as she had, caused a cloud of green to surround Hecate needlessly. Although beautiful, none of these women had touched Pippa the way Hecate had, felt Pippa the way Hecate had.

Perhaps Pippa read her mind, or maybe Hecate was just so predictable, as Pippa leaned forward and placed her hand just above her friend's knee. "But I must admit, I find your darkness, and mysterious air much more... intriguing."

The wetness between Hecate's thighs only increased, embarrassingly so, Pippa's words themselves felt like a caress. She couldn't control her body's reactions; the arch of her neck, the curl of her fists, or the intense shudder.

And like the serpent that unhinged Eve, Pippa moved her hand higher, higher and higher up Hecate's thigh, until there was nowhere left to go.

Hecate was sure that Pippa must be able to feel the heat of her skin, to feel the electrical pulse as her centre throbbed just beneath where her hand had chosen to rest. She almost begged Pippa to cease her game of teasing, so unlike the reserved facade Hecate had hidden away inside was this, tears pricked her eyes in fright. But in reality, in this reality, here with Pippa, Hecate wanted nothing more than for Pippa to continue, to reach between her legs and give her relief.

"Do you want me to stop?" Pippa asked, once again, so in tune with Hecate's emotions.

"No," Hecate said in a quiet but definite tone.

"Good girl," Pippa cupped her hand and through the layers of material, and Hecate sensed her release coming closer.

"Pipsqueak..." she said breathily.

"Pipsqueak," Pippa mused as she circled and pressed Hecate over her dress, "I like it."

As the final scene of the ballet played out before them, Hecate came apart with a barely stifled cry.

"Stay with me?" Pippa asked, "stay with me tonight?"

And Hecate would stay, of course, she would, but she knew full well that tonight, the only night, would never be enough.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, long time no update - sorry about that...
Okay, so this chapter, the last scene in particular, was the first image my mind conjured up when I planned this story, and I think I've taken so long in re-writing it because I wanted to get it right. Originally, I had planned for this chapter and the next to be one, but, in the first draft I realised that was far too long, and they both hold significant information regarding the overall plot, that, in the end, I decided to separate them to better highlight the plot points. If that makes any sense at all?

On another note, I've just finished watching S2 of Chilling Adventures of Sabrina (and a large portion of my free-time has been consumed by that, sorry) and I can now add Miranda Otto to the list of women older than my Mother whom I would legit kill for. Miranda and Raquel are both 51, right? Is it something about that age that just makes women so attractive? Or is there something in my water?

As always, thank you for all your support, and comments and the like are always very much appreciated - even if I don't reply, just know, I read every single one, and they brighten my day.

You can find me on tumblr @ohlookitstomorrowff

Catch:)
Chapter Summary

Dozing lightly, on and off, the two women lay curled in one another arms, still bare beneath the sheets. Hecate, her front pressed to Pippa’s back, her arms wrapped around her tightly, her fingertips dancing merrily along the soft swell of Pippa’s stomach, only paused momentarily when the obvious smacked into her with the force of a gale.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Much like The Trenton Estate in Hertfordshire, Pentangle House in St James's Square belied the grandeur of an Earldom. On the outside, the perfect picture of peerage, but inside was quaint and warm and smelled like home.

Instead of cool marble: soft carpets lay, lush Persian rugs atop.

No wall was bare; nameless faces fitted in gilt frames posed systematically, embossed wallpaper peeking from behind like a smile of innuendo.

Every surface shone, each ornament had been placed and polished with care, but the air carried no smell of such. Bitter lemon and beeswax had been replaced by spice and the promise of fresh bread in the morning.

Crawford, the butler, too was an anomaly of an upper-class household. Neither young nor old, an air of flamboyance and an accent to match. Hecate felt like a girl sneaking into her father's library as he took her shawl with a knowing eye and tilted lip.

Pippa, on the other hand, seemed oblivious to the servant's clever deduction, or perhaps she had no care? Hecate guessed the latter as she was pulled upstairs by the hand and drawn to waiting lips giggling naughtily on the landing.

Like the warmth of down on a winter's eve. The bloom of a lone rose. And very much like coming home.

No spring chicken was she, and this was far from her first Easter; nonetheless, Hecate closed her eyes against the light ever nearing. She knew its rays would envelop her soon, take her away from this newfound home, no more to return.

How cruel it would be, sadistic even, to have home so near, to see it almost daily, but never again to cross the threshold.

Hecate evaded the light as best she could.

For now.

"Pippa... I don't-"

Pippa, bare, golden breasts full and tempting (Hecate wondered if the sun had seen them so, half
jealous, half trembling with arousal at the thought) looked upward with hooded eyes. Paused as she was between Hecate's legs her mouth ajar, Hecate could feel every beat of her breath touch her most intimate area. Sensitive and wet.

"What's wrong, darling? I won't hurt you, Hiccup, all I want is to please you. To feel you. To hear you. To taste-"

"Pipsqueak!" Hecate's exclamation was low and gravel filled, losing all meaning of chastisement when coupled with such a pet name.

The display of purity was not lost on its subject. Pippa smiled softly, placing a chaste kiss on the jut of Hecate's hip.

Minuets of silence passed, Hecate trying to grapple with her words, Pippa always patient and eager to please.

"It's not that I... I don't want you to feel... you don't have to-"

"I know that," Pippa interjected forcefully. "I know I don't have to, Hiccup, but I want to, I want to very much." A sly look shrouded in false embarrassment crossed perfect features, "I once told you I had a preference for romantic novels - I don't know if you remember?"

"I remember." A brief re-hashing of their first visit to the theatre appeared, crowded out by vivid thoughts of the pages of writing tucked safely in Hecate's armoire.

"Yes, well," Pippa continued, dotting kisses on the expanse of creamy thighs as she went. "I've read scenes, several in fact, detailing this particular act, and each time I-I... It affects me so. Do you understand?"

Hecate nodded. She very much understood.

"It's supposed to feel magical; like flying without wings."

"I know."

"You do?"

"I might've come across some of the... books you favour."

"Did you enjoy them?" Pippa's eyes glinted with curiosity.

"Indifferent is a better choice of word, perhaps I'd find them titillating if they were-"

"Two women?" Pippa offered.

When Hecate only blushed in response, Pippa pressed no further. "That is my only critique," she admitted, her eyes drifting to Hecate's centre. "If someone were to write about two women, then I'd like to read that. I'd like to read that very much," she finished wistfully.

"If you want to," Hecate stuttered, her gaze trained on the ceiling. "If you want to, and only if that is what you wish... Pipsqueak..."

Crawling upward, so they were face-to-face, Pippa connected their gazes. "If you want to I'll stop, all you have to do is say."

"I won't want you to stop," Hecate whispered.
"Then know that I won't either."

Pippa descended once more, lips trailing reverently. At that moment, Hecate felt as though she was transported to lay on an altar. She felt worshipped for the first time in her life: it took her too long to name it, and when recognition came, it stung at her eyes and stabbed at her heart.

"Open your legs for me," Pippa said. When her command was obeyed immediately, she placed quivering thighs over her shoulders with a whispered 'good girl' as a reward.

Hecate, so new to all of this, responded to the praise with a cry and jump of her hips. Pippa held her fast, preventing the contact so evidently desired, for just a moment longer. When, finally, her tongue peeked out, Pippa's intensity forced Hecate to look upon her ministrations.

Her folds were wet, from their earlier activity in the middle of the packed theatre, and from their tantalising, wandering, promising, interlude here, upon Pippa's bed. As a result of the first lave of Pippa's tongue, Hecate could no less control the shuddering orgasm that racked her slim frame than she could volcanic eruptions in the East.

Stunned, Pippa withdrew for a moment, taking in the sheen of sweat atop perfectly round breasts and the shy bite of thorn-ravaged, rosy lips. “No. No, darling - that just won’t do,” Pippa said, her shock replaced by disappointment.

“I’m sorry,” Hecate said in sincerity, head facing the wall, away from Pippa, where a Goddess was immortalised on canvas.

“Not what I meant; you don’t need to be sorry, sweetheart.” Pippa interlaced their fingers for comfort, to bring Hecate back to her. “I’m glad you enjoyed yourself - I’m glad I can… help you to enjoy yourself,” she said with a giggle of self-adulation. “I’m only sad it was over so soon.”

Hecate peered down tentatively, her deep-brown eyes scanning for any hint of fabrication. There was none.

“Now, Hiccup, I am going to do that again, and you’re not going to come until I tell you to, understood?”

Her breath caught, it was an order, and one Pippa hoped she would obey, but there was something else there too; Pippa needed Hecate’s consent. In life, Hecate was in control, always in control, of herself, of situations, of others. But here, in their lovemaking, Pippa offered to unleash her of any burden, to take the reins. She focused on Hecate, and her own pleasure was derived from that.

“Yes, Pippa,” Hecate said steadily.

Kissing every inch of her lover she could reach without returning to the still twitching skin at the top of her slit, Pippa took her time. Hecate knew it too. By the fifth minute, she was whimpering, by the seventh, she was thrusting her hips, and by the tenth, she was begging. “Please, Pippa, please.”

“But until I tell you to, remember?” Pippa said before entering Hecate with two fingers and suckling at her with her mouth.

Not at all like what the books described.

Ethereal. Floating. Flying. They didn’t even come close.

She shook with each swipe of Pippa’s tongue, her heart hammering beneath her ribcage, a stuttered,
and, uneven beat. And each time Pippa hollowed her cheeks, pulling Hecate into her mouth, Hecate grappled with the satin sheets beneath her, her fingertips never finding enough purchase. Eventually, she had to give in, surrender, her hands raking through honey-warm curls.

Pippa hummed in approval, the sensation reverberating through Hecate’s whole being, before suckling faster, her fingers driving deeper, curling now on the retreat. Just when Hecate was on the edge of release, Pippa stopped and blew lightly atop the masterpiece she was working on before starting up all over again.

Three times she brought Hecate to the brink without letting her fall over the precipice. Each time, Hecate’s plea’s grew increasingly incoherent. Each time, her hips stuttered a little more unevenly. And then, after what felt like hours of torment, Hecate was granted the key to freedom. “You can come now, darling. I want you to come for me. *Now.*”

The last syllable lit the fuse of a chain reaction, the likes of which, Hecate had never even dreamed of experiencing. Her whole body lifted off the bed, contorting like a woman possessed - if Pippa was the devil, then let her be so; if Hecate was to burn in hell for all eternity, then let it be with Pippa as her mistress. Like a heathen’s chant, Pippa’s name fell from Hecate’s lips, distorted and melting into one long cry. Like ceremonial calling cards, the candles around the room flickered with the power of magic.

Until it stopped, and Hecate, the lamb lain slain, drained and motionless.

She came to, sated and weightless, unable to move more than an inch, surrounded in glittering light of solid gold.

Pippa was beside her, a lock of Hecate’s hair twirling around her finger. “Hello.”

“Hello,” Hecate replied languidly.

“I’d say you rather enjoyed that, and, that I was right, wouldn’t you, Hiccup?”

Smiling slowly at the smugness in Pippa’s voice, Hecate chose her answer as carefully as she could. “I never disagreed with you for you to be right in the first place, but yes, I did enjoy it, thank you. I’d very much like to do that to you now.

“Later, darling,” Pippa said, her fingertips now padding a path to trace the outline of Hecate’s lips. “Right now, I think you’re exhausted.”

“Hmm, perhaps I am, but unlike you, I have no wish to make you wait.” Allowing the glint in her eye to follow Pippa’s shapely curves, Hecate, with powdered confidence, “you’ll just have to help me out a little.”

“What did you have in mind?” Pippa raised herself up on one arm and leaned over to bring their lips together. “Will I?”

“Incredulous but a moment, Pippa dropped flat, nuzzling her face into the crook of Hecate’s neck, groaning; “oh, Hecate.”

“Is that a yes? May I taste you, Pippa?”
“Yes, Hecate, oh, god, yes.”

“Come here then.”

Pippa shifted, straddling the uppermost of Hecate’s torso, her knees on either side of her head and her centre close enough that Hecate could see the glisten of her excitement coating her nether leaves and the tops of her thighs.

“Closer, come closer, please?”

“Are you sure you’ll be comforta-“

“Yes, more than. Please, Pipsqueak?”

A few more inches and Pippa was poised perfectly, covering the bottom half of Hecate’s face so that only her eyes and the bridge of her nose were visible. Hecate breathed deeply; breathing Pippa in, preparing herself for the most devout of feasts. She tried to repeat what Pippa had done to her, right from the start, except, the kisses Hecate placed on Pippa’s inner thigh were less than delicate.

She touched her tongue to the smooth velvet that hid Pippa’s centre: the taste was a juxtaposition - tart, but sweet. It was ambrosia to her, she couldn’t get enough, and so, she massaged with her tongue and teased with her lips, drinking Pippa in until her lover crumbled above her. Chanting Hecate’s name like a dying prayer.

Dozing lightly, on and off, the two women lay curled in one another arms, still bare beneath the sheets. Hecate, her front pressed to Pippa’s back, her arms wrapped around her tightly, her fingertips dancing merrily along the soft swell of Pippa’s stomach, only paused momentarily when the obvious smacked into her with the force of a gale.

Love.

That’s what she was feeling. Of course, it was!

Hecate, starved of touch and affection and utterly disillusioned to affairs of the heart, Hecate Hardbroom had fallen in love. Many men were in love with Lady Pippa Pentangle, considered one of London’s greatest beauties the moment she stepped out during her first season, but Hecate was not a man.

Such arrangements between women were not unheard of, not as common as two men, but still, they were not the only women to fall for their own. The love Hecate felt was not illegal, morally wrong in the eyes of the church, yes, but she wouldn’t hang for her heart. All that aside, if anyone found out, they would be shunned, shamed and taunted in the street, and Hecate had no doubt believing her Father would send her away to an institution.

Their paths were never meant to be the same.

“I’m glad we’re to become Sister’s,” Pippa whispered into the darkness.

Pippa’s words reminded Hecate that, from time-to-time, they would deviate from the linear, crossing paths once more, but never like this. They should never have been like this in the first place. Pippa was to be her brother’s wife and would, one day, inherit the title of Duchess of Bedford.

She cried silently until the wee hours, Pippa fast asleep at her side, and then, when her eyes ran dry, Hecate left, glancing briefly at the smoothness of Pippa’s naked form as she went.
She had expected her father’s house to be quiet when she entered, for the halls to be deserted, but as ever, luck was not on Hecate’s side.

Rounding the corner and into the hall that occupied Perses' office, Hecate ran into the last man she wished to see, ever: Lord Pelham.

“Good evening, Lady Hecate.” Bent low over her hand, his voice smooth and simpering, Pelham attempted his best at a charming manner, but Hecate could hear the mocking lacing his tone, see the leer in his posture. With her tear-stained cheeks and facade of crumbling stone, Hecate was in no mood to upkeep the pretences of a Lady tonight.

“Do you know,” said Pelham, “you have the palest complexion I’ve ever seen?” Slowly raising his big, calloused hand, Pelham slinked forward in his jaguars crawl. “I wonder if you’re parlour extends all over?”

Hecate, like a gazelle, leapt backwards as the dark hand stroked the air, missing her cheek only by a fraction. “Don’t you dare! Don’t you dare touch me!” Too emotional was she, that her voice sounded screeching: her shoulders tensed in fear, her hands clenched pathetically.

“Come, now, little blackbird, don’t be like that, you’ll crash my feelings like a pile of gold.” Pelham taunted her, in the outstretch of his arms - trying to invent a christlike innocence - and the powdered sugar sound of his usual timbre. “I can’t have my future wife embarrass me by shouting like this in public. But don’t worry, dear Hecate, I find your temper to be invigorating,” the sneer of his smile dropped, along with all hint of humour, and he looked at her straight, enunciating his words with deliberate effect; “I shall allow you to let it go in our marriage bed and there only.”

Forgetting her desire to be as far away from this man as possible, Hecate strode forward, glaring into the icy-blue of Pelham’s dry eyes. Before she could express her outrage, Pelham returned his glee with gusto and added dynamite to the mix: “you see, I have just made a deal with your brother - he’s very keen on our union, you know. He has a little problem - threatening letters and blackmail, a cowards approach if you ask me - and I’ve promised him my help.” Pelham paused for effect, holding up a single finger and straightening his self as he would in parliament before a big speech. “And the best part is, dear Hecate, as a reward for my valiant efforts, Percy has promised me you. The only trophy I asked for.”

“I will never marry you!” Like the hiss of a viper, the venom in Hecate’s promise would have stung any man. Pelham, however, seemed unfazed - the rise in his cheeks suggested amusement.

He laughed heartily, but instead of handsome, Hecate thought the show made him look like a plague doctor. “Don’t worry about your ties elsewhere, little blackbird, you can keep the Pentangle girl.” Hecate’s eyes widened in recognition of his statement, and again, Pelham laughed; “oh, yes, I’ve been watching you - that day in Bond Street, and at Trenton’s ball. I can understand your infatuation, she’s quite something. In fact, I think I’d like a go myself - after we’re wed, why don’t you ask her to join us?”

Instinctively, Hecate swung the flat of her palm. She hit with every drop of force she could muster. If it killed her, she’d ensure this creature didn’t come within a foot of Pippa. Her Pippa. She’d always be hers, at least within the ruined walls of her heart. But, before the slap could satisfy, Hecate found her hand seized in a pulverising vice.

“No,” Pelham growled, his face close enough now that she could smell the whiskey on his breath. “I am done flitting around your little games, Hecate!” He squeezed her hand harder for effect, “you will marry me, and I’ll tell you why; you’re not foolish enough not to know - ho would society
react if they found out The Earl of Trenton’s daughter was caught beneath the sheets with her fiancé’s spinster of a sister?”

Hecate gasped, fresh tears burning the red rims of her eyes; “you can’t, you mustn’t!”

“But I will, you know I will.” Pelham moved his grip from her hand to her forearm and pressed, roughly, on the oval-shaped red mark on her wrist. Her sleeve had risen as she’d moved to strike him, and Hecate baulked as evil touched the evidence of the fact she’d once kissed an angel.

Knowing what he'd done, Pelham relented for the evening; he placed a long, wet kiss on Hecate’s cheek and bid her goodnight.

When satan’s shadow had gone, Hecate fell to the floor, her skirts crumpling beneath her, the wetness still sticky between her thighs all but forgotten, and she cried. She cried without tears, huge dry sobs until she was heaving on the ground. She hadn’t noticed the door of the servant’s staircase open, but when Ada sat with her and wrapped Hecate in her arms like a child, Hecate knew Ada had heard everything.

Now, she’d have no other choice but to leave Pippa be.

Their story read fin.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, dudes, remember me? I've not updated in forever, but college has literally taken over my whole life. I'm on holiday at the moment, so i'm trying to use all my time to get this story tied up, I hope this is decent enough.

I want to thank everyone who has stuck by this story, I know how annoying it is, as a reader myself, when you think an author has abandoned their work, but just know that I have no intentions of doing that.

As always, comments and the like are much appreciated.

You can find me on tumblr @ohlookitstomorrowff

Catch:)
Learning How To Feel Can Be Our Destruction

Chapter Summary

If Hecate had thought Trenton house would be different in the light of day, she was sorely mistaken. The same smell, the same warmth, the same sense of conviviality and a happy family life. Crawford greeted her with the same deep bow and immediately ushered her into the foyer; “I’m afraid Lady Pippa is not at home m’lady.”

“I’m here to see The Earl, is he available?” Hecate asked, trying, and failing miserably, not to wonder at Pippa’s whereabouts. It left a lump of disappointment in the cavernous hole of her chest.

“He is, m’lady, would you like me to inform him you are here?” Crawford said, not missing a beat.

“Please.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The servant’s hall in the basement of Bedford house was white-wash with very little in the way of light - natural or otherwise. A housemaid and a hall boy sat at the far end of the table, their heads together and their hands, centimetres apart. It was a scene the butler would have disbanded in an instant, and perhaps he’d throw the young boy out on his ear believing he’d corrupted the girl who couldn’t have been more than 17. However, as he was serving his master upstairs, Ada Cackle, the housekeeper, had full command of her juniors and she saw no harm in a little flirtation (as long as it went no further, of course.) The housekeeper sat at the other end of the table, entertaining a most curious guest for the setting.

Staring into a cup of steaming tea while trying to listen to Ada’s soft attempts of comfort, was Hecate. It had been 4 days since she’d been, in effect, sold to Lord Pelham for the price of sorting out her brother’s dirty work. Nothing had come of the transaction in the intervening time, but Hecate knew Pelham would strike when she was least expecting, and the likelihood was that Perses saw her as lowly goods Pelham must pay for before he claimed the receipt.

Although the business of forced marriage - or rather, marriage by bribery - weighed heavily on her mind, it was the parchment crumpled in her left hand that troubled Hecate most. It was one of a trio of letters Pippa had sent her since Hecate had sneaked from her rooms in the darkness, and it was no less easy to ignore than the first 2. A proposition of an incognito visit to a pleasure garden had Hecate tearing at her hair in restraint. She had promised to leave Pippa be, but Pippa had no way of knowing that, and Hecate had no way of telling her.

Hecate had promised to leave Pippa be.

“That’s it, the engagement’s been finalised, and the banns will be read in a sennight.” Johnathan, Perses’ valet, strolled into the room loosening his tie with an air of smugness.

“What?” Hecate jumped at the announcement, her tea spilling onto her hand - it burned, but she
didn’t feel it. “What engagement?”

“Pardon me, my lady” Johnathon said, failing to change his demeanour and spitting her title like a wayward fly that inconvenienced him. “Lord Perses’ engagement to The Earl of Trenton’s daughter, the Lady Pippa.” The valet poured himself a cup from the kettle, drinking from it happily, as though the world had not just caved in.

Hecate slumped back into her chair, unable to comprehend that the news was real. Johnathon hummed, clearly pleased with himself, and excused himself - he'd done what he needed. “Goodnight, Lady Hecate, Mrs Cackle.”

After a minute or two, Ada leant across the table inconspicuously; “everything will turn out right in the end, Hecate, it will, I promise,” she said patting her friend’s hand.

“You can’t promise that,” Hecate declared, devoid of emotion, “but I can make sure I stick to mine.”

If Hecate had thought Trenton house would be different in the light of day, she was sorely mistaken. The same smell, the same warmth, the same sense of conviviality and a happy family life. Crawford greeted her with the same deep bow and immediately ushered her into the foyer; “I’m afraid Lady Pippa is not at home m’lady.”

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“He is, m’lady, would you like me to inform him you are here?” Crawford said, not missing a beat.

>Please.”

Stood alone in the bright room, a shadow of darkness, Hecate refrained from looking at the pictured walls, instead, she stared straight ahead at the door the butler had disappeared through. Thankfully, he was no more than a few turns of the clock; “His Lordship will see you now, Lady Hecate.”

Trenton’s study was much like her father’s, except the numerous personal effects; a large portrait of his wife above the fireplace, a framed drawing Pippa had gifted him as a young child. The man himself sat behind an imposing desk of dark wood and stood upon her entry. “Lady Hecate, what can I do for you?” Trenton asked as Crawford closed the door.

“Forgive me, Lord Trenton, but I’m afraid… I-I… I have come to you… to tell you something…”

Trenton held up his hand, quietening Hecate’s stuttering. “Please, have a seat? Can I get you anything? Tea? I’m afraid you’ve missed the lunch service, but I’m sure I could have something rustled up in the kitchens for you?”

“No, Sir, thank you.” Hecate took the offered seat, and when The Earl had returned to his own, she breathed deeply, stealing herself for what was to come. “Sir, I’m afraid I’ve come to tell you something about myself… and Lady Pippa.”

“Well, I can’t imagine it to be something too grave in severity if it concerns you and my daughter; you had me worried, Lady Hecate.”

“No, Sir,” Hecate said for a second time, “it is… rather severe.” Her next words were directed into her lap, “Pippa - Lady Pippa - and I… have been more than… friends…”
The Earl considered this for a moment, before smiling sadly, his eyes holding none of the malice Hecate had foreseen. “Such fancies can often happen, I believe Pippa has become too fond of more than one girl throughout her teens. I understand, girls are kept separate from boys throughout adolescence, it’s only natural to seek comfort and company in each other, relationships as such are harmless-“

“’I’ve stolen your daughter’s innocence!’” In her frustration, Hecate had shouted, and her confession had sounded harsher than intended. Still, it was the truth, and now that it was out, she could only carry on. “I have deflowered her, and she I. We have been intimate in a way that only man and wife should be.”

“I don’t believe I need to hear any more, Lady Hecate, you have explained yourself more than enough,” Trenton said, his face expressionless.

Confused, and on the brink of tears (as she so often had been in the past week) Hecate apologised. “I’m sorry, Sir: I’m sorry I have abused your trust and hospitality, and I’m sorry I’ve ruined your daughter’s marriage.

“I wish I could accept your apology, but, as you must be aware, I’m too stunned at the moment to think it over. As for Pippa marrying your brother, I see no need for the arrangements to change. In fact, the fact that my daughter is no longer… the fact that you’ve told me of your relationship with her, well, that is more the reason she should marry. Sooner, rather than later, might I add.”

“But, Sir-“

“No.” Lord Trenton was much more forceful this time, standing from his chair and facing her squarely. “I don’t think there is anything else you should say, I’ll have Crawford show you out.” He rung a small, brass bell and turned his back on her to face the window.

Hecate clenched her fists as the tears began to fall. She tried to hide them from her voice and prayed she’d be successful. “I care for your daughter, Lord Trenton, deeply. I lo- I wish the best for her,” the tears came harder as Hecate almost spilt her words. “And, believe me when I tell you, I do not think my brother would make a suitable husband - for anybody, let alone Pippa.”

“That hardly matters now, does it?” He said in an exhale of breath over his hunched shoulder.

“My Lady?” Crawford appeared at her side, “let me get your shawl, m’ lady, and see you to the door.”

She followed the kind butler who said not a word about the tears still tracking her cheeks, and bit her tongue and fought against her own legs and their wish to retrace their steps. Hecate very nearly returned to The Earls office and told him all about her brother’s sordid past - about the woman who was hanged two seasons past through no fault of her own bar stupidity. If Trenton knew who Perses really was, would he let his daughter marry him then?

It didn’t matter; Trenton could never know.

Hecate couldn’t ruin her sister - the sister she’d once resented - or her chances of marriage. Not now. Not after Pippa had taught her how to feel.

Everyone with the name Hardbroom would be thrown to the gutters if they knew what Perses had done.

Pippa Pentangle had called at Bedford house three times in as many days, and each time she’d been
turned away. Even when she’d asked for Cassandra, she’d been told, firmly, that no one was home to see her. But Pippa saw the light in the library window, and yesterday she was sure she’d saw the curtains move. Hecate was home. And Hecate wasn’t speaking to her, wouldn’t even reply to her letters.

Pippa was worried. Worried, and more than a little angry.

Once again, she lifted the heavy brass knocker and let it fall, and this time she was not prepared to let the ridiculous butler to send her away. Pippa resolved to go to the back door and ask for Ada if she had to.

But it wasn’t the butler who answered the door.

It wasn’t a footman either.

It was Hecate.

Hecate, looking dishevelled and worn out as though she’d not slept for days. “Lady Pippa~“

“You owe me an explanation.”

“I don’t believe so.”

Doing her best not to shout, but unwilling to curtail her anger, Pippa moved onto the top step, causing Hecate to half retreat behind the door. “You do! All week I’ve written, I’ve called on you, and for a week I’ve heard nothing! Is that all I mean to you, Hecate: nothing?’

Hecate appeared ashamed, addressing Pippa’s hem instead of looking her in the eye. “We can’t do this anymore, Pippa. I can’t see you anymore.”

Stunned, Pippa made a move forward, trying to wrench Hecate to her and demand she stop this nonsense. “Don’t, Hecate. Don’t do this.”

But Hecate was quicker, she shut the door swiftly, with nothing more to say then; “goodbye, Pippa.”

Inside, a figure in black cried silently against the door, able to hear the strained voice outside whisper ‘please’.

Mildred tried her hardest that evening, she really did. Unfortunately, Hecate was quick to the boiling point and never sat below the simmer.

When Mildred tried to recite the works of Lord Byron, Hecate bubbled over.

When Mildred tried to interject humour, Hecate steamed.

When Mildred laid a hand on her cold arm, Hecate had turned to oil, leaping from the pot, her words stuck.

Hurt crossed Mildred’s young face, and although Hecate felt regretful, she had not the energy to repent. Mildred, however, had grown accustomed to Hecate; an intuitive, watchful little thing was she, she garnered herself and in her best Hecate-like impression, faced the issue head-on. “I can’t know what is wrong, Lady Hecate, not if you won’t talk to me, but you can’t stay so… belligerent all the time-~”
“Belligerent, Mildred? It seems you have been keeping up with your homework?”

“I have, my lady, but that’s beside the point. You won’t talk to Mrs Cackle - not really - you just sit there looking all sad while she does her best. You do the same with me, even if you are harsher than with Mrs Cackle, and I know Lady Pippa has been here and you’ve sent her away-”

“I think that’s our lesson at an end for this evening.” Hecate stood, cold and unreadable once more, moving to hold the door open for the maid, turning a deaf ear to her words as she departed.

‘THE EARL OF TRENTON IS PROUD TO ANNOUNCE THE ENGAGEMENT OF HIS DAUGHTER, LADY PIPPA PENTANGLE, TO THE DUKE OF BEDFORD’S SON AND HEIR, LORD PERSES HARBDBROOM’

The announcement, in its tacky black-and-white, laughed at Hecate from where it lay. She wanted to turn it to ashes, even flip it over to a column about this season’s appointments at court, but unusually, the table was full this morning, and Hecate couldn’t bare to show anything other than stoicism in front of her family.

To her right, Cassandra had been eying her all morning: something led her observations, and Hecate couldn’t deduce whether it was worry, or, heaven forbid, knowing. Hecate made a mental note to ensure Ada curtailed the servants gossiping as best she could.

It was unnerving, this new sisterly manner Hecate and Cassandra had slowly adopted these past few months. It made Hecate feel a pang of strange guilt, all those years she’d avoided her sister, looked down upon her, blamed her for their mother’s death. If Hecate had been level-headed from the start, she would have realised how bereft Cassandra was; she’d met their mother for a matter of minutes before she’d succumbed to fever. The girls, far more than Perses, were effectively orphaned that cold day in March, but unlike Cassandra, Hecate at least held something to remember her mother by. Hecate had the chance to see her mother each evening as she sat at the looking-glass and allowed her long hair to fall around her shoulders. Like a waterfall in the night, her mother had said.

Cassandra had nothing. Hecate had always been jealous of her sister’s classic beauty, of all the praise and attention it brought her, but for a moment she wondered whether Cassandra had ever been jealous of her? Surely, Cassandra had seen their mother’s portrait, hidden in the drawer of their father’s desk? Surely she’d recognised the resemblance staring back at her?

Hecate looked to the clock with a curl of her lip, she’d only managed to pass 5 minutes with her internal musings. She’d only gone 5 minutes without thinking of the wretched broadsheet beneath her left hand. If her nails curled and the paper crumpled, only Hecate was wise to it.

“Cassandra, Hecate,” The Duke said, addressing them from his post at the head of the table, “as you know, your brother is now officially engaged to the Trenton girl.”

Of course, Hecate had been waiting for it, the fanfare to start. Although it toyed with her to hear Pippa mentioned so carelessly - it clearly demonstrated her father’s opinion of Pippa: just a silly, little girl who happened to be beautiful and well-bred, enough characteristics to steer Perses’ reputation in the right direction - Hecate reverted into her old training of remaining impassive.

“The celebratory ball is to be in 3 weeks, and I expect both of you to look your best, especially you, Hecate, as hard as that may be.”

“Yes, Hecate,” Perses interjected, “I forgot to mention that Lord Pelham has agreed to escort you -
a great honour for someone such as yourself.”

“A great honour, indeed,” said the Duke.

*Pelham.* “Lord Pelham?” It was a great testament to her self-control that her voice remained measured.

“The very same,” Perses said.

“Is there a problem with that, girl?” Asked her father. “To catch the eye of a man like Pelham at your age, and with your looks and temperament, well, one would think you’d be thankful.”

Problem. *With Pelham?* Of course, there was. But Hecate could say not a word. Not unless she wished to paint Pippa’s door with the infamous red ‘X’ of the plague. “No, father, there is no problem - I’m just shocked is all, and flustered at having so little notice.”

“Hmm,” The Duke looked her over carefully, “I think 3 weeks is enough notice, don’t you, Percy?”

“It’ll need to be a remarkable dress - a lot of workmanship. But we’re lucky she’s so slight - not much material will be needed, and that should cut time and money.”

“Good, good,” approved The Duke. “Tomorrow morning I’ll arrange for both of you to visit the dressmakers-”

“Wouldn’t you rather go with Lady Pippa, Hecate?” Cassandra looked nervous and flighty, Hecate thought it very odd, shopping was her sister’s favourite pastime (even when accompanied by her.)

“She’ll be busy with plans of her own, Cassandra - Pippa’s no time to run after hopeless Hecate now that she’s to be a married woman,” said Perses.

The words hurt. They hurt Hecate to the bone. Thankfully, however, she hadn’t much time to mull them over; “but Hecate and Pippa have become such good friends, she really has become fond of Hecate. I know,” Cassandra enthused, “I’ll call on her, ask her if she’s got the time-“

“I agree with Perses,” Hecate said, her voice dry and foreign to her own ears. All 3 pairs of eyes looked at her like a sheep with the bolt gun at its head - there had never been a time any of them could recall when Hecate and Perses sang from the same hymn sheet (not even in church when they were children).

“But, Hecate,” Cassandra protested.

“No,” Hecate said coldly, “Lady Pippa is far too busy.”

That evening, after a quiet, strained lesson with Mildred where not much progress was made, Hecate was once again sat with Ada in the servant’s hall. This time, they were alone, giving Ada free reign with her assessment.

“I agree it would’ve been unwise to tell The Earl of Trenton the whole truth, who knows how he would have taken it, and, if he did decide to go to the authorities, I doubt anyone would believe him. There’s no evidence, as you know. No, the only thing that could have come from Lord Trenton knowing, would have been ridicule for everyone - including him. And the last thing you want, Hecate, is to have a man with a grudge on your back.”
With a sympathetic smile, the housekeeper offered Hecate a curious-looking muffin covered in pink icing.

“No, thank you,” Hecate said, her voice choking halfway through.

“My mistake,” Ada said, shaking her head in mock foolishness, “I forget - you don’t have a sweet tooth.”

That was both true and false at the same time; Hecate’s palette was far more savoury until her visit to the countryside, but, that was not the reason she passed on the offer of cake. Ada had a habit of forgetting minor details, either that or, at times, she was insensitive to Hecate’s feelings. The older woman could clearly see the sweet treat was pink.

“As I said,” Ada took a bite of the offending muffin, “you were right in the way you handled Trenton, although, in retrospect, I’m sure you regret going to see him in the first place?”

Hecate did not answer, the only regret she held, was that of the Earls response - Pippa would marry Perses regardless of what had taken place with his sister.

“Not to worry, I understand, Hecate, but what I fail to see is why you didn’t speak to Pippa?”

As Hecate opened her mouth to answer, a soft knock came from the back door, “are you expecting someone?” Hecate asked.

“Me? No,” Ada said, her eyes confused behind her spectacles.

In one seamless motion, Hecate rose from the hard, wooden seat and opened the door. A street urchin, with holes in his shoes, and soot on his face. The boy removed his torn cap as soon as he saw her; “Sorry to disturb you, ma’am,” his voice was as tacky and broken as the cobbles whence he came. “Is Cuthbert ‘ere? I’s been sent to give ‘im sum’ing,” he held up a small, sealed envelope.

It took a moment for Hecate to decipher the boy's words from his accent and poor grammar, but eventually, she got there, and, with her plumb, clear voice, said: “Mr Cuthbert has retired for the evening, I can ensure the note will reach him-“

“No, ma’am,” the boy panicked, “I’s been told to put it straight into ‘is ‘and me-self! Man gave me ‘alf a shilling to do it.”

“Mrs Cackle?” Hecate called over her shoulder, “do we, perhaps, have a shilling or two lying around?”

Ada did not question the request, instead, reached into an old copper teapot containing the morning’s paper money, and withdrew two battered coins. “Here you go, my l-“ Ada stopped herself at the last minute, Hecate’s dark eyes warning her silently. It would be unwise to let the boy, and more importantly, whoever had sent him, just who he had been speaking to. “Here you go,” Ada dropped the coins into Hecate’s palm.

Hecate, who didn’t often come into contact with physical currency, tested the weight of her soon-to-be bribe. “Young man, you will give me that letter, and in return, I will give you this-“ Hecate opened her hand and watched as the boy’s eyes lit up.

“Two shillings?” Hecate could tell the boy had thought about grabbing the coins and running, she could see in the squirm of his hands, clutching his cap and widening the tear. Perhaps he had done it before? But, something about Hecate’s severe manner, the straightness of her spine stopped him.
“Two shillings,” she reiterated.

Tentatively, the boy placed the note in Hecate’s hand: he kept a firm grip on it, leaving black marks smeared on its front until Hecate had handed over the small wage.

“Thank you, ma’am,” he said, inspecting the coins before testing one on the corner of a cracked tooth.

Turning the letter over, Hecate noticed the scrawled script did not read Cuthbert - her brother’s valet - but Perses, his master. “Excuse me, young man?” She called to the boy, who had snuck five feet backwards without her knowing. “But this letter isn’t addressed to Cuthbert, it’s addressed to Lord Perses.”

“I dunno, ma’am - can’t read.”

Hecate watched his wiry shadow drift into the night, his footfalls silent. No wonder the boy, and others like him, continued the cycle of crime and poverty. There was nobody in power willing to ensure that children, regardless of background, had a basic level of education. It lodged firmly in her mind, that if circumstances had been different, Mildred Hubble could have been the urchin knocking on her door this evening.

“What is it”, Ada asked as Hecate returned to the table and sat down.

“Let us see, shall we?” Slipping her long forefinger behind the dripped candle wax seal, Hecate popped the letter open as neatly as she could.

Perses,

You know who I am and therefore, I don’t believe there is any need for introductions. I hear you are to marry the daughter of an Earl, congratulations. A pretty young thing isn’t she, the girl you’re to marry: average height, blonde hair, brown eyes, tanned skin and lovely, lovely curves? It would be a pity for anything to happen to her before you get your hands on her dowry, not to mention her reputation, which is stellar so I hear?

All of this can be avoided, Lord Perses. You know this. All that I ask is that you meet me like a man, at dawn, 10 paces, a pistol each.

You know how to find me.

G.

Gasping for air, Hecate looked up at Ada, concern clouding the older woman’s features. “What is it,” Ada asked again.

“Pippa…”

Rushing through the expansive hallways of Bedford house, Hecate tried to calm the frantic jolt in her chest. She could hear Ada puffing at her heels, the housekeeper’s questions a mere blur in the carpet.

The letter felt heavy and menacing in her hand, a little crumpled from when Hecate had snatched it from Ada as the housekeeper had just reached the last line.

“Hecate? Hecate!” Ada had caught up to her, they were only steps from Hecate’s destination. “Are
you sure you want to do this?"

“I’ve no other choice.”

Hecate knocked on the door, thrice in quick succession.

Raised voices could be heard from within, but nobody came to answer.

Regardless of her own fears, Hecate broke a cardinal rule and swung the door to her father’s study open.

The room was large: bookshelves hid the window, a pair of armchairs sat in front of the fire, a drinks trolley took pride of place, its whiskey decanter near empty.

Hecate usually saw her father’s desk as his pulpit, from where he preached about her unworthiness, but not tonight. Tonight, The Duke looked haggard, older than his years, his silk robe was creased, and his hair was wayward. His butler stood beside him.

Perses paced before the fire, the snarl of his lips customarily hid by a smile was left unfettered.

And, in the middle of the room, Georgiana, Cassandra’s ladies maid, stood like Hecate had done so many times before. Tears stained the young woman’s face, and only Hecate seemed to see. Her head was cowed, and only Hecate seemed to notice.

“Father, a letter has just arrived at the back door… I thought you ought to see it immediately.”

The Duke did not look up from the bottom of his crystal glass; “is it about Cassandra?”

Puzzled for a moment, Hecate paused before going on, “no, Sir, it’s a letter-“

“Then I don’t want to hear it,” said the Duke.

“But, father-“

“Our Sister has run away with an equerry, Hecate, to be more specific: The Duke of York’s equerry, I do believe you’ve met him.” Perses had stopped his pacing, now turned toward Hecate with that familiar look of undulated hatred.

“What?” Hecate was thrown from her plight by the bolting horse that was this news.

“Run away: absconded, disappeared, eloped,” Perses barked at her as if she were dense, “this afternoon she left with him, they are in love, she says, and are - I quote - ‘to be married at the earliest convenience’. It’s all here in this note she left.”

A vision of a smiling Cassandra dancing with a tall, lean gentleman in Hertfordshire swam in Hecate’s mind. She looked to the still sniffing ladies maid, “Georgiana, did you know about this?”

“Don’t you think we’ve asked her that already?” Perses sneered.

Hecate didn’t hear him, focused on trying to discern Georgiana’s teary words. “I knew she was fond of him, my lady,” the maid dabbed a handkerchief to her nose discreetly. “But I never thought she’d do anything like this. I do wish she’d told me, or at least taken me with her, so I knew she was safe,” Georgiana said before breaking down again.

“Perhaps Mrs Cackle should take Georgiana downstairs, your lordship? She’s clearly shaken up, and I doubt she’ll be much use to until she’s coherent,” offered the butler.
“What? Yes, yes, do that Mrs Cackle, but don’t let her out of your sight, not until I’ve thought on what to do,” The Duke said, still not taking his eyes from the pattern on the glass of crystal.

The mention of Ada and her presence at her back reminded Hecate why she was here in the first place. She didn’t know how much danger her sister was in if any, but she knew Pippa was. “A letter came to the backdoor for Perses,” Hecate said in a rush, “it’s from a man who signs himself only as ‘G’, I think it may be the man who’s blackmailing him.”

“How do you know about that?” Perses' anger had amped up a notch, his face contorting further, his voice growling.

Hecate ignored him. “He says that if Perses doesn’t, ‘face him like a man’, he’ll harm Lady Pippa. I think, no, I know this man’s threats are not empty; father, you have to do something!”

“Your sister has left this house a scarlet woman,” her father looked up for the first time since Hecate had entered his study. She very nearly gasped when she saw the bloodshot of his eyes - he was intoxicated and angry, and most of all, he felt humiliated. Hecate knew from past experience what was coming next. He came to stand in front of her, one hand still holding the glass, the other, raised, swiping from left to right. The sting of the back of her father’s hand registered as Hecate collided with Ada’s front. Instinct had her holding her cheek, the warm trickle of blood where her father’s signet ring had cut her a familiar feeling. “How can you think of anything else? Mrs Cackle, forget Georgiana, take my poor excuse for a daughter out of here, and keep her far away from me!”

“Yes, Sir,” Hecate heard Ada say, as she was guided from the room.

“This won’t sting at all.”

It did sting, but Hecate did not care. They were sat in Ada’s sparse bedroom in the very roof of the house - Hecate on the single chair, Ada, stood beside her, a rag soaked in saltwater infused with lemon. “If I could just find out who ‘G’ is-“

“Hecate,” Ada pressed, rather than dabbed, the rag causing Hecate to flinch, “I’ll help you in any way I can - I’m always here for you, you know that? But I don’t think it wise for you to wade into this, you could get hurt-“

“And what about Pippa?” Hecate snapped, “if I don’t do something, what if something happens to her?” Quietly, more to herself, Hecate whispered into the looking glass, imagining Pippa on the other side; ‘I’m merely existing without her with me, but if the world was without her, I can’t see my place in it all.”

Hovering her hand over the tight bun high on Hecate’s head, Ada nearly reached out before thinking better and placing her hand on the younger woman’s shoulder. “I’d have left this job if it wasn’t for you, Hecate, do you know that? Years ago - after your mother died - but who would have looked after you then, hm? You care for Pippa, you love her, I can see that, and I know you’ll do everything in your power to keep her safe, but, Hecate, If you were to be caught in the crossfire, I’d never forgive myself. My job has always been to look after you, and I’m certainly not going to stop now.”

“Ada,” Hecate softened, her hand meeting her friend’s on her shoulder, their eyes in the mirror, “I’d have been lost all these years without you, but I have to do this…”

“I know, I know you do, dear, and I have an idea.”
Perses' study was far less organised than their father’s; papers stacked on top of books stacked on papers. At the top of the pile, sat a bound journal that smelled of gin, Hecate looked in there first, but there was no indication, no hint, to the blackmailer's identity.

Hecate searched for half an hour with no luck, Ada keeping watch outside. Another quarter of an hour went by before she got a sniff.

In the writing bureau, in the second to last drawer, a newspaper clipping Hecate remembered from the time.

Emmeline Gerrard of the London borough of St Giles, a prostitute who’d risen in the ranks to become a madam, was hanged for the murder of a prominent peer’s son. It just so happened that the brothel Ms Gerrard ran was owned by an undercover Perses and that the aristocrat that was stabbed 12 times in the chest was Perses ‘business partner’ - Hecate was adept at hiding in plain sight and overhearing conversations.

The trial had been a sensation when Ms Gerrard claimed not have been the perpetrator and that it had in fact been another ‘toff’. Of course, the gentry don’t commit such crimes, and Ms Gerrard was laughed at, all the way to Her Majesty’s Prison Newgate.

The newspaper clipping didn’t offer anything new, it didn’t even mention half of the scandals Hecate was privy to, but what interested her most, was a note stuck to the bottom-left corner. It was in a frightening familiar hand:

You’ll pay.

Gerrard.

Gerrard. The blackmailer, the man who could potentially harm Pippa, was named Gerrard. And Hecate had a hunch where she might find him.

Chapter End Notes

Dun dun dun!

I had so much fun writing this chapter - I wrote the majority of it whilst in Turkey on holiday, I don't like the heat and this was the perfect distraction.

I'd like to know everyone's thoughts on this chapter, I know it's plot-heavy and so, I just want to make sure it makes sense to everyone. If it makes sense, or, you liked it - great, let me know. If it didn't make sense, you have any questions, or you didn't like it, please let me know so I can better explain or rectify my mistakes.

Only 3 (possibly 4) chapters left now lads, and that includes an epilogue.

As always, comments and the like are very much appreciated, and, you can find me on tumblr @ohlookitstomorrowff

Catch:)
A Different London To The One We Know

Chapter Summary

The church itself was tall and grand, a single oil lamp hung outside the double oak doors, but the graveyard, with its granite statues and wooden crosses, was neglected and dead to the world. It was difficult to see the names of those buried in the dark, rows upon rows, Hecate peered at; plenty of Johns and Williams and Davids and Edwards, but no Franks. Then, a particular shrine caught Hecate’s eye, it looked to be an unskilled man's version of The Virgin Mary, one of her eyes were squint, and both of her clasped hands were left. The name etched in the granite was Francisco Warner.

“Good evening.”

Hecate turned at the man’s voice, expecting to see a menacing thug, but instead-
“we’ve met before?”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For three nights since the perilous letter came into her hands, Hecate Hardbroom had walked the streets of St Giles, asking anyone who will listen if they know a man named Gerrard.

She wasn't oblivious, Hecate, she knew she’s bound to look out of place in the darkened, narrow streets filled with petty criminals. Ada had leant her a dress she hoped one of the housemaids wouldn’t miss, and she shrouded her face in the shadow of her shawl, tied underneath her chin to stop it slipping. The only issue no one could seem to fix was that of Hecate’s voice; as soon as the people of St Giles had heard her speak, they knew she wasn’t one of them. Ada had offered to accompany her, but Hecate refused to give her that burden. She’d have taken a footman, except, they were under the thumb of her father’s butler, and, therefore, could not be trusted.

It was with blistered heels and little hope that Hecate snuck out for the fourth night in a row and descended into what most considered to be London’s hidden shame: St Giles.

Long ago, her grandfather had told her if she was ever lost, all she needed to do was follow the stars. It should have been useful information, for she was lost now, in a narrow alleyway littered with beggars, a tavern at one end and a circle of prostitutes at the other. But when she looked up, Hecate could see no stars, no one in this part of London ever had.

She brought a scented handkerchief to her nose and continued walking toward the tavern. The door opened, bright amber light and a heavy waft of pipe smoke came from within, Hecate breathed deeply, longing to be away from the stench of gin and decay. A man, toothless and intoxicated, was thrown down the steps and rolled to a stop in the middle of the lane, right into Hecate’s path.

“He owes me a bleedin’ fortune,” someone yelled from inside the tavern.

“I’d ‘ardly call a few shillings a fortune,” said the toothless man.

“But you owe a lot a people a few shillings, don’t ya, Charlie? Including me.” Hecate watched as
someone stepped from the shadows, moving to help Charlie. At first, Hecate thought it was a man wearing the shabby breeches, cap and coat she’d become accustomed to seeing, but when the voice turned to face her, helping Charlie to his shaky feet, Hecate could clearly see the figure of a woman.

The woman looked strong and tough enough to handle herself.

“Oi, Dimity, I think that’s her - the toff that’s been down ‘ere lookin’ for the boss.” Dimity looked to where Charlie was pointing, right at Hecate, and Hecate had the immediate urge to run.

She ran as fast as she could. Through puddles of god knows what, Hecate ran. Her slim frame made her light on her feet, but Dimity was much faster than springy steps. Just as she was about to reach the gaggle of prostitutes, Hecate was tugged, hard, through an open door.

The lighting in here wasn’t much better than outside, and neither was the smell, except now there was something added, an overly floral perfume that gave Hecate a light head. She felt movement to her right and looked over when she heard a feminine voice say something to Dimity, who still held onto her tightly. When she saw the speaker, Hecate really wished she hadn’t looked.

The woman had fiery-red hair, and that was all Hecate noticed except for the fact her bodice was so low that her nipples were visible! It was a brothel. Hecate had found herself in a brothel.

“Not tonight, sweetheart,” Dimity called after the woman, “business, not pleasure,” she said while prodding Hecate forward like a prized cow. “This is her, the toff that’s been running about the streets looking for Gerrard.” Hecate had been pushed behind a curtain, into an office of some sort, where a woman Hecate thought she might’ve recognised sat in front of a cracked mirror applying heavy red lipstick.

“Ah, of course, have a seat, dear.”

Hecate stayed rooted to the spot, perhaps she leaned a little closer to Dimity - she didn’t much like the strange woman who’d accosted her, but she was preferable to what sat in front of her.

“I know how you people like your formalities, forgive me, I’m Agatha. Now, sit down. Please.”

Still, Hecate did not move, there was something about Agatha, her features were reminiscent somehow, but twisted and neglected. She had to have been in her mid 50’s, perhaps the same age as Ada, but there was none of Ada’s warmth or kindness here. No, instead, Hecate shivered in the cool blue of Agatha’s stare.

“Thought toffs were supposed to be smart,” Dimity said

“I wonder who she belongs to?”

Dimity ignored Agatha’s statement, instead, pressing on, but Hecate took notice, nor did she miss the close way Agatha was examining her. It reminded Hecate of somebody… but that was too impossible a thought to entertain.

“Is he here?” Asked Dimity.

“Out collecting money, and I’m afraid you’ll have to take her someplace else” Agatha gestured toward Hecate, “we’ve an important client visiting this evening, office hours are closed. And Dimity,” the madam called as Dimity was dragging Hecate back out the way they came.

“Yeah?”
“Do tell Gerrard, when you find him, he works for me, and whatever he’s up to can be done on his own time.”

Agatha watched Hecate retreat all the way.

“Where are you taking me?” They’d walked half a mile from the brothel before Hecate gained enough confidence to utilise her voice.

“Out of St Giles,” Dimity said plainly.

Digging her heels into the dirt, Hecate ensured they came to a stop, “no! I can’t, I must speak with this Gerrard. You know him, please, take me to see him, I’ll give anything you ask? There’s still time tonight, it’s only—“ Hecate looked at her wrist. Ordinarily, a clock-face winked back at her, but not tonight.

“Didn’t wear your watch incase you got dipped?” Dimity smiled, looking far less terrifying. “Not as daft as I thought then? Or maybe you are - you saw the fright you got tonight, shouldn’t that’ve taught you?”

“You, miss, are the one who tackled me and dragged me into a brothel.”

“Never heard anyone complain before,” joked Dimity. “Look, I’m sorry ‘bout that, but you did run, and I thought there’d be the best place to speak to you, I didn’t know we’d run into Agatha - she don’t usually do her own dirty work.”

“You work for that awful woman? Does Gerrard?”

“Gotta get by any way you can when you’ve not got a rich daddy looking out for you.”

“I support myself, thank you very much,” Hecate bristled.

“Still rich though, ain’t you?” There was no malice in Dimity’s questioning, only intrigue. Still, it was one of the stranger conversations of Hecate’s life. “Bet you was born with the silver spoon and everything?”

“Hmph… Listen, Miss Dimity—“

Dimity burst out laughing, “ain’t ever been called no miss neither.”

Hecate refrained from pinching the bridge of her nose, for someone as enthralled with language as Hecate, it was hard to hear the other woman’s appalling use of it. “Dimity, then. Dimity, I have trailed these streets for 4 nights now, and I’ve heard hide nor hair of my quarry, I’m at my wit’s end. Please, it is important? Please take me to your friend?”

Dimity placed a single finger on her lips as if she was considering. “Who are you?”

“I’ll tell Mr Gerrard only.”

“Midnight, Friday, the graveyard behind St Giles in the Fields, look for a Mr Frank Warner. Don’t be late.”

Wednesday and Thursday came and went at the pace of a snail, but Friday was going far too quick. When the clock stuck half-past-10, Hecate began the now all too familiar path into the East end. The first leg of her journey was simple enough, she hired the use of a taxi on the corner of
Trafalgar Square, but trying to navigate through St Giles in a carriage was dangerous for two reasons; 1, the roads were full of unsuspecting holes and dips, easy for horses to lose their footing, and 2, a carriage was like a moth to a flame for the vagabonds who thought themselves highwaymen. So, Hecate was forced to make the half-an-hour walk that would take her to St Giles in the Fields.

The church itself was tall and grand, a single oil lamp hung outside the double oak doors, but the graveyard, with its granite statues and wooden crosses, was neglected and dead to the world. It was difficult to see the names of those buried in the dark, rows upon rows, Hecate peered at; plenty of Johns and Williams and Davids and Edwards, but no Franks. Then, a particular shrine caught Hecate’s eye, it looked to be an unskilled man's version of The Virgin Mary, one of her eyes were squint, and both of her clasped hands were left. The name etched in the granite was Francisco Warner.

“Good evening.”

Hecate turned at the man’s voice, expecting to see a menacing thug, but instead- “we’ve met before?”

“I believe so, Lady Hecate,” the man removed his cap, placed it at his chest and dipped a curious bow.

“I wasn’t expecting that,” Dimity, dressed in the same fashion as the previous nigh Hecate had met her, stood beside Gerrard, grinning.

“Nor was I,” Gerrard said.

“That day in the bookstore, Pelham was… you were more than gentlemanly, I was very grateful to you,” Hecate said.

“I am not the man you see before you, Lady Hecate, not really. But your brother, he as good as killed my sister-“

“So you intend to repay him in kind,” Hecate hissed, “and kill the girl he is to marry? Well, I have news for you, Sir,” anger drew Hecate forward, her finger inches from Gerrard’s plain-featured face, “my brother does not love Pippa Pentangle, and you will gain nothing but trouble from her death.”

“My lady,” Gerrard held up a hand, unlike Hecate, his voice was calm, “I have no wish to harm the girl. And I’m no fool in thinking Lord Perses has love for anyone but himself - it’s the Trenton reputation he wants, he needs that, and I must make him pay.”

Hecate thought for the briefest of seconds before her heart pumped one last time. It was instinct.

“Please, take me instead, do whatever you will, just don’t harm Pippa…”

Perses Hardbroom was not accustomed to answering anyone’s orders. In fact, he wasn’t likely to answer them at all if they called him Perses; why his mother decided to name her offspring after characters in Greek mythology was beyond him. So, when his father summoned him by a loud below of his Christian name, it took Percy a good while longer than it should in replying.

They met in the hallway, The Duke in his nightwear, eyes red-rimmed - he’d not put the bottle down since Cassandra had run off with somebody else’s servant. Percy, however, was still fully dressed and ready to go, even at this late hour. “What on earth is this?”
“What is this? What is this? I’ll tell you what this is, boy, here,” his father brandished a piece of parchment in his face.

Perses,

Since my last warning has gone unheeded, action has been taken. I have your sister, she will remain unharmed if you meet me at dawn. I shall wait in the graveyard where my sister lies every morning for a week.

Gerrard.

“That’s two daughters I’ve lost to ruin, boy. Two! Not even your marriage will be able to lift our name when this gets out—“

“Be quiet, old man, and listen.” Percy had grown sick and tired of his father, it was time for the reign of a new Duke in the house of Bedford, and this seemed the perfect beginning. The Duke turned red with anger, but Percy cared not, he spoke aloud and if his father listened, good, it would mean one less problem to deal with.

“Gerrard is bound to grow bored, or, at least frustrated if he thinks he can outsmart me-“

“You have to deal with this, boy! You got us into this mess, I covered for you last time but this time-“

“I said hush!” Percy barked, looming over his father with pride; he was bigger and stronger, and soon he’d be more powerful too. “Hecate is better off where she is-“

“Better off! Better off! That’s the second one to-“

Percy really was getting tired of this, it crossed his mind that the stairs looked rather inviting - what if his father were to have an accident? It shouldn’t be too hard to believe, there was plenty of evidence supporting his intoxication, perhaps he tripped? No, something like that was bound to cause a ruckus, avoidance of such things was key to his success, best to give the old man one more chance.

“I’m sorry about Cassandra, really, I am. She could have married well, been a great asset to us, but Hecate? Hecate? Hecate was going nowhere, an embarrassment if you ask me. Sure, Pelham might’ve taken her off our hands, but he’s got skeletons of his own, and this way we won’t lose money, we’ll gain it.”

Ah, good, he’d piqued his father’s interest, the old man's ears twitched, “I’m listening?”

“My Grandfather left her a sizeable fortune - more money than you or I have put together - and what happens if Hecate dies before it is claimed?”

“I can claim it?”

Percy didn’t mention that if, in the event of his father’s passing, he too could claim Hecate’s inheritance - only he needed to know that. “Correct. We shall be rich once again, and, with my marriage to the noble 'Lady Pippa',” he sniggered mockingly, “we’ll be laughing. We might be asked back to court, although, I do wish The Queen would pop her clogs, The Prince of Wales is much more fun.”

“I like you’re thinking, boy.”
Percy liked his own thinking too, he went out with a smile on his face that night, his plan tucked safely under his hat.

Somewhere, an out of tune piano thrummed, loud, unrecognisable cockney accents singing along. High above the din, up 3 flights of rickety wooden stairs, a single room had been left to rot. There were no windows here, no carpets or drapes either; apart from a small cot with sickly-brown threadbare sheets, the only furnishings were an old table with one leg 3 inches too short, and a pair of mismatched chairs (clearly, an elderly woman with one eye had given embroidering the cushions a good go).

From the cot, there came the odd sniffle of tears and a murmured name that the other woman occupying the room pretended not to hear. A pale face shone beneath the blankets, midnight hair gleamed in the little light available.

She’d been blindfolded as she was brought here, in the back of an apple cart, but Hecate had an inkling of where she might be. It didn’t matter though: Hecate wasn’t going to try and run, she went willingly with Gerrard and Dimity, as their hostage, or as bait, she didn’t know. What she did know, however, was whatever she was doing, whatever purpose she was to serve, it was keeping Pippa safe. Albeit, Pippa and Perses were still to wed, but Hecate knew Pippa was a trophy to her brother - he needed her polished and preened to go on show.

Hecate didn’t know how long she’d been asleep, nor the time of day, but with a growl of her stomach, she was forced to sit up.

"Hungry?" Dimity sat at the shoddy table, a pipe in one hand and a glass in the other. Hecate nodded in response, rubbing her eyes while coming to. "Bet you ain't never felt that before?"

Hecate deigned not to mention all the times she'd been locked in her room for days on end, Ada forbidden to bring her food, and a footman constantly on watch outside her door. All because her father could. "May I have a drink, please?"

"It's gin," Dimity held up the glass, and at Hecate's grimace she chuckled, "forgot you was green, never had gin before neither?"

"Decidedly not," Hecate said dispassionately, "have you any water?"

"Need to wait on somebody bringing something 'm 'fraid - sent a lad out to get us some lunch too."

"What time is it?"

"Think it's about two," Dimity said, "but ain't no clocks 'ere."

"Do you think he'll keep his word?" Hecate's question was an automatic impulse, her mind having not awoken fully, allowing her tongue to release that which made it burn.

"Who?"

"The Prime Minister," Hecate retorted sardonically, "Gerrard, your boss, who else would I be talking about?"

"You're quite cryptic, y' know? Gonna have to be a bit more specific, lady?"

Hecate pressed on the forefront of her temple, it was clear to her that Dimity viewed her as a game, much like a cat sees a mouse, constantly pawing and playing. Hecate had little patience for
frivolities at the best of times, but right now, it was spent twice over. "Do you think your boss will keep his word - I've substituted myself for Lady Pippa, and thus, he's promised not to harm her, will he stick to that agreement?"

"You care about her, don't you?"

"You've not answered my question," said Hecate, growing terse in her hunger and subordinate position.

"Yes, I think he'll keep 'is promise," Dimity said. She gave a sad smile before going on: "he don't want to 'arm no one, 'sept your brother, o' course. Even 'ere, in St Giles, most of us 'ave honour; he's said he won't touch her an' he won't go back on 'is word."

Hecate gave a sigh of relief that held no comfort, bringing her legs close to her chest and hugging her arms around them, in a way her governess would have scolded her for being uncouth, she let a single tear darken her eyelashes. But, as Hecate would soon come to realise, Dimity was nothing if not tenacious, and, like a dog with a bone, would not give up.

"You've to answer my question now."

"Yes," Hecate said in a whisper, "yes, I care for her."

"Must be 'ard," Dimity said solemnly, "to 'ave fallen for the girl that's to marry your brother?"

A strange choking sound left Hecate's throat, and her arms tightened their hold, she turned away from Dimity, doing her best to hide how hard the words stung. "Don't be ridiculous..."

Hecate heard the scrape of the rickety chair moving atop the rotting floorboards, and moments later felt the dip of the bed beside her; "didn't mean to hurt you... it's just, you wouldn't be the first to 'ave feelings for someone you shouldn't. Almost makes you seem normal," Dimity laughed dryly.

"I think you're reading too much into things," Hecate said harshly, still refusing to look Dimity's way.

"Don' think so," Hecate felt a hand hovering over her shoulder, she tensed up, but it never fell. "An' don't think I'm judging because she's a girl... as I said, you wouldn't be the first."

Genuinely intrigued, and seeing a way to divert the focus of conversation, Hecate turned around, "what happened?"

"If I tell you, will you tell me?" Dimity asked, laughing, nudging Hecate lightly and trying to lighten the dark and heavy mood. Hecate just stared, resisting the urge to roll her eyes - she was starting to find Dimity harmlessly annoying and bordering on humorous. "S'pose not...

"She were a barmaid," Dimity said wistfully, leaning her head against the stone wall and closing her eyes. "Used to water down me gin - said she wanted to make sure I got home safe," Dimity smiled, her lips tightly held together in the way it looked much more like a grimace. "wasn't too happy 'bout it at first, but we got talking and... I liked her..."

Everything was silent for a moment, even the piano and its accompanying singers seemed to pause, Dimity took her time, her throat bobbing each time she opened her mouth to speak. It was the first time Hecate saw the other woman as vulnerable, she almost offered a comforting word, as Ada or Mildred, or Pippa, had so often done with her, but in the end, she thought better of it. How much comfort could someone as broken as she really provide?
"Never saw myself as a wife, nor a mother," Dimity continued eventually, "maybe it was because I always knew I preferred women? Marigold weren't the first: working for someone like Agatha makes running into the debauched an everyday occurance - and I've been accepting jobs from her since I were thirteen. In and out of brothels, you're bound to run into a girl you find attractive, and I did, loads of times, 'sept, there's never any emotional connection."

Dimity opened her eyes then, turning to face Hecate once more, "I know how it all must seem to someone like you, seedy and immoral, but I never paid for sex." Hecate flinched at that, earning her another of Dimity's laughs. "I sought comfort in it, and I suppose after selling their bodies all day to men who are often less than kind, meant the girls did too." A playful smirk etched its way to Dimity's lips, and her eyes twinkled as she addressed Hecate, "and I'm sure you know, women are much softer than men... a woman knows just how to please another woman."

Hecate blushed profusely at the scandalous nature of Dimity's words, only increasing her companion's enjoyment; "c'mon, don't tell me you don't know what I'm talking about?"

"What happened with you and Marigold?" Hecate asked, completely ignoring Dimity's ceaseless prodding.

"What didn't happen?" Dimity wiggled her brow in innuendo.

If it was possible, Hecate became even more uncomfortable, squirming where she sat. "Please, just tell me the appropriate parts of the story?"

"Killjoy," Dimity said with a huff. "I s'pose I had a bit of a reputation," Dimity sat back again, "I think she liked that, in the same way as some women like a rake."

"If people knew of your... preferences," Hecate stammered, "were there no repercussions?"

"Sure," Dimity nodded, "got heckled a fair bit, still do in fact, but I made sure it never bothered me, I'm proud of who I am." Hecate's mouth hung agape in confusion, and it did not escape Dimity's notice. "I know things must be different for you, I think everyone's experiences are different, even when they're similar. But around these parts, as feeble and as dirty as they may be, I'm at home. We look after each other, and I s'pose it 'elps that I 'ave people like Gerrard, and even Agatha, looking out for me. 'Sides, there ain't one of them hecklers outside that I ain't 'elped at one point."

The rest of the story was interrupted then, as a scruffy young man brought in a loaf of bread and a lump of potted-meat wrapped in paper, and laid them on the table. The scruffion wasn't too pleased when Dimity asked him to fetch something to drink that wasn't alcoholic, but Hecate was thankful, even though the milk she was eventually offered was sour.

Enjoying their sup, neither of the women seemed to remember their conversation until every last crumb had disappeared. "You never told me what happened to Marigold," said Hecate.

"Dunno," Dimity said, placing her hands behind her head and yawning loudly. However, as at ease as Dimity may have been, Hecate could still see the gravity that lay behind her words. "She peached on one of Agatha's boys, told a magistrate he were a thief, and ain't no one heard from her since."

Chapter End Notes
The addition of Dimity, and a few other familiar names and faces, and a rather sinister turn, was fully fun to write. I wonder if anyone recognises Gerrard?

Again, this chapter feels so plot heavy to me, and it was originally planned to include the events of its successor, but that felt much too much. So, please let me know if this makes sense, or if you have any questions - or theories - we're nearly at the finish line, which is good as I have to go back to college tomorrow after having 3 weeks off.

Anyway, as always, comments and the like are much appreciated, and you can find me on tumblr @ohlookitstomorrow

Catch:)

End Notes

This came about after @flyingsalem on tumblr asked me to write something using Hayley Kiyoko's video of 'Girls Like Girls' as a prompt. This has, however, taken on a life of its own and I've been working on it for a few months now. I have outlined this story to conclude within 12 chapters, but, it's far more likely there will be a lot more. If anyone is wondering, I do intend to update the tags section as the story progresses.

I'd really love to hear what you think? Comments and the like, really are much appreciated.

You can find me on;
Tumblr @ohlookitstomorrowff
Instagram @ohlookitstomorrow

Catch:)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!