Unbecoming

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Unbecoming

by Turnpike

Summary

Harry Potter never came to Hogwarts. Seven years later, the Potter girl is forcibly abducted from Privet Drive and thrust into a world of magic, violence, and intrigue. The Dark is rising. And in their custody, her life has narrowed down to escape, survival-or vengeance.
Chapter 1

The man opened the door. It swung open, keening inward on its fire-torqued hinges, and he slipped inside, silent as smoke.

The grey light filtering through the bare windows barely illumined the hall, but the scorch marks stood out against the walls like a stop sign; emblazoned in more archaic and violent signs than the former occupants could understand.

He knew it though, knew intimately the calligraphy of violence, the media of light and blood and fire that engraved itself into a place. Knew with an artist's knowing the way the wand and will had flourished into the scarlet blossoming below the muggle's bullneck. He waltzed into living room, conscious only of the cold, the light, the heft and fall of his cloak, of everything but the horror. And so he moved to the mantel, fingertips forward to tilt a broken portrait as delicately as they might turn a rose.

The same characters in every frame. The horse-faced housewife, the bullnecked man, the girl--the girl, who didn't appear until she was six, maybe, the girl with the heavy lidded eyes and coarse black curls, with the eyes, her eyes. Here, at six, at eleven, when she should have been--here, at fourteen, at sixteen, with her mother, dressed in scarlet and smiling.

He turned to not shudder, to not lose his senses, to see and seek only with his skin. But it was no use, as it always been with her, and the horror broke him from his reverie, broke him into himself and out of the perfection of death.

He ran, ran up the stairs, never minding how his footfalls echoed on the stairs, never minding the holes in the walls or the broken banister. He ran into the room, where Petunia's corpse sprawled shattered as an abstract on the lintel, and where the person she had hopelessly guarded was not.

The girl.

The window was open, but had been blasted from the exterior. The wall was bloodless in the silhouette of a body, elsewhere, it had been sprayed red.

He stopped, as his heart stopped, and shrunk within him, and looked frantically about himself for hope.

Picture frames on the walls, carved with rudimentary runes. The strange tension at the door, taut as a snapped piano spring. He did not need to lift the molding to know the girl had painted her blood below the wood, or test the wards to know the Death Eaters had broken them.

The dried flower bunches on the walls, full of holly and rowan branches along with the graduation roses and lover's trifles. Warding woods. A rock collection positioned strategically through the room. Amulets, foci. Even the embroidered curtains, the small silk tassels at the corner of her garments, hinted at the same. This was the house of a witch among muggles, every seemingly mundane object turned to purpose.

He sat down on the blood-speckled bed, suddenly weak with the unexpected loss. He had expected James' son, a son he now knew never existed. He hadn't expected her daughter.

The rising sun shone through the sheer curtains, and resumed a cursory inspection. The broken aquarium was empty. The green snake lay belly-up with a smashed skull some distance from the bed. The closet was filled with charred clothing, the dresser broken. He saw the glint of silver amongst the
gore and pulled it free of the slick white bone that had been Petunia's scapula, and held it. A simple chain, and a bit of peridot. He held it like a heartbeat, and knew it was hers. Terrified and desperate and hers.

"Hold on, Heather Dursley," he said softly to the dawn, palming the necklace into an inside pocket. "I'm here. I'm coming."

"I was under the impression she was dead."

The Headmaster appeared older than his years. "You'll recall the incident with Charlie Weasley being slipped that diary horcrux some years ago?"

"Difficult to forget, given the difficulties involved in cleaning a 4000 pound basilisk corpse out of the sewer pipes after the aurors demolished half my dungeons in killing it," Severus pointed out mildly.

"Well, yes. Minerva, Horace, and I occupied ourselves for some years after in destroyed the horcruxes."

"I'm amazed you engaged Horace in such an endeavor--I was under the opinion my old teacher preferred to remain undisturbed--Horcruxes?"

"Five, Severus. Five. I thought we'd had them all, I was certain of it. So when the Dursleys demanded that their daughter not attend Hogwarts, and Heather herself was so adamantly against it--well, I thought it would be more harm than good pressuring her. So many of Voldemort's former followers were still abroad, and all of them were looking for a boy. The safest place I could think of was the muggle world, within the blood wards."

"Alone, and uneducated," Severus confirmed distastefully.

"With her family, educated to the highest standards of Muggle education, and by all accounts, controlling her magic far better than the majority of untrained muggleborns manage. Arabella Figg can't even cross the sidewalk if she's feeling peevy towards Petunia."

"Arabella Figg is a squib!" Severus snarled. "Professor, it might have been enough to repel muggles, but with the Dark Lord searching for her--" he arose and turned to the window, nails clenching slender crescents into the soft pine of the frame. Head bowed in fury, the tendons of his neck taut with grief, and the old man, mute as an oracle.

It was a long time before he controlled his breath, and turned back, suddenly exhausted, to the Headmaster.

"I will find her," he spoke, dead. The words fell like stones, ponderous with fate, and the Headmaster heard them as a soothsayer, heard a thousand voices suddenly silenced at their speaking. And yet, he said nothing.

Because the old man had said much the same thing, once, in swearing vengeance against an old lover who had killed his sister.

I will find you. I will sacrifice my dignity and my self-respect and my integrity, forswear all other commitments, will become what I abhor for your sake. For you, Lily's daughter, I will kiss the hem of the one who murdered your mother, will kill and torture the innocent, will consort with those who repulse me. For you--for you, I will gain Voldemort's trust in torturing half the Order if I have to, and
keep it by killing the rest.

For you, I will become the monster I might have become, except for your mother. Only for you.

"I will not see you again, Headmaster."

"No," the old man said mildly. "You will see me very often, since you will be spying on me."

Severus regarded him, unsettled, undecided.

"I trust you," the Headmaster said gently.

Had Severus been younger, and prone to dramatic outbursts, he might have raised Fiendfyre out of the grate to claw and coil around the older man's robes; to hiss and cackle about the phoenix's perch and leave spiral tracks of fire and charcoal against the walls, like an animate form of Van Gogh's 'Starry Night'. He might have called demons out of the wood of the desk, or menaced the old man with legilimanced nightmares, to remind him what he was.

At this age though, he knew that the headmaster needed no display more than his restraint to recognize him. Even now, the Professor regarded him with equal parts respect and disappointment. It was the almost professional attitude of a white wizard towards an adept of the dark arts--a kinship divided by trivial commitments to lesser beings.

The dark wizard bowed his head to his old master, out of respect, and left the room. In his pocket, the sumac wand had already begun to burn with anticipation.

---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

The girl sprawled across the bed. Voldemort glanced in through the door crack, and dismissively shut the door.

The girl plied her needle with a dexterity Narcissa had seldom seen outside old women's circles, raising silver runes along the hem of her velvet skirts. She felt them jab, sharp as needlepoints, at the edge of her third eye, and her whole body fought not to close under the pressure.

Which was the intention.

She could only guess at the traps the room held, the wards the girl had chipped into the wood with her bleeding nails, the spell-knots tangled in the hairbrush, the innocuous arrangement of the furniture. Every day the house-elves swept out the debris of her spellwork, and every day, another ward awoke.

None of them were particularly powerful. The makeshift supplies were poor foci, easily destroyed by the magic bound up in them. In the course of time, they'd disintegrate naturally, burnt out by energies they were not made to hold. Any classically trained wizard would never have set those wards in anything less permanent than stone or silver. It was like building a bomb.

Narcissa blinked.

"A lovely dress, and befitting of your station," she commented neutrally.

Heather turned a knot that made Narcissa's eyes water to see it. The girl's own eyes were spotted with petechiae--from close concentration? Or was she not immune to her own work?

"Better than running around starkers," the girl murmured.
"You'll be like that sooner than later if you continue embroidering those runes into that cloth," Narcissa cautioned. "Runes are meant for stone, or metal."

Heather didn't raise her head. "Provide me with those then."

The woman sighed internally with exasperation. "If we were sure we could trust you with them, we could, but you haven't been exactly receptive to any of the Dark Lord's servants."

The girl ignored her.

Okay,

, Narcissa mused, at least she's intelligent enough to recognize that we're unsympathetic to her fondness for those Muggles that raised her. None of the usual bravado we get from younger captives. She decided to be frank.

"Heather," she began gently, "no one's decided on your position yet here. If you showed more cooperation, or showed more interest in the welfare of our people, you could very comfortable."

"I'm not fighting."

More's the pity. That's the only thing men place any value on nowadays.

"No one said anything about fighting. Learn how to use a wand properly. Learn about the culture and history of your people. Try to be a witch, instead of dismissing your heritage altogether."

Now Heather glanced up, and while her expression was noncommittal, the look in the girl's eyes hinted at something that turned her stomach.

"My heritage," Heather commented mildly, "is that of the Potter family, formerly known as the Peverells, who have been all but destroyed by your Dark Lord and the previous wars of this century. My other relations have been killed by their association with your world." She sat back in the chair, sewing forgotten. "I want nothing to do with witchcraft."

"Not even to avenge your family?" Narcissa enquired.

"If the Dark Lord is half as powerful as the Death Eaters who came to my house, I would not be so foolish as to fight against him. And if his enemies are even a fraction as powerful as he, I would not be so foolish as to fight for him." Her eyes pierced Narcissa's as the runes had. "I want to live."

"Sometimes," Narcissa warned, "living necessitates fighting."

The girl's lips compressed into a thin hard line, a look which, like her embroidery, seemed more appropriate to Narcissa's mother than this teenager. Narcissa hefted a bag from beside her chair, forgotten during their badinage.

"Read these," she told the girl. "Memorize every single spell and the wandwork. When I return, you will practice."

Her eyes narrowed. "You trust me."

It's not a test, girl, nor can you exploit this.

"No."

At an impasse for this line of query, the girl opened a book, which Narcissa took to be simple
acceptance. The older witch passed out the door, the runes still glaring into her shoulderblades as she left.
It wasn't until two months later that Severus saw her again.

The Death Eaters had convened in the middle of the night at the newly refurbished Riddle Manor in the aftermath of their latest mission. Lucius and Avery were to abduct a key Order member while another two forces created diversions in the nearby villages to draw away the DMLE. Avery had been captured, and after the battle, no one seemed to know exactly where Lucius had gone.

In the old ballroom of Riddle Manor, newly scrubbed down to the planks, the Death Eaters knelt in their ranks, heads bowed below the candles. The Dark Lord sat on a dais, silent and unmoving as sculpture, his long pale fingers considering that long, pale wand. Severus did not dare let his eyes linger, but he could imagine the snake insinuating herself about the man's shoulders, the cruel thin lips and clean-shaven jaw locked in a sneer. The germinal light of curses burning and fading along the wand's shaft, as the man thought through and dismissed punishments.

Clatter of footsteps. Usually, Lucius moved soundlessly against the boasting and clamor of the Dark Lord's ranks. Not now, not with them silenced and shamed like this. He came in, heaving for breath.

Recognizing the futility of an inconspicuous entrance, Severus heard him fall forward onto his knees and crawl the length of the hall. He usually knelt to Severus' left, but now, he crawled past Severus and prostrated himself before the dais. Severus could see a bloody trail smeared along the floor, and smelt the metal and sour milk smell of the man's blood.

"My Lord," gasped Lucius wetly, and Severus considered the probability of a lung puncture.

"Speak, Lucius," the man snapped.

"I was called away... my wife..." he gasped, and Severus predicted a pink froth from his mouth, or frank arterial blood. A knife or blow to the chest?

The Dark Lord sighed irritably, and knelt down alongside Lucius. "Severus, Thester, examine this man and then gather what supplies you need to treat him in the infirmary," he ordered. "Now, Lucius. Your manor. Attacked?"

"The girl..." he gaped like a fish after breath, and Severus hoped the Dark Lord would not try to heal him. A wizard's aptitude for healing spells diminished with their use of the Dark Arts. They relied instead on Potions, which was why he, a half-blood, was so well favoured in the Dark Lord's ranks. A Dark Wizard might try to use a healing spell, but more often than not, they were patch jobs, leaving scars and long-term damage.

"Yes, the girl," the Dark Lord pressed, moving aside slightly as Thester Carrow, nee Prewett, slipped her slender hand along Lucius' side. The mother of the Carrows, she was one of the few White witches in the Dark Lord's employ, and forbidden to practice the Arts even if she had wanted to. Even the most zealous of Dark wizards understood the need to keep a few of their family pure for this.

A whispered incantation; the man's breathing eased, and the Dark Lord nodded his thanks to the woman. She smiled simply, and continued to press her hands her hands along Lucius' body, searching for other wounds to heal, while Severus removed a Blood-Replenishing potion and opiate
from his robes.

"The Potter witch," Lucius breathed. "She's escaping, my Lord--Draco and the boys are trying to catch her down, but my wife alarmed me--she's escaped the house, my Lord!"

"A wandless girl escaped your house, injured you, and evaded a pack of my younger Death Eaters?" hissed the Dark Lord incredulously. "Never mind--we will discuss the details of this later, once she is secured. Severus, Bellatrix, come with me. Thester, take Lucius to the infirmary. The rest of you--dismissed, until I decide otherwise."

The other Death Eaters waited respectfully for the Dark Lord and his two chosen to exit the room before scattering. Severus followed the incensed Dark Lord to the Apparition Point, until he flickered into non-existence, leaving a bloom of smoke in his wake. He breathed deeply--and exhaled out onto the lawns of Malfoy Manor.

The Dark Lord hissed a charm, holding the bone white wand aloft his palm. It spun aimlessly, and the man cancelled the spell irately before attempting it a second time. Now, it pointed straight towards the orchards southwest of the Manor, and the Dark Lord began to stalk off in that direction.

"I will be greatly interested to know, Bellatrix, exactly how an untutored halfblood witch of no account is able to proof herself against tracking charms when your nephew either cannot or will not."

Bellatrix grimaced in the low light. "He takes after his father, my Lord."

"And Lucius is ever eager to be noticed, of course," the Dark Lord mused--in disdain or amusement, Severus could not tell. They moved around the side of the house, and in the far distance, through the trees, they could see the laserlights of spellfire through the trees.

The Dark Lord broke into a sprint, Severus matching his stride, and Bellatrix, somewhat slighter than both men, laughed in anticipation as she brought up the rear. How far they ran, Severus did not know. Far enough that most Muggles would have been sobbing for breath by now.

They slowed to a walk as they reached the perimeter of the spellfire, and the Lord held up a hand to silence them as he stopped.

There were six boys there--Draco must have summoned reinforcements--but only three of them were still upright. Theo was on the ground, gasping as Lucius had and clasping his bloodied side, and Vince and Graham were out cold. Zach, Greg and Draco formed the points of a triangle, and in the centre--

The Dark Lord's lips turned upwards, in such a rare expression that it took Severus a moment to recognize it.

He was smiling.

In the centre of the boys, robes aflame and whirling like a phoenix, was the girl.

Severus stared, suspended again between horror and pleasure.

He couldn't guess how many layers of robes she wore, but as one smoked into ash, a second revealed itself, the embroidered runes emblazoned in fire the second a spell struck them. Cloth wasn't meant to hold back that much power, hold that much power. Draco flung a particularly ugly Heartstopping Hex, and a protective rune on the sleeve caught it, burning the entire arm off the garment. The girl turned the moment Greg tried to rush her, and threw a doorknob from below her robes, shielding herself the next moment.
The doorknob hit Greg, and exploded.

Severus remembered, grimly, Narcissa's criticisms...

"No classically trained witch would set wards of that power in anything less than stone or silver. It's like building a bomb."

The boy was thrown back against the tree, his jaw torn and mangled, face bloody, eyes shut so tight he couldn't see whether they were still there.

"But of course, we can't give her the proper materials--they're too dangerous."

No, Severus saw, they had given her a woman's tools--silk and scissors, thread and thimble--and, with a man's arrogance, supposed her helpless. Ignored history. A woman could conquer a man and by turn a nation with a slip of silk and a smile. Though, staring at the Dark Lord's delighted face before the burning girl, he hadn't expected this kind of conquest.

Seeing Greg fall, Draco cried out and slashed his wand through a harsh turn, conjuring the cursed fire. It leapt forward in the form of a dragon, seemingly to devour the girl, and Severus stared at his Lord, pleadingly, who still stood aside, still waiting, watching, enraptured.

The girl flung back her silk hood and smiled, the insane smile he had seen on the lips of every Black he'd ever known, and flung herself to the ground, scraping a rune there in bare seconds before scrambled backwards. The ground leapt up before her, flinging back the fire--

and Draco screamed as it rushed back upon him, while Zach tried a useless Aguamenti against it. Theo, still heaving for breath against the tree, flung a sectumsempra at the back of her head that should have bisected her skull--and instead set her oddly knotted hair aflame.

The Dark Lord, ruefully smiling, stepped forward.

"Enough," he spoke pleasantly, gesturing with his wand.

The dragon extinguished itself an inch before biting down on the ankle of the Malfoy heir. Draco tripped forwards onto the grass, shaking. Zach came out cautiously from behind a tree, and the girl regarded them for all of a moment before she ran.

"No," the Dark Lord murmured. "We'll be having none of that." He reached into his Endless Pocket and rummaged leisurely for a moment before pulling out a long silver chain, seven feet long and slender as a lady's necklace. It thrummed and vibrated in his hands like a living thing, and he stroked it.

"Fetch me Heather Potter," he whispered, and set it down to snake off through the grass. It sped away at an improbable speed, cutting grass alongside it neatly as a razor, and in the distance, he could hear the girl's anguished scream. The Dark Lord's smile deepened in satisfaction.

"Bellatrix, please assist the Potter girl to join us. Severus, if you would please see to the boys. Smith, you are still more or less intact--assist him. Draco..." he paused. "I have yet to hear a plausible explanation from your family for this evening's events. If you would kindly explain yourself?"

The boy dusted himself off and knelt trembling, unable or unwilling to meet the man in the eyes.

"My Lord," his voice shook, "Mother always locked Heather in her room for the night. She was never allowed into the Manor unless escorted by a family member. We never gave her a wand, though Mother tutored her in magical theory--"
"I see," the Dark Lord said, eyes lidded like a hungry snake. "And whose idea was it to teach her Runes?"

The boy's mouth opened and snapped shut, like a gaping fish. "She already knew Runes when she came here--not proper ones--primitive things. Like, the basic forms."

"The basic forms," the Dark Lord repeated slowly, and then, "Do they teach you nothing, boy, at that school of yours?"

The boy braced himself, though Severus had never seen the Dark Lord curse a youth Draco's age, and the Dark Lord shook his head disgustedly before lecturing the Malfoy heir. "The basic forms, boy, are the most powerful. They're the roots of our magic before it's branched and divided itself into a thousand different spells. With every wand-stroke, boy, your will carves a rune into cloth of this world, and the runes closest to the original forms are the most powerful. You didn't see the girl casting a single specific countercurse out there, did you?"

Draco stared at the ground. "No, my Lord."

"Exactly," the Dark Lord continued with relish. "The original form of a countercurse can block any specific variation of a curse it was destined to block. If she wrote the rune for 'move' on her robes, and left it dormant until needed, it would probably block everything from a petrification jinx to a stupefy."

"My Lord..." Draco began hesitantly, looking up for the first time and flinching at the sight of the man's eyes. "Why would we not all use original forms for our spellwork?"

"Most of you haven't the power to spare," the Dark Lord said in satisfaction. "Runes in a medium are different--allow a wizard to gather his power beforehand, and can make even a weak wizard formidable with preparation--but no wizard I've ever seen before has been foolish or desperate enough to work in cloth," he told Draco as Bellatrix hauled in the glaring girl.

She was entirely nude, save for the silver chain that looped around her neck before binding her wrists and fingers behind her back. More than naked, hairless, her black curls burned down to the scalp, her brows bare lines of charcoal. Blisters, red and oozing, covered her face and hands and arms, and the flesh was peeling away at her fingertips. Her stockings, slippers, and petticoats must have saved her skin, for the flesh and hair over her torso and legs was intact, and Severus looked away before he could consider the way her body responded to the cool September night.

"I stripped her down, Master," Bellatrix declared. "She still had on another layer of robes beneath those, and even her corset was sewn through with protective spells. She's burnt protections into her skin though--shall I deface those, or would you have the pleasure?"

The Dark Lord stepped away from Draco and considered the girl openly as Severus never would have dreamt of doing to Lily's child. He gave her an cruelly appreciating once-over as Severus watched helplessly, the girl's feet dangling above the ground to prevent her from toeing a second ward in the dirt.

He saw as the Dark Lord saw. Even obscured by burns, the features a distinct blend of Dorea Black and Lily Evans: Strong, angular jawline, slender nose, high cheekbones, the hooded and bloodshot eyes glaring out at him. A long torso, leanly soft in that way girls are for a few years in adolescence before they fill out. Small breasts with pale rose areolae and pertly upturned nipples. A thatch of black curls at her pubis, above long runner's legs.

But what the Dark Lord reached out to touch was the rune carved into her forehead, Eihwaz--and
abruptly he snatched his burning hand back.

"Lily Potter made that rune," he told them. "Somehow--but never mind. It goes more than skin-deep, and I cannot touch you until it is removed, nor can I think for now of how to remove it."

"Good," spat the girl, her burnt face cracking open with the words.

"Hardly," murmured the Dark Lord. "When I cannot think of a means to accomplish something, I usually consider it as an opportunity for experimentation--and as your idleness has obviously not benefitted me these past few months, I believe I can find some alternative means of recreation for the two of us."

Now she did spit at the Dark Lord, and Severus winced, expecting some kind of curse.

He laughed.

"Men who have slighted me far less than you have died for that kind of impudence," the Dark Lord said pleasantly, wiping the spit from his face. "I suspect you will die in the course of our experiments together though, and that should be punishment enough."

"Go to hell!" snapped the girl, predictably.

"Of course," shrugged the Dark Lord, "other punishments can be arranged. Severus, I know you have some affection for the brat. Bring her to the infirmary. Heal her. I want no permanent damage from this night." The Dark Lord eyed the girl speculatively, and she bristled under the attention. Severus felt an inward incredulity at the way the Dark Lord's gaze lingered.

The Dark Lord ignored the way his men toyed with Muggle women more out of disinterest than anything. While Severus had seen him display a kind of affection for Bellatrix, even gather her into his chambers, this slow consideration of the girl, her body branded with crude runes and burnt on the edges, unnerved him.

Bellatrix saw it as well, and smiled giddily, slipping behind the girl and stroking her hands over her shoulders.

"Now, my lovely cousin," she simpered as Heather turned her head and snapped her teeth within an inch of Bella's chin, "you'll be good for Severus, won't you? And then, maybe your Cousin Bella will help you learn all the Arts Cissy is too proper to teach you."

Bella kissed the girl, fast on the lips, and came away with a bleeding mouth as the girl snared a corner of the woman's lip between her incisors. She laughed.

"Not bad for a Mudblood's brat, I'll give you that."

Grim and quiet, Severus took control of the spell and bobbed the girl alongside him towards the apparition point. Once they were out of eyesight of the others, he shucked his overrobe and slipped it over her head. It was many times too big for her, but the looseness would prevent further irritation of those burns and it would keep her modest. She didn't say anything, not until he had whisked her through space and into the small private room in the infirmary, doors warded against any foolhardy Death Eaters who dreamt of glory in killing the object of the Dark Lord's demise.

He disrobed her, and after a brief struggle to make the chain understand his intentions, set her on her back, the silver restraining her to the bed. He took out basic Replenishing potions, burn salves, and bandages, and began to work on her. She was oddly limp at last--burned out, he supposed--and made no resistance as he debrided her wounds, even though he'd seen battle-hardened men twice her age scream bloody murder at these ministrations.

It took him the better part of an hour to clean the wounds and apply burn salve. It would take her the
night to regrow her skin. Thankfully, the fire on her robes itself was ordinary, though it had burnt longer and hotter than it ought to have as the runes broke. He coaxed the silver chain off her. It moved reluctantly, curling itself at the foot of the bed like an anxious snake, and would not be picked up.

He dimmed the lights and moved to leave. He thought she might be asleep, until a soft utterance stopped him on the way out the door.

"Thank you."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you everyone for reading! I really appreciate your support and hope you enjoy this story!
Chapter 3

She laid waiting, still as sleeping on the pallet, until the man left and the gas lamp burned low. Closed her eyes, mindlessly traced the shape of Sound with her fingers like a pianist practising the scales, or a penitent's practised hands over a rosary. Her hands worked the figure into the air until she felt the magic catch like the bobbin thread to the descending needle of her sewing machine, and still continued, until she could hear the surrounding rooms as clearly as were she there.

And then, she still waited, her hands keeping their familiar rhythm to maintain the spell. She had hoped Narcissa would finally offer her a real wand instead of the birch switch she'd used to practise the motions of the spell—a real wand, that acted like a loom for the threads of the world, binding them in place once caught by her will. None of this constant fixingfixingfixing to keep the Sound and the magic from slipping her fingers and settling back down into the floorboards.

She waited until the noise was less crowded, and again, until she could hear distinct voices laughing on nothings, and again, until the voices became drowsy murmurs, and the murmurs became silence.

And only then, did she sit upright, the bare friction of her burnt skin against itself almost tearing a scream from her raw red lips.

Paused again. And, defiant, stood upright.

There, that was fine.

The lamp had guttered to nothing, and she squinted by the pale light issuing from a narrow window to find clothing. There was a stack of short smocks that might have passed for hospital gowns in this backwater society. It was beyond hope that they would have sterilized them properly between patients. She unfolded several before choosing the largest one and gingerly let it settle on her shoulders.

It was agony.

It was fine. She was a bloody Dursley. She could handle it.

She picked up a scalpel on the counter as well—honestly, had none of these wizards any sense?—and stopped her hand motions to hastily cut the figure for open on the door knob when the lock didn't turn. She tried it again.

Still no use. Perhaps the tall and dark one was not as stupid as his peers then.

Nothing for it then.

Reluctantly, she nicked the crease of her elbow, collecting a few beads of ruby-bright blood, before carving the sign again, this time fixing its image in her mind.

"OPEN," she hissed.

The rune burned white as a magnesium flare in her mind's eye, and she was blind. When her vision cleared, the rune was smoking in the door, and the door was ajar.

Breathing a silent prayer to whatever gods might be watching, she stepped out, only to be stopped short. She sprawled face-first and landed on her burned and bleeding palms, biting her lips so as not to cry out, and kicked out at whatever had tripped her.
There was nothing there. Only an unfamiliar coolness about her ankle. She glanced back and saw the blasted chain had settled itself there, the tiny links nestling tight to her skin like a sleeping snake.

She cursed silently. As uncivilized and ignorant as these people were, they still had powers and artifacts she couldn't comprehend. The least she wanted was to go home with one as a souvenir. Given the speed with which the thing had found her the last time, it was the next best thing to a GPS chip. She hadn't--didn't--dare burn Lost on her skin to confound such devices. Flesh was too permanent, and Lost too capricious a sign, to risk her skin for. It might confound her as much as these wizards, make it impossible for her both to find or be found. It was enough to activate the sewn mark when the Malfoys discovered her, to get far enough away before nulling it and trying to find a way out again.

No. All she had now were the protection rune on her forehead, and the crude brands--Memory, on her inner arm, and Swift and Agile, to the inside of each her ankles. She'd practised those often enough to be sure she could fix them to serve her purposes.

They'd have to be sufficient.

She tugged at the chain, but it held fast. She gave up, and peered out the doorway. It opened onto a long room with two rows of beds, barely visible in the moonlight slanting through the high and narrow windows. The infirmary. Of course.

Surprisingly, only three of the beds were occupied--two by men, one by the squat and ugly youth who had attacked her with his friends when she'd made a break for it. Vincent. She wrinkled her nose. Men, attacking girls! In Britain! Her father would have had something to say about it--bloody freaks, going after helpless young women--

Her gut collapsed suddenly, and she gasped in a dry sob, clutching her stomach as she tried not to cry out--not at the pain of the abrasive cotton against her raw hands, or the suddenty of remembrance.

Father.

She straightened up, her features contorting and settling on a grimace as she tried not to cry. He was dead. So was her mother, and her brother, for that matter. They'd destroyed her home. Aunt Marge might be alive, but she couldn't go to her--not until she knew whether or not she'd be safe from these people.

She had to get away, and then, then she'd decide where to go. These magical freaks weren't even accepted among their own kind, were they? They had police, Aurors, she'd learnt, from Narcissa's enquiries after her sister's health following raids. She could find them, maybe.

So she held herself silent. The men were snoring, and Vince, whether he was awake or not, couldn't see her, not with the bandages around his head. Dad would be proud, he'd always told her about his father's work with the infantry during the second war. Dudley would finish smashing in the hoodlum's head, the way he'd done with every other man who'd looked the wrong way at his baby sister.

She slid over the planks, hands shaking with her heartbeat, and barely heard the creaking of the floorboards. A look behind, all quiet, and still, the men undisturbed, in their drugged, Dreamless sleeps. Let out a breath: thank God for opiates. Now, before her--the corridor, dark, lined with doors. And there--that was a banister, wasn't it?

She descended the stairs rapidly--too rapidly. Her vision blackened, she swayed drunkenly for a
moment and grabbed for the handrail, almost screaming when, again, she'd forgotten the burns. She peeled her hand off the railing, left a layer of skin behind, suppressed the urge to wipe her bloody palm on her gown, and pressed forward.

Almost there--

The stairs went no further. She stepped out the door.

The hallway here was completely dark, and felt like it was smooth slate underfoot. She traced the ridges and moved forward blindly in the dark, painfully tracing the sign for Sight. Before she could catch hold of the magic though, her toes brushed against something that was neither slate nor wood--something smooth, and soft, and almost too familiar for fear. She heard the vague rustling of the person against the stone before she heard her voice.

"Clumsy idiot!" A pause, as the individual stretched herself out, sluggish with the cold. "Stupid, barging into people who just want to sleep." And, considering, "I smell blood. Perhaps you can be useful to me."

Heather could have laughed--hysterically, incautiously-- but didn't. She had to be at least as wise as this stranger if she wanted to survive their encounter. So, instead, she lowered herself, belly-flat to the ground, doing her best not to put the least pressure possible on her burnt arms, and accepted the greedy, assessing touch of the person insinuating herself next to her. She felt the stranger's tongue flicker over her wound, and spoke before she could be tempted to bite.

"I'm so sorry for waking you," she slurred, hoping she wasn't botching this as much as her old friend, now dead, had always complained. "I can't see in the dark nearly as well as you can, I'm afraid."

An intake of breath, a rustling.

"Well, why not make a light, idiot? Isn't that what you freakish apes do all the time?"


"Most of my ideas are good ones," said the voice smugly. "Even Master thinks so."

"Who is Master?" Heather asked, considering her bloody palm, and wincing, awkwardly tracing the rune for Light in her blood on the flagstone.

"He is a warm thing. Not as warm as sunlight, but adequate. He brings with him fires and mice and rabbits and other stupid apes that are not wise enough to give me what I deserve, and I take from them their flesh. His name is Master or Lord. It is a strange name, but apes are stupid in that way."

The Light took, and Heather held her breath.

She laid nose to nose with the most awe-inspiring personage she'd seen in ages.

The individual before her had a massive, triangular head that, along with the long slender teeth half visible over her lipless mouth, suggested poison--though the length and bulk of her, from what Heather could see, was that of a constrictor. She had to be at least 15 feet long, tip to tail. Her skin was smooth and plush as polished leather, diamond-patterned like an adder's, and the vague lumps along her length suggested recent feedings. The stranger considered her through her amber-hued eyes--an oddly human thing to do--and smelt her experimentally, tongue flickering out to taste her blood on the stone.

"You are also a freakish ape."
"Yes," Heather said, not sure whether she was trembling in awe, or fear, or from simple exhaustion. She had to run, she had to go, NOW.

And yet—presentations could not be rushed. Not with an individual of this size and strength. Courtesy was ill-met with speed.

"But not as stupid as most apes," the snake considered. "At least you can speak normally. None of the squeaking and squabbling most of you furred things make."

"Yes."

"Yes?" mocked the snake. "Is that the only word you know? Pity," she coiled herself out, unlocking her jaw.

Heather startled both of them when she finally gave up and suddenly laughed.

The jaw hooked back, and the amber eyes blinked strangely at her.

"What?"

"Forgive me again," Heather sibilated. "I am being terribly rude. It is just, you are so beautiful, I don't know what to say. And it has been so long since I spoke to a snake."

The snake reared back. "That is unfortunate. Every ape should have the privilege of doing so at length before they are eaten," she said.

"Indeed," Heather agreed easily. "I was once to a snake as your Master was to you--a warm rock, and bringer of juicy small furred things, plump with blood and stinking of fear."

"I do not like my things small, but blood is good," the lovely, long stranger concurred. "And... was this snake anything like me?"

"Nothing as beautiful or strong. You could have swallowed a dozen of her," Heather spoke honestly, and the snake settled back in reassurance.

"Yes. I am strong, and deadly, and no other snake will ever approach me unless to barb himself along my length. My children will flee at the smell of me, the weight of my ponderous girth ripples through the ground like an alarm. I have eaten dozens of lesser snakes. Master is powerful too," she considered. "Though wasteful. He does not eat his kills. Though I am grateful for his stupidity. I am grown fatter and longer for it. And he does not seem inclined to eat me. Freakish ape. Have you eaten anyone?"

Heather considered. "I sometimes eat other furred things--things with four hooves that trample people, and small tasty birds. But I haven't eaten anyone yet, though I may kill someone soon."

"Pah," hissed the snake, flickering out her tongue. "Surely you have been hungry enough to want to kill before? Not a sibling, a mate?"

She remembered sparring with dinner forks with Dudley over the last pancake, and almost giggled. "Of course. But apes are warm things, and tend to give one another food, and better food comes to those who do not eat each other."

The snake looked perturbed. "So I am told, and you apes are truly freakish. But," the snake considered, sidling against her, "you are warm."
"I am. Please mind the tails at my sides, they are healing."

"Fine," the snake grumbled, careful not to brush her arms. "So, ape, if I am not to eat you right away, do you have a name, and is it sensible?"

Heather translated passably as Soft-Thing-Under-The-Belly, which pleased the snake more than the name of Master, which, really, was closer to He-Who-Can-Kill-All-Others-But-Is-Warm-Place. If she hadn't heard Lady describe her by a similar word, she would not have guessed what it meant.

"And what do the apes call you, beautiful one?" she asked drowsily.

"Snake-In-A-Strange-Voice," the snake said in disgust—though, to be fair, that seemed to be this lady's reaction to everything.

"Callings are an ape thing."

"Of course," the snake told her. "You are almost sensible. Not quite as sensible as a snake, but for a stupid ape, you might almost be as sensible as Master." She laid a coil closer to her. "And warmer. Mmm. Perhaps he can make you as an extra rock for while he's away. The other apes are too dumb to talk."

"Not an unwise idea," came a voice from behind her, and Heather hissed quickly in startlement, jerking upright, the snake mirroring her as it reared back. She felt the tension leave its coils against her hip a moment later though, as they realized who it was.

"My Lord," she whispered, squirming away from him awkwardly, sprawled out on the flagstones as she was. She crawled backwards into the snake, who sniffed in boredom or annoyance but settled herself against Heather's shoulders—whether to prevent further retreat or a means of comfort or simply because she was warm, and the snake was too lazy to move, Heather didn't want to guess. She suspected the latter.

"Miss. Potter," susurrused the man, folding himself onto his knees as though to examine her better, and adjusting his silver-framed spectacles as he did so. His right hand caressed the lady's trailing tail absent-mindedly as he cornered her against its coils. "Why on earth are you out of bed at this hour?"

Gentle. Reasonable. You couldn't tell from his tone that this was the same voice that had ordered her family slaughtered, their bodies desecrated, torn to bits and the bits spattered on the walls like spatter-art, a macabre collage of blood and bone and the shredded remnants of Mother's interior decorating.

"I was looking for the restroom," she answered coolly, avoiding his eyes.

"And there were none in the infirmary," he suggested, teasing her with the possibility of an excuse.

"There was a very serviceable chamberpot, my Lord, however, I find it difficult to shit without my modern conveniences."

It didn't translate exactly, of course, but the snake's tongue carried scorn very reliably. He hissed irritably.

"It is unbecoming for a lady of your station to speak so frankly," he reprimanded her.

"Station? If I had any, I would be able to do as I pleased," she snarked back, leaning against the snake more heavily as her vision blurred and blackened again, a migraine throbbing through her temples."
"No rational human being would ever do just as he pleased," he murmured, red eyes closer now. "Rash choices have unpleasant consequences. Like the ones you're experiencing now, Miss. Potter."

She gave a bewildered hiss.

"Bleeding, dizziness, fatigue--did those Muggles teach you nothing?" he sneered. "You are going into shock from fluid loss. Potions and charms can only do so much. You will die, and I will not have the pleasure of killing you."

She blinked dumbly. "Oh." She closed her eyes and settled back against the lady's scales. It seemed wise.

"Stupid girl," he hissed, and she heard Snake-In-A-Strange-Tongue's emphatic agreement. "Severus!" he snapped. The vibration then, a pulse of sympathetic magic that resonated in her bones, was the last thing she felt before losing consciousness.
When she awoke, it was back in her room at Malfoy Manor, with the silver chain tangled about the fingers of each hand, its length loose between them. Heather didn't even need to look to know the door was closed, and the room stripped of spells. The walnut moldings, probably dating from the 1700s, with her runes fitted cleverly into the original carving, had been torn out, leaving bare walls. The hardwood floors had been sanded smooth in the corners, and under the rugs, where she'd hidden trips and jinxes, and the board she'd coaxed to splinter under Narcissa's foot as she entered--that had been removed, and the hole filled with rock salt.

The bed was smooth of any embroidery, the elaborate canopy bed replaced with a rusting iron frame that was as stubbornly silent to Heather's querying fingers as a stereotypical prison guard. The walls were bare, her robes replaced with simple shifts in the wardrobe, and she smelt salt and burning sage.

The only thing in the room other than herself and the spare furnishings was the great snake. It dozed by the fire, which now had a metal grate in front of it--so they didn't care for her getting her hands on charcoal, or any other writing supplies, she supposed.

It dismayed her to find them not entirely stupid.

Someone had also tended her body for however long she'd slept. Her nails were pared down to the quick, her head newly shaved. She supposed, if she really had to, she could tear open a vein with her teeth--but there was scant munition left in this room. Iron, and salt-washed walls, and cloth that smelt of smoke and sage. The mirror was a possibility--but even as she contemplated breaking it, or the complications of trying to escape out the window, the silver chain pulled taut and bound tight her fingers.

Nuts.

She sat down on the wide ledge below the high window, looking at the white grounds below, caressed her snake, cried.

Hogwarts slept. The courtyard below was a blank slate, their footprints slowly scrawling an uneasy message across it as a figure in the window watched.

Severus Snape walked alongside Albus Dumbledore; himself, black as a crow, the other almost fading into the white world.

Odd, how wizards tended to dress up to their stereotypes.

"I do not understand this, and frankly, Headmaster, for the first time in a long while, I do not know what to expect from him. He will not touch the girl--he says the scar on her forehead, Eihwaz--it's not just from the Killing Curse. Lily did something to protect her. I almost think he burned when he touched her, but then--he will not allow Bellatrix to deface the runes on her body either. I am not sure whether to be relieved by this or whether he has some other intentions for her."

The Headmaster would not answer Severus with his eyes, which in itself was suspicious. Of the two, Albus was the superior Occlumens--so what did he think Severus might see, floating on the rim of his consciousness? Or was it mean nothing, was he simply lost in thought--but no. He was old,
this wizard, and with age came calculation.

"Tell me, Headmaster!" he pressed urgently, aware that he might as well be storming a mountain for all the good it would do. A wizard in his forties, trying to persuade a man so old he was almost inhuman? Albus himself had forgotten his age.

"Defacing Lily's rune would do nothing," Albus said at last. "Voldemort," Severus' Mark itched in recognition, "is aware of this. Minor runes, the kind paid for with pain, like the ones you say she branded on herself--those might be reversed. It would require an equal and opposite payment--either the contrary mark engraved on the flesh of another, pressed against hers, to annul it, though that would depend on the other's will being as strong as hers.

"Frankly," he smiled faintly, "Even if Voldemort did have one of his men try reversing her runes, I doubt it would be possible. Any Runemaster whose will is powerful enough to turn aside a cutting curse with a word embroidered on a scrap of silk--there is no way any of them could turn her own flesh and blood against her."

"The blood wards though," Severus demanded, "you based the wards on Privet Drive off Lily's sacrifice. Off her blood. With the Dark Mark, even I couldn't pass them to check up on the girl, not while Voldemort wanted to kill her--"

A disturbing possibility occurred to him, and he stopped in his tracks.

"Headmaster," he began, "when, and why, did the Dark Lord stop wanting to kill the girl?"

The Headmaster looked aside, as though studying a frozen fountain in the courtyard. Severus tensed, feeling like an unruly puppy. He wanted to shout, to shake the man by his shoulders, to tear the riddle out from his skull until blood bloomed out from the veins through the sclera of his eye. He could almost see the vision crystallize into being, felt a curse bell his throat like beginning of an aria, but better, real and lovely and unlike any staged drama he'd ever seen--

The Headmaster cleared his throat, and Severus shivered, both at the Arts' withdrawal and the man's sudden and knowing gaze.

"I warned you," he told the younger man, mildly, "what happens to those who practice the Arts. Any kind of white magic, even practical magic--the power comes from you, is an extension of your being. You control yourself, and through yourself, your power." He picked up a handful of snow from a nearby flowerbed, twisted his hands like a magician pulling scarves through his fists. The snow flowed and warped like glass, and he held a crystalline rose.

Severus' lips twisted. "And yet, there are some, like Plato, who saw the Arts as divine inspiration--opening of the self to possibility, poet as oracle, that we might become the vessels of the gods."

The Headmaster set down the rose. "You do not believe in the gods, Severus," he said gently.

"No. I don't expect I know what I believe anymore."

The man's hand came softly as a father's upon his shoulder.

"Then believe in me, Severus," he said, almost pleadingly. "Believe that whatever I have done, I am doing to save our people."

Whatever I have done

The words echoed, like rocks falling into a deep cavern, and, caught in their gravity, he opened
himself.

It was though the words between them were wires, suspension for a bridge, and he was swaying on it. The image changed, the wires tore through his wrists and ankles. He saw his body stretched out as on a crucifix, hanging head down, the stigmata in his joints giving credence to the seeing.

"You," he croaked, and Albus looked tired and guiltless. "You have lectured me on the Arts for years. Given up for years. Why now. Except as a distraction."

Whatever Albus' primary purpose--to guide him back, or to turn his attention to other matters--that was irrelevant.

What mattered, was the answer.

"Why doesn't he want to kill the girl?" he demanded, his magic rising up his throat, like a cauldron on the point of bubbling over. He choked it back, rasped the demand once more. "WHY."

"I do not know," Albus lied calmly.

Severus turned away from the man before he could change his mind, and retched fire onto the courtyard.

Nothing would grow there that spring.

She had been dreading the return of Lord Voldemort to 'experiment' on her, as he'd threatened, imagined herself the victim of some cruel test the likes of Dr. Mengele might have administered. But when a day passed, days, then a week, she forgot how long she had been there, and forgot her fear. She became bored.

Sometimes--though she knew it was useless--she imagined what she would have been doing right now if Voldemort had never come. He'd come the day before her birthday. She'd never gotten to see what her Mom had gotten her, or gone out with the girls that night for drinks, or dared Jenny Andrews to finally ask her brother out.

Right now, she should have been returning from her first semester at Cambridge studying zoology, Lady snug around her wrist and spitting insults about everyone and anyone. Freshman or not, she would have been employed by one of the reptile labs within a month of getting there. Anything else was unthinkable. She would have roomed with Sara Parkes from Snyde's, the school she'd attended, and her mother before her, and obligingly dated and charmed the boys of Daddy's business contacts, and in general, had a smashing good time.

It could be Christmas right now, she considered, with the snow outside. Christmas, and Daddy would be outdoing himself again, always lavishing his family with everything he could--and sometimes couldn't--afford. It could be Christmas, and her lanky mother, a good half foot taller than she, would be decorating the tree, and if it was brighter than their neighbors, no one would really ask why. If snow fell everywhere but their driveway, someone must have shoveled it before they woke up. If a storm broke down the power lines and every house on the block lost electricity and the Dursley house was still bright and warm, the telly still blaring cheerfully from the living room--well, that was just good luck.

Somehow, around the time Petunia had stopped denying to strangers that the little black-haired girl was her daughter--the daughter she could never otherwise have, not with all the fertility treatments the doctors could offer--she'd stopped asking questions, and accepted her as a kind of dangerous miracle. Heather was wonderful, as much and maybe more than Lily, because Heather was
completely hers, especially after she'd refused the old man and stayed with Petunia. They'd been happy, so happy, and Petunia had hated to love the girl, because that kind of charmed life couldn't be normal, there had to be a cost, and the red-eyed Devil had collected.

She wondered if her face was on the back of a milk carton now. If her friends had been mad when she didn't show up for drinks, horrified when they found out what had happened. If they assumed she was dead. She hoped so.

No one else needed to die looking for her.

Her meals came three times a day, delivered through a slot in the bottom of the door that doubled as the snake's exit. She imagined what her mother would say of such treatment. She supposed the measures taken against her warding the room had also made it impossible for house-elves to enter.

It was afternoon, and she had spent an unproductive day arguing with Nagini over the relative nutritional benefits of baby house elves as opposed to rabbits, when the door opened. She scrambled back, clutching behind her back a broken bit of wood planking she'd torn up from the floor and sharpened. The person in the entrance sighed.

"Accio weapon."

The blasted bit of wood tore itself from her fingers and into Narcissa's waiting grasp, and she flung it into the corridor before shutting the door behind her. Heather backed up into the corner. The woman looked at her in a way that might have been pitying as she gingerly sat herself on the musty bed.

"I would apologize for confiscating your stick, but landing myself in a hospital bay once this month on your behalf was enough for me."

Heather eyed her warily.

The woman sniffed. "Well. Off the floor. Don't be ridiculous. If I did mean you harm, I'm the one with the wand."

She hated it when they were reasonable. Still. Reason on their part didn't mean she had to act rationally. And if that made no sense, neither did her life right now. She remained on the floor, holding her knees, staring into space.

She heard Narcissa breathing, and then, slowly, the creaking of the planks as the woman eased herself down onto the dirty, salted floor, skirts and all. Still, she flinched when the witch hand brushed her jawbone. The hand hesitated, and moved onto her shoulder, holding her in a half embrace. She remained stiff and unyielding.

"I'm sorry," Narcissa breathed, moving her hands away finally. They sat silent for a moment, and Heather wondered if she could punch the woman in the crotch, run for the door--but no. After last time, they wouldn't be stupid enough to send the woman alone. If she could wrest away the woman's wand. But the silver chain shackling her fingers would not allow magic.

So all there was to do was listen.

"I'm sorry. I know what it's like to lose your family, to be in a place totally unfamiliar to you. My parents died in the war too."

She refused to listen, but Narcissa refused to stop talking.
"The Ministry had my uncle in Azkaban. You don't know about it yet. It's a terrible place."

"Sounds like most of the wizarding world I've seen so far."

"It can be horrible," Narcissa admitted. "I can't imagine war is pleasant in any world."

Heather shut her eyes against the memory of images off the telly, the kind always passed over while they were flicking through the channels to the football game, the kind she never imagined to have any relevance for a girl living in Britain.

"There's no war in my world."

"Wake up. Whether you are blind to it or not, you have been living in a warzone your entire life. Maybe your Muggle-visions censor it out, or maybe we've Obliviated the worst of what has happened from your collective memory, but it is happening and has been happening since before you were even born."

"I don't care!" she suddenly burst out, flinging herself back from Narcissa. "I don't care, do you hear me! I was safe, and my family was safe, and then all you lot came along, and--"

Narcissa stared at her as though she were an unfamiliar object, and Heather realized she was breathing hard, crying, again. She sat on the bed, turned away.

"You're not what I expected," the woman's voice came, gentle again.

"What the hell did you expect?" snarled Heather through her tears.

"I don't know," Narcissa hesitated. "A resolution to this war. Everyone at the Ministry thinks you will defeat the Dark Lord."

Heather laughed as she cried, choked on her own phlegm, blew her nose on the sheets to Narcissa's disgust. "So that's it! Everyone in my family dies because of some stupid rumour. Is he keeping me here for execution then?"

"No one knows the Dark Lord's mind, but I think, if he meant to kill you, you'd be dead already."

"Then why am I here?"

Narcissa regarded her evenly. "You tell me that."

"What?"

Narcissa tugged her hand inside a pocket of her robes and brought forth a box that had no business fitting in a space that size.

"You have a choice, Heather. You can either spend your days sulking in here like a Muggle cow, magic-less, until the world burns to cinders, or,"

"Or," she demanded, choking on the word.

Narcissa opened the box. Inside lay a strange set of jewelry. Heather leaned closer to examine it. The top pieces appeared to be sets of slender rings, engraved with unfamiliar glyphs, and connected with silver chains.

"Pick it up," Narcissa directed.
Uneasily, she took the thing in her palm.

"Your other option," Narcissa told her, "is to find out for yourself exactly what the Dark Lord wants with you. He has asked my opinion as to whether or not you are prepared to deal with polite society. I want you to tell me what my answer will be."

Heather stared at her, wide-eyed.

"I can keep you here. A protected prisoner. Away from my mad sister and the Dark Lord. Maybe you might even get another chance to escape."

"You didn't slip through the floorboard," Heather breathed, and Narcissa cast a wary glance at the snake.

"Hush," she cautioned.

Heather swallowed.

"Or," Narcissa continued grimly, "you can try your luck out there. I can't guarantee it'll be easier. I think I can prepare you, to some degree, for what they might expect of you, but if you want any chance to getting away," she whispered closely, "you'll have to get them to trust you. Ask to learn the Arts."

Bile rose in her throat.

"I'm never--I can't do that to someone."

"Hush. It's not all blood and warfare. The Arts are all instinct. If killing isn't a basic pleasure for you, you can't use the Arts for that purpose. The spells won't accept an indifferent caster."

"Then how do I convince them?"

Narcissa smiled grimly.

"There are other, more visceral urges than the need to kill. And not even the Dark Lord himself is immune to them."

Chapter End Notes

Yay! Thank you so much everyone for the positive feedback! I'm so glad you're enjoying this!
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

In which Narcissa talks, and for once, everyone hates Sirius Black.

Chapter Notes

Nota bene: Opinions expressed by characters in this fic are not necessarily those of the author. I mean, I have a girl raised by a family canonized as bigots communicating with fascist wizards. They were mostly polite this time, but sooner or later, things might get ugly.

Secondly. I may have sort of accidentally saved this story under 'ResumeJan15' and 'CoverLetter15'. And submitted it to potential employers. BY ACCIDENT. While trying to apply to work in health-care!

*Faceplant*

Let this be a lesson to you all: Hitting the 'Save As' button while you have another file open only uploads the open file, not the SELECTED file, to your USB stick.

Now enjoy this chapter while I cringe in fear at all the HR reps reading the first three chaps and wondering what kind of potential serial killer is applying to work in their hospital.

Cheers?

If her mother could see her now.

Petunia would not have recognized her. She swallowed back the sense of betrayal, moved on. Her silver soles scraped unpleasantly against the flagstones, like tooth on bone.

The strange set of jewelry in the box had turned out to be magic suppressors. Narcissa had smiled grimly as she'd set them on her.

"Goblin-made," she explained, as Heather traced the unfamiliar runes awkwardly. "Silver laid over iron. Custom-made. They told us a hundred smiths fixed the power in these wards. That they prayed over each piece for seven days, starving. Keyed them to you, specifically--the Dark Lord gave them your bloodied clothes and nail parings and hair to burn in the forge. These could not have been inexpensive. Any goblin piece is precious."

And the unspoken conclusion. She was precious to this madman, this obsessive terrorist. Had he been lurking in the background of her life forever, like Christine's malevolent Phantom, waiting to take her?

But she wore the pieces now. They'd been a pain to untangle and slip on, and had tightened as soon
as she'd set them in their proper place. First a bracelet about her wrist, then the sets of slender rings adorning the second and third joint of each finger. A thimble-like cap cover each finger tip, and a slender silver rope ran through a tiny hoop at the top of each ring, chaining her finger to the wristband.

She'd heard at Snyde's that jewelry could be given in the ancient world more as a mark of possession than loving adornment—earrings marking men like the stock tags punched through the ears of cattle, necklaces as a kind of human yoke. Knowing a thing never prepared you for being it.

Her feet then. Similar to sandals, a band encircled her ankle, with twin chains running down each side to support a heel piece, another three running down the dorsum to the tip. Her toes slid into slots. A silver torc, shaped like a double-headed serpent completed the piece.

She felt like she was choking again.

Narcissa eyed her knowingly. "It will take some time for you to get used to not feeling the ambient magic. The withdrawal's usually worse, but the fact that you've been in a room whose energy has been largely negated for the past week and a half will make it easier on you."

"Usually worse?" she hacked. "Have you ever had these things on before?"

"No," Narcissa said simply. "However, you are not the first guest who has been... obliged to stay under duress."

"You keep other prisoners here?" Heather asked, trying to hide her interest by playing with the bracelet. Narcissa looked unimpressed.

"It is war, and we, at least, are not the 'home team'. We don't have the option of throwing captured hostiles to rot as fodder for Dementors. We have to keep them somewhere. Be thankful our lodgings are more... humane than the Ministry's."

Heather regarded the spare, smoky room, and scoffed.

"Well, I was expected to do something after your escape attempt," Narcissa said soberly. "I thank you for sparing Draco, but my husband was punished for your actions."

Heather paled.

"I'm... I'm sorry," she managed awkwardly. "Was he badly hurt?"

Narcissa shook her head. "The Dark Lord finds it counterproductive to damage the forces he relies on in battle. And his punishments have been more... fitting as of late. Lucius will be spending some time away from home for his inability to prioritize completing his mission over... personal matters, and for trying to protect me by dealing with your escape personally instead of telling the Dark Lord immediately. Draco and his friends, on the other hand," she stared into the distance, "they are to be put on the front lines. To learn how to 'fight like men'. The Lord was not encouraged that his next generation of soldiers was too weak to fight off 'an uneducated, wandless girl.'"

"I'm sorry," Heather repeated weakly. "I know how much you care for your son."

"I do," Narcissa admitted, sitting back. "But it's not your fault. He would have taken him, sooner than later. As much as I would love to keep Draco home, and safe, it would be selfish of me to do so."
"Why not? You've said it yourself, he's only a boy."

"And you're only a girl." Narcissa laughed bitterly. "Yes, and yet when they brought you back from that Muggle dump, you were bleeding from a dozen places and bawling your eyes out. You actually tore out a chunk of Peter's arm with your teeth. The Dark Lord himself looked like he'd gotten into a fight with a wildcat, scratches all up and down his arms. Little halfblood bitch, you looked like my sister the night the Aurors came for my father and arrested her instead. If you'd fight like that for your family, you should understand."

"None of this makes any sense."

"War doesn't have to," Narcissa murmured. "We, unfortunately, do. Now, he's coming this evening. We need to make you presentable."

She felt a sick feeling in her stomach, clutched the shift to her. Narcissa eyed her knowingly.

"I was fifteen when I married Lucius. He was eleven years older than me. My parents had never wanted anything to do with the Malfoys, no matter their wealth. Their family was weak, my father always said, too willing to compromise with our enemies for financial gains, too cowardly to fight, too arrogant and 'refined' to do their own work. No Malfoy," and she smiled viciously, "has ever bloodied their hands as you have in branding yourselves with runes. A Black, on the other hand--" she took Heather's hands in hers. "Do you know, we are cousins?"

She had said it before. Heather nodded mutely.

"I saw my father's bare back when Mother garbed him for war. It was scarred over with Runes she had burnt into his skin to turn aside spellfire. He was tall, and muscular, and though he had pain in his legs from Grindelwald's War, he moved like a soldier. All grace and economy of movement. I wanted a man like him.

"Except, of course, they took my uncle. Orion Black. His own son, my cousin, betrayed him to the Ministry. Sold him out for entry to the ranks of the Aurors. They were coming for my father too, but Bellatrix bought him the time to run, to get our mother's family out to the continent.

"And then it was just us. Mother, Andromeda, and me.

"Mother was a Rosier. She knew our father's wishes for us--oh, he swore up and down that the only man good enough for a girl of his was another Black. Hoped we could make a match with his sister's children. Except Sirius turned traitor, and then, the war curtailed Mother's options. The Malfoys had the political power and the money to protect our family, and they were willing to use it to ally with the House of Black. We are a broken house now, but even twenty years ago, we were revered. They looked to us as what a witch should be. So while Mother didn't want to do it, didn't think Lucius Malfoy was good enough for any of us, she promised him Andra, who was only two years younger than him, and a powerful enchantress. It was an uneven match, but that very fact would protect her. She was stronger than him, wiser, and Mother had spent her entire life teaching her firstborn the magics of binding a man.

"Except," Narcissa continued, face blank with the memory of anger, or perhaps, loss, "she wouldn't do it.

"None of us suspected. But the night before she was supposed to marry Lucius and fulfill the contract, she ran away. We couldn't find her. We'd learn later than she had gone and sullied herself with a Mudblood, but it didn't matter then. With her gone, and Bellatrix in custody, all she had to offer them was me."
"And I did it, of course. I was still in school--barely had even written my OWLS--but I did it. To save my family. The Malfoys didn't complain, of course. Why would they? I was always the most beautiful of my sisters, and besides that, young and pliable. They were afraid of Mother, and Andra, but me," she laughed, "I was like a baby hawk fallen out of my nest. Too easy to crush underfoot if they felt like it. And the Malfoys have always been narcissistic. I think it pleased old Abraxas that I was as fair and pale as any Malfoy.

"So," she finished, "this is no comfort to you, I know, nor is it meant to be. You are not the first woman to be sacrificed to this war. You will not be the last. What should be a comfort, is that you do not know for certain what purposes he intends you for. Or," and she came closer and brushed her hand along the stubble of her scalp, "how you can turn those purposes to your own ends. The only thing for certain, girl," and Narcissa's eyes, blue as morning, caught her own.

"If you ever want to be the mistress of your own fate, you cannot afford to be passive. Take everything that happens to you, good and bad, as brute fact. You cannot change what has happened. You have some limited power to change other people's actions, and you have complete power over your own agency. Use it.

"Decide what you want, calculate the best means of getting it, and taking it. You may have to do things you consider abhorrent to get what you need. Consider the price, and if it's worth it, pay it. Any girl who would brand herself though," and Narcissa's hand gently clasped her own in sisterhood, "is Black enough to know these things."

Heather breathed out.

"What do I have to do to impress the Dark Lord?"

"We'll start with your hair. There are spells to grow it out."

Heather hesitated.

"I know. You can't tie spell-knots in hair grown through magic. It's like trying to hold sand in a sieve. But you can't use magic with the suppressors anyways. Beauty, girl, is a power beyond magic."

She nodded acquiescence.

What had followed was a process more lengthy than her mother's spa days. Narcissa had whisked her from the room in only her shift. Draco, walking through a farther section of the corridor, had looked up to see her. In the instant of recognition, he'd reddened and walked off hastily in the opposite direction. She'd been hurried into Narcissa's chambers, where the woman had all but dumped her into the wide brass tub and stripped her blushing of her shift before setting to scrubbing her off. That it was all done in a very no-nonsense manner did not preclude her embarrassment.

"Don't be ridiculous," Narcissa sniffed at her protests, as she herself stripped down to her petticoats so that her voluminous robes wouldn't be soaked in the process. "I had two sisters, and the Black properties were usually much smaller than this. We bathed together all the time."

Sometimes, Heather wasn't sure whether what the wizarding world resembled more--the 1800s, or the opening scenes of the bad lesbian porn Dudley watched when they knew their parents were gone for the weekend.

If Bellatrix had been involved, Heather felt comfortable betting on the latter.

To Heather's sputtering protests, Narcissa had scoured her all over with a coarse brush that could
have doubled as a prop from a historical documentary, and goat's milk soap (handmade by the Malfroy thralls, Narcissa assured her. None of that Muggle muck pressed out by machines). She'd said nothing of the small spellknots tangled in her pubis, to Heather's gratitude. Merely toweled her off, and hustled her back into Narcissa's chambers.

Two, three months with the woman, and Heather still couldn't get over this. Were all witches this immodest? Or was it a cultural thing, like the Latin hussies Mom complained about parading nude on the beaches in Majorca?

Either way, she didn't see herself ever getting over it.

"You'll get over it," Narcissa assured her, pulling a clothes-rack up from the interior of a modestly sized chest. "I'm afraid they confiscated or burned any clothing you made yourself, I took the liberty of ordering new things for you. They're not quite of the same quality as your own work--you could have been a seamstress, you know, if you weren't an heiress--but they'll pass muster in any company the Dark Lord keeps."

The clothes Narcissa had brought were like everything she'd worn the past few months. Utterly unfamiliar. She slipped on the green silk drawers while Narcissa cinched the matching corset about her waist, clipped on the lush high black stockings to the garter belt. There still seemed something vaguely indecent about all of it. Even when she and Mother went shopping, on the sly, before Daddy's birthday, the most flirtatious of Mother's lingerie was still very simple compared to this.

Then again. The Wizarding World was medieval, compared to her world. This was normal, she reminded herself, even as her image in the distorted mirror recalled the mannequins in the windows of the sex shops. Strange, and sick, but normal.

Or, she revised, at least the normal she'd have to live with until she could go back home.

Black petticoats now, in fine merino for winter, and over that, a pale green sleeveless brocade cinched at her waist with a silver belt that matched the torc and wristbands. Dark green outer robes, with a large cowl, completed the dress. Narcissa sat her down then, and pulled black curls back from the skin of her skull, until she felt lightheaded and ten pounds lighter, and they had to call a house-elf to bring trays of sweetmeats before she passed out.

"Magic always comes with a price," Narcissa murmured, pulling a brush back through her hair, just the way Petunia had always done. "Unfortunately, I can't magic hair out of nothing. Not if it's going to last. So I grew your own out, but it pulled the meat from your bones for it."

"Protein," Heather murmured absently, leaning into the brush. "Hair is made of keratin."

Narcissa pursed her lips. "And the earth is flat. Gods know what nonsense Muggles will think of next."

"Actually," Heather muttered, "we got rid of the flat-earth theory ages ago. Mostly. There's still a few nutjobs out there who believe it, but..." Narcissa wasn't listening. She'd moved onto wrangling her hair into a knot.

"Done," Narcissa announced. "Take a look in the mirror, dear, let's see what he has to say."

Heather cringed more than a little at this. Narcissa had refused to tell her exactly why some mirrors could talk, but given that she'd assigned it a gender--while most of the portraits, though of people, were still referred to as 'it's and 'that's--didn't reassure her that there wasn't, say, an actual human being trapped in there. Or, possibly, a male human being. Watching. While she dressed.
Which was just creepy.

No wonder Mom sent her to Snyde's Preparatory, instead of Hogwarts. At least Snyde's didn't allow for the possible perversions of inanimate objects.

Still, she approached the mirror, and smiled, awkwardly. Her hair had grown in twice as thick, under Narcissa's coaxing. The top layer was pinned up with an silver clasp--not sharp, damn it--leaving the bottom to curl down over her exposed shoulders and the wide neck of the brocade overdress. She'd used those antiquated cosmetics--and gods, Heather prayed they didn't have any toxic substances like the kind she'd read about--to accentuate the hollows of her cheeks and the shape of her eyes.

"I look like Bellatrix."

Narcissa smiled. "Tonight, and for all the nights to come, at least while you are near the Dark Lord, that in itself can be protection. However much you may have loved those Muggles of yours, they can't protect you from the grave."

Heather's hand brushed her scar.

"My mother has, so far."

"Against those who intend to harm you? Yes," Narcissa murmured. "But a Rune is based on intention, not consequences. It will not protect you against an obsession, or an ill-considered kindness."

"Is he obsessed with me then? The Dark Lord?"

Narcissa looked tired.

"He's only a man, but I never thought him capable of it. I suppose you'll have to learn that for yourself though."

And now. She moved along the hallway, at Narcissa's side, the great snake gliding along beside her, towards where the crack in the great oak doors spilled candlelight into the corridor. Beyond, she could hear conversation, the clangour of cups and plates, the meal in progress. Narcissa set her hand on her shoulder, kissed her cheek in a motherly salute, and stepped away.

She opened the door.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

As before, the opinions expressed by fictional characters are not necessarily those of the author. This fic is not meant to be taken as a blueprint for the ideal society. The protagonist--like anyone, really--has qualities that may appeal to some people, and turn others right off. She's a racist bitch with PTSD. She's also just a girl.

What I love about fiction is that it can give us perspective, balance. Help us enter into the lives of people we might otherwise dislike. There are always reasons why people act the way they do. And as unpopular a view as it may be, sometimes the 'persecutor' needs as much sympathy as the 'victim'.

That's enough of a spoiler, I suppose.

She wondered if they'd cut the room before her from the halls of Wellington Palace.

Slate floors, and high plastered ceilings, the moldings gilded with gold leaf. An unfamiliar mythology painted out over the ceiling. She thought she recognized Slepnir and Yggdrasil, amid the wicker men and hung priests. The raw sienna color outlines of their robes suggested blood, and she wondered how the portrait would affect her without her senses shackled.

The long oak table could not have sat all of the Dark Lord's men. There were only twenty, maybe thirty, privileged enough to join him in his own home this night. He headed the table, and to the whispers of his guests, rose to his feet on their entrance. His men followed suit. Narcissa gestured towards the empty seat on the Dark Lord's left before slipping to the other side of the table to stand alongside her husband. A swallow, and Heather stepped to the Dark Lord's side, bile rising in her throat.

"My Lord," she curtseyed, bowing her head. "I thank you for inviting me to your table." She barely managed the formulaic courtesy by eying the assortment of cutlery available, contemplating if he would scream as her father had if she shoved the fork between his ribs.

He grasped her chin delicately in one hand, tilted her face to meet his eyes. There was vicious amusement there, and pride. Her skin sang at the sudden touch.

"I thank you for attending." He took her hand in his other, and bowed over it, kissing it with his thin, dry lips. She reeled back, gasping. "I will thank you even more for allowing me to show you a quiet evening's entertainment. While I thoroughly enjoyed your creativity last week, I believe it would be unfair to my other guests to ask them to endure such excitement on a regular basis. Please, do try to restrain yourself this evening, dear."

The silver cords binding her fingers to her wrists grew tight, hyperflexing her wand hand for a moment, before loosing again. She slumped down into the chair the Dark Lord held out for her, barely noticing the people around her.

Of course, she realized dimly, he would have keyed her chains to his magic. The whole room felt like a vacuum to her senses--senses so acute that even a Muggle hummed at the periphery of her
awareness, like a lone mosquito blundering into a tent. This many wizards should have exploded on her awareness like a fireworks display.

The burnt sugar smell and memory of dark forests that always accompanied Narcissa. Lucius’ magic, cold and scentless and grey as winter. Draco--always distant--felt as a vague chill, and woodsmoke rising into the night sky. He was more Black than Malfoy, no matter what he looked like, or what his parents believed. The smell of burning things was unique to Narcissa, Bellatrix, and Draco.

But the Dark Lord.

She could feel nothing now but his magic.

She couldn't help but feel this couldn't be right.

Because his magic felt like home. Like her father's overwhelming bulk crowding her in an embrace, like Dudley teaching her how to use the punching bag in the basement, like the time she and Mother planned the wedding shower for Aunt Marge and Colonel Fubster. He felt like her stolen family, her stolen life, and she almost sobbed when he released her hand.

She narrowed her eyes at him while he smiled and began the meal, doing her best to focus on anything other than him.

Bellatrix had been seated at the Dark Lord's right hand, with Narcissa next to her, followed by Lucius. She supposed it was a casual gathering. In any formal occasion, proximity to the Dark Lord would indicate rank, and she doubted that either she or Narcissa should be closer than Lucius. The new recruits were present, though conspicuously quiet on her entry, and she noticed a fat, balding man who had been present at her capture, whose forearm now bore a sizeable dent. He looked down uneasily at her scrutiny, and Heather noted the reaction.

Beyond that, the only person she recognized was the man seated directly next to her--the ugly Healer.

And he was ugly. He looked like--well, what Dad would have called a half-breed. Olive skin, black hair, black eyes, and a long hooked nose all suggested some Eastern descent. His hair and face were greasy, the way Mother would expect from someone out of a country that didn't practice proper hygiene, and he smelt like B.O.. She wondered when he'd last changed his robes, and wondered more that he dared show his face in the Dark Lord's presence looking like a tramp.

Or that the Dark Lord himself would keep someone like this in his employ. She considered the man, between a mouthful of artisan greens and a bite of winged boar. The Dark Lord was tall and distinguished, as British a man as any in Parliament--if you ignored the whole terrorist thing. Clean-shaven, with neatly trimmed black hair, he didn't look older than his late twenties--and wasn't that a mystery?

The ugly Healer could have been the same age, but he'd have looked more appropriate begging on the streets of Cokeworth than in this august assembly. As though noticing her scrutiny, he turned and smiled at her with a sincerity that disarmed her for its unexpectedness.

"I apologize. I was unable to introduce myself to you properly the other evening. Severus Snape.” He bowed his head, and Heather noted with surprise there wasn't a trace of an accent. His teeth and nails were nicotine gold. Didn't wizards have any proper dentists?

"Heather Durs--Potter," she said awkwardly.

"Pleased to meet you, Miss. Potter."
"Heather, to you," she smiled stiffly. "Surely we are familiar enough after the events of--after events, to use each other's Christian names."

Bellatrix's face twisted in Heather's periphery, presumably at the word 'Christian', and it would not surprise her if these terrorists were satanic cultists as well as neo-nazis. The ugly man was unperturbed.

"Heather then," he said warmly. "Are you feeling better then? How are you settling in?"

She fought to keep a hysterical laugh from bubbling up. Feeling better? She considered trying to combine honesty with diplomacy--as much as was prudent given present company. "Your ministrations speak well of your skill, Severus. I've healed very well, I think. However," she hesitated, "I am unaccustomed to idleness, and feel somewhat bored this past week."

"Bored?" the Dark Lord cut in dangerously, stabbing a cranberry with his fork simultaneously, so that juice splattered out like blood on the word. "I believe, Miss. Potter, that there are remedies to such a condition, and they are better supplied by myself than Severus."

She cringed inwardly at what such a remedy might entail, but forced herself to meet his eyes. "And what sort of remedy might that be?"

His hand brushed hers gently, and again, she felt that treacherous sense of familiarity. His eyes smiled knowingly. "Finish your supper first, dear," he advised her mildly. "We can play a game after supper."

Bellatrix clapped her hands like a child, and Heather felt an abrupt nausea.

"My Lord," Severus ventured cautiously. "Perhaps it is unwise to give the girl so much excitement so soon."

"Severus," the Dark Lord said good-humouredly. "You heard the girl. She's doing better. Compliments of your skill." Heather risked a glance up through her hair. The man's face belied his tone of voice. He looked like Nagini pausing to consider the effects of her venom on a rat before eating it alive. "Unless you have other concerns regarding her condition?"

A wild-looking man seated next to Lucius who had been previously immersed in devouring his bloody steak guffawed around a mouthful of raw meat. Lucius, to his credit, had inched his chair away from the man's until he was almost in Narcissa's lap.

"Old Snivellus?" sniggered the man, licking clean his teeth that had been filed into points. "He's just objecting out of concern for his condition. Boy never had any balls. Rather hide behind Dumbledore's skirts than fight like a real man. Surprised you keep him around."

Severus' lips grew thinner until the man finished.

"More wars are fought and won in the backroom than the battlefield. If you could claim any brains to go along with your balls, you'd know that. Unfortunately," his lip curled disdainfully, so that he looked uglier than ever, "we are all aware of what part of their anatomy wolves think with."

"At least that part of me is intact," the wild man sneered. "Is that what you do with Dumbledore then-win wars in the backroom--"

"I think that is enough," Lucius said, and even he seemed surprised at himself for speaking out. "There are ladies present."
"Yeah," the wolfman tore a hunk of meat from a still pink haunch, "like Snivellus."

Severus glowered.

"Such as my wife, and her sister, and our guest," Lucius responded icily, nodding his head to Heather. The tramp seemed undisturbed.

"Your sister-in-law ain't no lady," he declared, licking his fingers. "But I'll be polite for the sake of the girl there, seeing as she's not broken in yet." He leered at her with those long teeth and unnatural amber eyes, and she stared boldly back, fingering her dinner knife. The Dark Lord ate placidly, seeming to enjoy the dinnertime drama.

"Enough," Severus snapped. A breath. "My Lord," he began, "may I request the after dinner entertainment to involve a duel between myself and Fenrir? Seeing as he requires... persuasion of my abilities."

Fenrir sniggered. "Your abilities? Fine with me. Maybe I can give you some new ones." He snapped his teeth twice with an audible clack.

The Dark Lord took a long draw from his wine glass and looked distinctly unamused.

"A duel, I believe, would be edifying for all involved. The new recruits have likely never seen the Arts practised to their full potential--not with the Ministry surveillance everywhere." He swirled the dregs in his glass. "And it would be in everyone's best interests to be reminded of why dark creatures are to be afforded respect," he emphasized, eying Severus, who looked equally unimpressed.

"Respect. Sensible," grunted Fenrir, cracking a bone and fishing out the marrow with a taloned fingertip.

"Almost as sensible as not discussing 'backroom' politics before witches," the Dark Lord continued icily.

The tramp snorted. "What, you can't say they don't have experience in it--" he stopped short, eyes bugged out in pain, and grasped at something below the table. Heather noticed that while Bellatrix's right hand was idly playing with a salad fork, her wand hand was conspicuously under the tablecloth. She caught Heather's eyes and smiled wickedly, and the girl saw the black wand snugged in her sleeve as she brought her other hand back up to dab at her face.

"Their experience in it," the Dark Lord said dryly, "is precisely why we do not mention it."

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After supper, they adjourned to the duelling chamber. She'd nearly stumbled upon it during her flight from the Riddle House infirmary last week. It was located in the basement, a huge chamber set outside the structure of the main building, probably so that the whole house didn't collapse if the wards failed during a particularly violent duel. It was built like a small hockey arena, with raised seats overlooking the duelling ground itself. The Dark Lord pulled her by the hand to the dais at the front of the arena, and sat her beside him, Bellatrix and a reluctant Draco to their left. Nagini curled herself around her legs--whether for warmth or to prevent her from running or even standing, she couldn't guess. Probably both.

The floor of the duelling ground was dirt, the structure itself framed in hardwood, studded with wardstones. She felt along the barrier in front of her to guess the wards, and sat back in frustration.

The Dark Lord eyed her knowingly. "Is there a problem, Miss. Potter?" he asked silkily.
She gritted her teeth. "Yes. I can't feel anything."

"A common aftereffect of trauma, I have heard, though why you should be feeling it in response to the death of those vermin you lived with, I haven't the least notion."

She hated him.

"Of course, I suppose they were intelligent enough to respect and serve you, though certainly not to the level your status should have required."

What a fucking, racist toolbag.

"Not that, my Lord," she said, voice trembling--and oh, she hated that as well. She would not cry in front of this perverted, murdering scum. "I meant to say, I cannot feel any magic through the chains. Could you please," she swallowed, "allow me the liberty of feeling it? Otherwise, I fear my pleasure in the duel may be stinted somewhat."

He smiled, and in this proximity, she could feel the satisfaction radiating from him like sunlight on her face. If she could feel this, she bet that he could feel exactly how much she hated him. A sense of amusement, barely distinguishable from her own, followed to confirm the suspicion.

"Of course, my dear," he agreed, reaching for her torc, so that she almost choked herself flinching backwards as he grasped it in one long fingered hand, and sent a pulse of that damnedly sympathetic magic through her binds. "After all, it's only to protect you from using dangerous magic without appropriate supervision."

She barely heard the last words, stunned as the magic broke in on her senses. It was like moving from a soundproof room into the moshpit of a concert in the space of a second. For an undetermined time, she grasped onto that familiar magic--until she came to, and found herself holding onto the Dark Lord's hand for dear life. She tried to let go.

The Dark Lord's grip didn't budge.

"What do you know of werewolves?" he asked patiently.

She gave on trying to free her hand.

"They exist," she said flatly.

"Surely Narcissa had something to say on the subject?"

"I was a bit too preoccupied with, oh, the fact that I was being held by a terrorist cell of mythical beings to ask about the particulars."

"Very well then. Focus on Fenrir," he ordered her. "Tell me what you sense."

You must use the force, she thought hysterically, pitching her senses forwards to the tramp in the arena.

"It's disgusting," she said flatly. "He smells like he hasn't bathed in ten weeks. And blood. Wet dog."

"Ignore the smell," the Dark Lord told her. "How does the magic cling to his body? Compared to a wizard?"

Her perceptions skated along the wolf's skin, compared it to the pulses emanating from the Dark Lord. "His magic can't get past his skin," she said in surprise. "Like me, with the chains. Did you do
that to him?"

The Dark Lord laughed.

"No, more's the pity. It takes considerable effort to keep a wizard's magic from seeping out from his body. Werewolves just don't have an aura. Like most dark creatures, their magic is internalized. It makes them resistant to most spells. Taking one down demands a physical attack. Now," he squeezed her hand, "tell me what you sense from Severus."

She obeyed, more out of curiosity and to distract herself from his touch than anything else. To her surprise...

"He smells... clean," she mused, mystified. "Wet earth after a rain. Like springtime. And something floral... lilacs...?"

Bellatrix snickered.

"Severus smells like a girl in a boutique. I can't wait to tell him."

"Can't you smell him?" Heather asked her.

The Dark Lord answered for her. "The body doesn't have a sixth sense for magic, so it usually co-opts one of the other five for its perception. Most humans have weak olfactory glands, so sensing it through smell is rare--except, of course, in Parselmouths," he concluded smugly.

Heather regarded him uneasily--something that had become a habit. "Parselmouths. Are we like snakes or something?"

The Dark Lord looked even more smug. "This discussion is unsuited to a public forum," he told her. "We will discuss it in depth. Later. For now, the short answer is that we have an affinity for snakes."

Thanks for the nonanswer, she thought irately, trying not to roll her eyes.

You're welcome, came the unexpected response. She turned to the Dark Lord wide-eyed, but he was focused on the duellists now.

"My people," he announced. "We are gathered here to witness a display of skill offered by Master Snape and Fenrir Greyback. There will be no killing or permanent injury. Duel continues until one forfeits. The loser," he smiled like a shark, "will assist me in teaching Miss. Potter the rudiments of the Arts. Begin!"

The men stood off, and her breath caught in her throat.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The Dark Lord grasped her hand tighter, and she felt his magic catch up her senses now, in a way that precluded thought and submerged her autonomy. Her sense of self dissolved by the intimacy of his thrice-damned sympathetic magic, she--he--they surged forward, a twinned consciousness. Their awareness telescoped on the duellists, and then, she forgot to fight.

There was a pattern here, she thought, lovely and dream-like, the Dark Lord's mind tracing potential avenues of attack so that they illumined the space between their thoughts like the laser grid of a security system. A pattern, the wolfman, still human, considering his shape, whether the tension in his hamstrings would give way to a sudden leap off lupine haunches. A pattern, and she felt a delight that was and was not her own at their perceptions. They--he--had never felt another's physicality through the Arts. That skill, that maddening intuition, belonged to the Blacks.

To Dorea's granddaughter, and now to him. Them.

Their Severus refused to circle yet, even with the damned Alpha clambering behind him. He stood in the ring, stance sharply straight as a knife, and they smelt the ozone that precedes a crack of lightning.

And then--predictably--Greyback charged and they were both awash in sensation.

Let it be put on the record: Severus had no bloody desire to get into a duel with anyone. He'd spent his time in the Dark Lord's services largely avoiding the petty bloodlettings staged by the purebloods through discretion and outright apathy. It was nothing to him who insulted whose wife, who was the better duellist, who had the more effective Castration Curse. It was stupid.

And so was he. At least where Lily was concerned.

No, he corrected himself acerbically. Not stupid. Strategic. He didn't think Fenrir Greyback stupid enough to try infecting Heather Potter, not after watching how the Dark Lord's eyes treasured her up as a precious possession. But Greyback wasn't a Death Eater or a wizard, he was a radical idealist, probably a budding martyr given all his wanted posters. His unpredictability made him dangerous to both sides. If he wasn't recognized as the leader of all the werewolves in Britain, the Dark Lord would probably have crossed him off as a liability and instated a more tractable Alpha.

Infecting the Girl-Who-Lived would be a coup. The halfbreed might even consider it worth his life. The Dark Lord had to know it, and after that offhand comment about 'breaking her in', he had no doubt the man planned to establish that Heather was off-limits himself. There was no need for Snape's involvement.

Except. Snape was fucking stupid.

And now, he stood across from the damned wolfman, circling like the animal he was, and Severus held himself rigid, refusing to turn.

He felt the shadow of the wolf on him as it leapt forward for his unprotected back, and folded himself into it.
The dog overturned itself, dazed, before he spun out of its shadow, pulling a slender silver baton out from his robes that telescoped into a seamless silver staff, and bludgeoned the damned wolf across the head, before using it to vault up and over him as it grabbed for his ankle.

He wished to God or whatever powers were listening that he could just kill the bloody bastard and have it over with.

Killing Greyback would be comparatively easier than hurting him badly enough that he'd give up. Give the animal credit, it knew how to take a beating.

It took a physical attack to subdue a wolf. He had to get close enough lay him out, preferably without being bitten, or scratched. Usually werewolf claws didn't carry enough venom for infection, but he wouldn't put it past that bastard to anoint his claws in spit especially for the occasion. Curses wouldn't work.

Curses were all the typical Dark Wizard would think to use.

He wasn't typical. And he hadn't just stayed at Hogwarts for the role of resident spy. Albus Dumbledore's skills in transfiguration probably made him the most dangerous wizard in Britain, outside of the Dark Lord.

He was just fortunate enough to have both men as his tutors.

He pulled up earth from the floor of the arena in a long swath and threw it around the wolf. It flowed and spun in a vortex, solidifying into shards of silver. Fenrir howled in outrage, a sound that Severus had never heard before, but his eyes stung, and his ears rang with it, the blood bubbling out from them, and then, there was no sound at all.

The damned wolf was gone, and there was a hole in the ground--how Fenrir could hide himself belowground that quickly was anyone's guess. Snape had always considered wolves to have limited magic. His eyes glinted with the expectation of blood, and he directed the maelstrom of silver into the foxhole, when the ground exploded beneath him.

The wolf came up from the ground, bleeding from dozens of gashes from the maelstrom, and while he couldn't hear its howls, he felt a vibration in his skull that suggested them. He flung himself into the air with his staff, forcing fire from his wand. The staff slipped on the loose earth, and he fell sideways on the ground. The wolf surged through the fire and tore his leg open.

He screamed.

Fuck Dumbledore, and Minerva, and anyone else who might sense this on him. He loosed himself. Folded himself and the damned wolf forcibly into their shadows--and disappeared from the ring.

Oh, they were still there, alright, in a shadow space, the dimension of the world wizards squeezed themselves through in apparition, quicker than thought, a quantum of time. Mortals couldn't exist on this plane, outside of breath and digestion and boredom; and it was only through reckless experimentation, those long nights when tried to forget Lupin's snapping teeth and scrabbling claws, that he had found a way to linger here, long beyond the fraction of a moment it took another man’s body to forget its shape.

He waited that fraction of a moment, that infinite moment, in this blind place where time was a stranger, before turning space inside out.

Heather's consciousness tore itself violently from Voldemort's, a second before she sicked up all over
their feet.

The combatants popped back into being. And with that, the floral scent had become sickly sweet, like funeral lilies, mingled with the overpowering stench of blood.

Voldemort curled his lip at her distastefully, but vanished the vomit.

She couldn’t look back into the arena.

Staring into her hands, she thought she heard Bella laughing at her, but her mind was too muddy to make out the words.

----------------------------------------------------

Greyback splinched, his body neatly bisected at the waist, the contents of his entrails sagging wetly onto the sand. His jaws suddenly weak, Severus had no difficulty loosing his leg from their clutch.

"Do you forfeit," he demanded viciously, tracing the length of the animal's wet lips with the silver staff, so that it seared the sensitive skin, and Greyback--Greyback!--looked back almost pleadingly.

"Do you?" he pressed dangerously, plying his staff along the length of an exposed rib. "Or should I just use Fiendfyre on you? No forcing that back on me now, all your magic is bound up in preserving your life, or what's left of it."

He levelled his wand at the wolf for another blow, when he felt a searing pain in his Mark. He turned to the dais, where the girl refused to look at him, and Voldemort was smiling, satisfied, his hands clapping slowly, beckoning him over. He seemed to yell a word, and Thester Carrow and Augustus Rookwood ran into the ring, presumeably to put Humpty-Dumpty together again.

He came before the dais, bowed reverently, and Voldemort clasped his hand in pride, before tipping up his head to meet his eyes.

*Go to your Healer*

He nodded, and felt a vague pressure and constriction against his thigh as the Dark Lord bound the long rip in his flesh.

*And Severus...* the man eyed the werewolf bite, the places were Fenrir's claws had shredded his pant legs and left long, angry, scratches. He nodded.

*Once you are well, you will make me aware of the results of this latest experiment*

He had never wanted to put this to the test, had no idea what effects the potion would have if he was forced to release its effects over a long period of time for prophylaxis, and yet. One stupid, rash choice had freed him from the difficulty of making another. He wondered if this was how James Potter had felt, free, caught up in the inertia of his own recklessness. If that was why Lily had preferred him to the studious boy who'd spent his time calculating how he would leave his father and Spinner's End behind him.

Lucius caught him up by the arm, pulling him up and out the door, presumably to the apparition point. His vision was darkening, he could see the green girl doubled over, shrunken into her seat.

She wouldn't like him either.

She was a precious and inviolate girl, the kind who politely sat for his lectures and submitted
technically accurate and unoriginal essays pieced out of the required reading. The kind naturally furnished with the lovely hair and long smooth nails Eileen Prince had slaved and sweat over achieving with hot irons and manicure sets while his father cheated with the bar waitress. The kind guaranteed the perfect future he'd tried to win for himself with sweat and blood—a quiet future on a Privet Drive, an ordinary peace he seemed incapable of achieving.

Except.

Whatever future the girl might have been groomed for, they'd ripped her from it that bloody night in July.

And whatever politely uninteresting girl she might have been, Severus knew all too well the Dark Lord would make no space for that person here.

And in the aftermath of the duel, she somehow found herself being hustled through the dark corridors of Riddle Manor by Bellatrix. They'd gone up two, three flights of stairs and turned innumerable corners before settling in a large chamber in the corner of the Manor. The woman plied her wand in the dark, as deftly as an old woman wielding a crochet hook, and Heather quietly damned the Dark Lord for stopping up her senses again, even as she acknowledged his wisdom in doing so.

Still. Watching someone cast without her senses was like watching someone knit with invisible wool. The motions seemed completely bizarre, even when they seemed to trace the outlines of Runes.

The chamber lit up, hugely warm with candlelight, the golden hardwood fairly glowing, the flames reflecting off the pane of the door leading onto the snowy balcony. Bella shut the door.

"Time for bed, my bitty halfblood," she announced, pulling a pair of loose cotton nightshifts from the wardrobe and tossing one onto the oversized canopy bed. "This one should fit you." She tugged off her boots and undressed without the least trace of embarrassment. Heather awkwardly turned to read the titles on the bookcase while she did so.

"Well, my little lovely. What are you waiting for?" came Bella's hand on her shoulder. She flinched at the contact.

"Sorry," she apologized stiffly, refusing to meet the eyes of the woman who killed her brother. She changed as quickly as she could, conscious of Bella's assessing eyes as she did so.

"Oh, you are lovely," Bella murmured. "If only you hadn't gotten your Mudblood mother's eyes, you could almost pass for pure Black. That figure," she stroked a hand down Heather's side, and the girl had had it. She grabbed the hand and twisted it into a lock as Dudley had shown her, except she didn't pause at the resistance of the joint--

and Bellatrix didn't pause at the suddenness of her attack.

The witch flipped over her shoulder as neatly as a gymnast, laughing, her wand abruptly in hand though it had been in her robes, Heather was sure of it. She didn't have time to consider this though, before she was shot back against the wall.

She allowed herself to be stunned for all of a second, before shaking herself aware, but in that second Bellatrix was before her, holding her at wandpoint. She tried to kick the wandhand aside, and found herself unable to move for her efforts.
"Brave little bitch," Bellatrix laughed, her hand tracing the curve of her jaw. "What did I tell you, little halfblood?"

She spat at her.

Bellatrix tsked. "Now, darling," she crooned, "is that any way to treat your dear cousin?"

Heather stared back at her. Bella met her eyes knowingly, and she felt a vague pressure at her consciousness.

"Precious darling," Bella murmured, pulling a lock of her hair behind her hair delicately, tracing her chin, fingers brushing down, down to the torc that collared her neck. "You really have no idea how you are loved. Silly, stupid halfbreed." She fingered the collar, and Heather trembled in her skin, before Bella sat down beside her, clasping her knees in a childlike pose. "Do you know the story, lovely?"

She blinked dumbly.

Bella clapped her hands. "Of course you don't!" A snap of her fingers, she summoned a brush, and moved Heather sideways so she could start raking her fingers through her hair.

"Once upon a time, when the land was new, when the Muggles ran naked through the forests like the animals they were and offered up their magical children as sacrifices to appease us—we were gods. The oldest of us are old, cold things, we drank their blood and ate their flesh, and were appeased, except, of course, some of us were too kind and stupid to farm them like the livestock they were. They gave them fire and taught them not to fear the dark, and like the short-lived animals they are, they bred out of control, and still," she sneered, tugging hard at a snarl in the girl's hair, "there were those who refused to put them down.

"So we fought with our own kind, terrific fights that left the countryside and the animals' feed in ruins, until the blighted creatures ran us down for destroying their crops. The wise ones hid, the weaker were hunted down and burnt in an attempt to pacify the gods of the sky and land, gods that didn't exist except in us. If an old one appeared to accept the homage, they tried to kill him.

"And eventually," Bella began to plait her hair, "those children of the muggles that had magic, who were subtle enough to hide it, became witch-hunters, Inquisitors, and we were run down in our groves, until we hid ourselves. Humiliated. Run out of our lands by our own livestock."
With her plait tied, she found movement and speech restored to her, and she spun away from Bella.

"Muggles are not livestock," she hissed.

Bella curled her lip. "Tsk, tsk, kitten. A cow lives what, ten years?"

"What?"

"Oh, she doesn't know she's special," Bella murmured, getting into bed and patting the place next to her. "Come in, it's late, dearie."

"I'm not sleeping with you!"

"Of course you are. The floor's clean, sweetheart, but I don't recommend it. Nasty dust bunnies we have in this house. They'll bounce all over you in your sleep, and your robes will be a mess by morning. In."

She gingerly raised the covers and got in, wondering if she'd have a chance to strangle the woman in
her sleep.

"What about your husband?"

Bella giggled. "I signed the papers and fucked the man, but he isn't nearly interesting enough to bother with on a regular basis. Besides, the Dark Lord says I get to keep you until he's decided what to do with you, and you're my cousin, sweet." She hugged the girl possessively.

What the fuck?

"Why am I special?" Heather demanded some time later, when the gas lamps were burning lower, and Bella's grip loosened enough that she could breathe.

"Hmm?" Bella asked drowsily.

"Why am I special," she repeated.

Bella yawned, and snuggled deeper into the girl like a contented cat, or perhaps a girl with a special dolly. "We'll live for ages," she said sleepily. "You probably less long, with that Mudblood mother of yours, but long enough for stars to die. To forget those Muggles of yours... mmm."

Staring into the blackness, bound in a stranger's arms, Heather closed her eyes, and cried for her mother.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you everyone for the comments and feedback! I really appreciate it! You're all wonderful *hugs*. Have a lovely week!
When Severus woke, it was with a ringing in his ears and a burn in his throat. The ringing came from the man yelling a foot from his face, and the burn…

Well. Magic always had a price.

He focused on the man in front of him, until the blur resolved into a face, and the screaming resolved into words, and an irate Poppy Pomfrey literally dragged Albus Dumbledore, Supreme Mugwump, Headmaster of Hogwarts, and probably the most powerful wizard alive back from his bed, shoved him into a chair, and hexed him there.

He supposed it was shock that held the man in place. Likely no one, save the Dark Lord, had dared curse the Headmaster outside of a classroom for more than a half century. Poppy Pomfrey was little more than a hedgewitch, but he had to give her credit for spunk.

“Albus, whatever you need to discuss with Severus can wait until he is recovered, thank you very much,” she sniped, looking very dishevelled after wrestling the Ancient One away.

The Headmaster didn’t look at all ready to humour the girl today. He stared back on Severus with old, cold eyes, blue as lightning, and Severus remembered uneasily that he’d probably schooled Poppy, generations before Severus was even born. He’d been there when Dippet had hired his grandniece, out of the charitable nepotism that came naturally in a community where members could live to be in the thousands, and family was the institution.

For all Severus knew, he could have decided on Severus’ very existence for his own, inscrutable reasons. It would not have taken much. Some gentle love charm on the last Prince girl—almost as young as Severus, a mere five decades old—to turn her onto the clever Muggle engineer, infuse some fresh blood into the line. That would be all. He had admitted to doing as much to increase the number of ‘Mudbloods’ in Britain—and he often wondered how many of them were not the byblows of his graduating classes, encouraged by some charmed whiskey into taking some Muggle girl to bed.

Often wondered if, despite his predilections, Albus ever took it upon himself to leave his changelings in a stranger’s womb.

Albus was unknowable as a god.

Fuck if Poppy Pomfrey cared.

“There, Severus,” she said brusquely, stroking a hand along his scalp in a way that was probably meant to be comforting, though it brought the thick, supple veins on the underside of her wrist in uneasy proximity to him, and he imagined he could see the quiver of a pulse at her radius. “We found you outside the gates last night tore up something awful.”

Lucius. Clever man, bringing him here to Hogwarts, and then running before the Headmaster could see them together and confirm his suspicions.

“Whatever happened this time? Did he…” Pomfrey’s voice trailed off, and she sat herself in a chair in his bedside, and he was reminded that some wizards were still too young to outgrow common
“No,” he choked, and it felt like ground glass had been tipped into his voicebox and left to sit overnight. “I…” he coughed into the sleeve of his hospital gown, when he removed his mouth, it was flecked with blood.

“Oh,” she exclaimed, pouring him some water from a pitcher and handing it to him, “I’m so sorry, I should have thought—” she handed him the water, and reflexively he took a long draught, before spitting it out over the blankets. It burned his throat like whiskey poured into an open wound.

“Severus! What—what’s wrong, what do you need—“

“He needs blood,” came the dry, dispassionate voice of his mentor, and Pomfrey turned back, incredulously.

“Albus, whatever—“

“Blood,” the Headmaster repeated grimly.

“I know he did come in with a werewolf bite and scratches, but all the tests report him negative for the change, and anyways, werewolves don’t essentially need blood—“

“Severus is not a werewolf,” the Headmaster confirmed. “He made well sure of that.”

“Well, what can I do then—“

“Poppy,” the Headmaster said clearly. “You can leave.”

She looked ready to protest, until she considered the implacable expression on his face. It was the face that made Grindelwald lay down his wand in a battlefield.

Predictably, it only made the nurse grumble and stamp out of the infirmary, and Severus could imagine the gossip she’d get up to with Minerva by way of revenge.

Albus Dumbledore could send every Death Eater in London scurrying like rats, but Severus would be damned if anything short of cancer or overtime could scare a nurse.

The old wizard called a silver basin to him with a hand, considered his wrist, and slid a long fingertip along a vein. It drizzled into the bowl, sweeter than honey from the rock, stronger than man rejoicing wine, and he closed his eyes to savour the smell of the magic—faintly acidic, of course, with the tang of lemons.

The bowl floated to him, as the man healed his arm with a word, and watched coolly as Severus sipped with slow reverence from the vessel.

And when the bowl was empty, and Severus cleaned his lips to savour the last drop, he spoke another word, and burnt the traces of his blood from the bowl.

Severus considered this, and lying back in his bed, spoke.

“You do not trust me.”

“Did you ever expect me to.” It was not a question.

“I suppose not,” Severus murmured.
“Blood Magic,” the Headmaster pronounced, and Severus surprised himself by not flinching at the word, nor the judgement in his mentor’s gaze. “I had suspected, for years, that you were dabbling in it—but this—why, Severus?”

“I had an opportunity to discredit Greyback,” Severus told him. “We’ve been waiting for ages to take him down. Voldemort is fed up with the number of casualties and turnings that accompany any raids he attends, but he needs the wolves for muscle. He wants Greyback gone. We want Greyback gone. It was the perfect opportunity to place myself in the Lord’s good graces, and I took it.”

“It wasn’t yours to take,” Dumbledore told him. “I’ve asked you all for patience on the Greyback issue. Many of those casualties on Fenrir’s raids are on Voldemort’s side.”

“Many of those casualties are civilians,” Severus snarled.

“And how many civilian casualties do you think we will have if this war continues?” Dumbledore asked him. “For that matter, how many will die if Voldemort replaces Greyback with a competent leader? If we lose this war?”

“You’re discussing Muggle casualties,” Severus muttered.

“Yes,” Dumbledore hit him with a hard gaze. “Kill enough of them, and they will notice. And then we will die.”

“And if we don’t kill them?” Severus asked. “Men breed like rats. They’ve already used up most of the resources on the planet. Soon they’ll be fighting over what’s left, just like starving rats fighting over the last bit of bread, cannibalizing each other to survive. What do you think will happen to us then. Old One, when they’ve cut down the forests and poisoned the lakes and covered every square inch of the earth up to our secret doorsteps? Will they thank us nicely for not killing them when we had the chance? Or will we be tracked down and killed, our bodies pickled up like the curiosities in my lab?”

“It won’t come to that,” the Headmaster asserted.

Severus looked at him incredulously.

“I’ve lived through many inquisitions, and we have survived each one.”

Severus shook his head. “You don’t understand what we’re up against. This—this isn’t just pitchforks and fire—”

“I know,” the Headmaster said more gently, and Severus shut his eyes to keep from screaming.

No. No you don’t. You’re too old, dammit, too bloody overconfident, and what’s worse, it’s probably merited. You’ll probably live through it, you old fox. You, and Athena, and Tiw, Bridgit, Loki—all the old ones, and a few of us lucky enough to avoid the bombs that will come onto our fortresses, corner us in our homes. Never mind the thousands that will die, you can always rebuild our species in your image, old man.

It was conversations like these that reminded Severus why he had turned traitor on Dumbledore to serve a sociopath only decades older than himself. The Dark Lord had his own best interests in mind—all men did—but, to Severus’ reasoning, his best interests would serve the common good more than Dumbledore’s.

“It won’t get that bad,” Dumbledore was assuring him. “They’ll settle down after a few decades. Instate some kind of population control. Probably there will be a few wars or epidemics to decrease
their numbers.”

Severus fought the urge to laugh. If the Prophet, largely controlled by Mudbloods and the Ministry could hear this, they’d have a field day. Dumbledore reveals his true colours—best case scenario, Muggles die of natural causes by the billions.

If war could be considered a natural cause.

Well. If two stags fought in the woods, and one killed the other, it was hardly an unnatural death, was it? Why man was the only animal whose death could be considered ‘unnatural’ seemed somewhat egotistic.

But the Headmaster was still talking.

“But I told you to let Remus handle the Greyback issue.”

Severus laughed. It began low in his throat and then came out as an ugly chuckle through his long, yellow teeth.

“Remus,” he snickered. “Remus is not a werewolf.”

“I seem to recall you telling me something very different as a schoolboy.”

He sneered. “I was young then. Younger,” he amended, at the Headmaster’s faintly condescending smile. “I’d never seen a real wolf before. Lupin couldn’t be one if he tried. He’s terrified of his abilities, and therefore can never hope to master them.”

“As you have?” the Headmaster asked pointedly, and a frisson of need coursed through him involuntarily as the man approached, his bloody sleeve swinging.

“I told you,” he said lowly. “I did what was necessary.”

“Yes, but I want to hear you say the words,” the Headmaster insisted. “What exactly did you do to ensure that you would never become a werewolf?”

The breath left Snape in a low hiss, and when he glared up at his mentor, his eyes reflected red in the light.

“I drank vampire’s blood. In a potion, kept charmed so that it would only take effect when I unlocked by the incantation.”

“And for how long have you done this?” Dumbledore asked quietly, occupying Pomfrey’s chair at the bedside now.

“Irrelevant. I had it when I needed it. The potion has no effects unless unlocked by the incantation, and expires regularly every six weeks. I’m not going to turn into a vampire from one dose of blood. It takes consecutive doses and then bleeding the victim dry. All I did was—“

“Bring yourself close enough to Turning into one creature that the other could have no claim on you,” Dumbledore murmured. “I’m amazed Voldemort didn’t curse you after you finished the duel. To beat the Alpha, and become a werewolf yourself—you could have been the pack leader we all need. That Britain needs.”

Snape’s face twisted. “You’d like that,” he said lowly, and repeated, louder, “you’d like that, wouldn’t you, Headmaster?
For one of your best servants to be Turned into a beast so that you had a bit more control over what goes on in this country. Wouldn’t you?”

The old man sat back, but did not deny it.

“Are you certain you have not Turned?” he said slowly. The old fear rushed over Severus, familiar as breath. “I’m not a werewolf,” he said hotly.

“No,” confirmed the Headmaster. “However, you know as well as I that whenever you take the body or blood of another for your own purposes, the effects can be... unpredictable, at best. The source always retains a connection to what has been given. And a vampire…” the man grew still.

“Severus, a vampire must continue to be alive, or rather, undead, for its blood to remain patent.”

Severus was silent, eyes closed, shutting out the burning sunlight creeping through the curtains.

“No vampire of an age to supply blood potent enough for potion-making has ever, in my memory, willingly contributed it. Not without ulterior motive.”

I will not answer.

“How did you get it?”

And still, Severus laid still as an undying thing on the bed, his canines itching in his upper jaws and his veins tight and dry as ditches in high summer, the tick-tock of his own heart beating him back into unconsciousness.

He only wished he knew whether the discomfort was truly his, or came from the other.

It doesn’t matter.

Sleep.

That same evening, a couple were walking the dimlit cobblestones of Diagon Alley up to Ollivander’s door. The man in the shop inside had curled up on the wide and dusty windowsill, below the equally dusty display box, to watch the Alley settle in for the evening, as he had done a thousand thousand unremarkable evenings. His kneazle rumbled contentedly at his side as he sipped his tea, and pondered the sultry curves of the raw rosewood bough in his lap.

It was November, and cold. The shoppers were all draped in heavy cloaks that hid their features, leaving him to guess their identities from their figures and the response of the wands at their approach. To all but the wandmaker, the shop was so quiet you could almost hear the dustmotes drifting into place. Not to him, never to him. The shop had for him the familiar clamour of a kennel to its master, the urge of each wood as distinct in the crowded aisles as the baying of a favoured hound to a hunter. The noise varied with the proximity of the wizard, and the sympathy of a wand.

For now, they were a hundred yards away, but he guessed they would be coming here. Oh, they could go to Flourish and Blott’s, but if that were so, they wouldn’t be so close together. The tall gentleman, in a long, black cloak with a deep cowl had his arm too tightly locked with that of the girl for any casual shopping errand. No, this was something of import. A date—but the eateries were all at the other end of the Alley, and besides, he felt that the man was older than the girl. He moved with confidence and a sinuous grace next to her mincing footfalls. A father escorting his girl for a new wand or a replacement, perhaps?
And as they came closer, he mentally considered and rejected who this pair might be. Someone of old family, to be sure. All the other girls wore Muggle trousers and skirts above their knees these days. The girl was outfitted proper for public, her dark green skirts almost long enough to trip her up, the tassels of a purple scarf peeking out from her hooded head.

Fifty feet, and a wand—that wand—began to sing.

He froze, and trembled, then rushed for the backdoor. Uncaring, the wand kept singing, now screaming, louder, louder, as incessant as the whistling whine of a caged dog asking to be set loose. And the others began talking, shrieking, pleading at his metaphysical ears, until he was stumbling to reach the back door, and had almost made it, until the front one blew open and the man threw the girl in before him, before snapping him back with a spell.

“Mr. Ollivander,” the man bowed his head in a mockery of deference, while the girl stepped back warily in anticipation. “Going somewhere?”

He swallowed, and it was some time before he could speak, for he had not lasted nearly two millennia for his courage, but rather, the lack of it. “My… my Lord.”

“Your courtesy is appreciated, sir,” the Dark Lord told him, settling down on the rickety chair and smiling as he drew back his hood. “If you would otherwise not diverge from your usual process, I would appreciate that also.”

Ollivander stared back dumbly.

The Dark Lord sighed irritably, flicking out a wand and passing it over to him. “Yew, phoenix feather, fourteen inches. Go on.”

Despite himself, Ollivander clasped the wand in his hand like an old friend, reflecting on the irony of wandmakers. The only wizards for whom a wand was absolutely useless, were those capable of making them. They were, like the wands themselves, empty vessels, waiting to be filled. Theirs was a magic that did not create so much as enable; it saw the form of things and brought it into being. Objects spoke to him stronger than people did, he knew their inclinations, the secret souls in wood and earth. For all his work and understanding though, they remained selfish, ungrateful things, bent on achieving the end he’d helped them towards—bonding to a master.

Even after centuries, he still sometimes hated them for this.

And still, he tuned out the delighted screaming of the other wand in the backroom, and listened to this one. It didn’t scream, but then, a wand began to mature, as it were, once bonded. The yew switch wasn’t very old, but it had taken to its master. It hissed and seemed to waver in his vision like a snake, and he passed it back, white-faced.

“It suits you,” he said honestly.

The Dark Lord seemed to take this as a compliment. “It has served me well.”

If not Britain, Ollivander considered, before he could remember the man was a Legilimens.

The man’s lips thinned. “Ah, well, we are not here to discuss politics, Mr. Ollivander. You see,” and he beckoned the girl forward, “my ward requires a wand.” She drew back her own cowl, and the man’s breath caught in his thought.

“A Black…but no…” he reached forward to brush aside her hair, to better see her forehead, when the sound of the Dark Lord clearing his throat stopped him, and he thought better of it. The mark was
clear enough to see anyways.

“Eihwaz,” he murmured, and surprisingly, the girl smiled.

“Do you like runes then?” she asked carefully.

“Yes, but—Eihwaz. It also means…”

“Oh. The Yew Tree. Yes,” she paused and glanced at the Dark Lord from under her eyelids. “I suppose I never considered it that way. Would it have been berkanan if he had a birch wand?”

“Well can say? But if you’re marked, you’re—“

“It is irrelevant as to who she is,” broke in the Dark Lord. “If you are wise, and would like to live to see the next millennium, I would advise you not to discuss your suspicions with anyone else.”

He nodded hastily. “Of course. My Lord.”

“Do what you need to do,” the man said lazily, pulling a book whose script he could not decipher from his pocket and beginning to read.

Ollivander sweated, and his heart drummed, and yet, he pretended this was any other customer, on any other night.

He knew which wand wanted her, but almost to spite it—and to pacify all the others, who wanted their turn, and would be whining for the missed opportunity long after THAT wand had gone off to whatever bloody end nature intended—he tried every one that asked. The most ridiculous requests, coming from slender reed wands strung through with unicorn silk, made for silly girls obsessed with divination, and ugly, clubbed boxwood branches stuffed with the heartstrings of ungainly dragons, for shiftless fencers, were granted. She tried them all, and burnt out the cores of a few hapless instruments that had aimed too high, splintered a rather lovely willow wand that had almost loved Lily Potter, and set his shop to shambles—but the more wands she destroyed, the quieter the voices became, until there was only one.

And now, he went into the backroom, and brought out the dark wand. He heard its joy and relief as soon as it touched her hand, and it was almost anticlimactic when she drew a yellow scarf out from its tip that shimmered into sunlight as it fell to the floor.

The Dark Lord looked up, fingered his own wand restlessly.

“The wand,” he asked, while the girl, drawing out a bindrune of issaz and mannaz, was contriving to make a snowman on his shopfloor.

“Eleven and three quarter inches, holly and phoenix feather—“

“Which phoenix,” the man demanded.

Ollivander swallowed, and met his eyes.

“Heather, your wand please.”

She stopped, looked at the Dark Lord with utter contempt.

“Crucio.”

But it was her that screamed, the strange rings binding her hand and foot glowing hellishly under the
torrent of her own magic, and it stopped the moment it began. The Dark Lord plucked the wand from her shaking fingers.

“I trust, my dear, this serves as a lesson to you,” he told her, picking her slight form up from the floor and setting her on the windowsill. “Please do not attempt to curse me. Any attacks against my person will rebound back upon you.”

She glared at him furiously, tears in her eyes. “I hate you.”

The man looked bored. “This is hardly a novel sentiment. When you have something more interesting to discuss than your post-adolescent angst—such as, perhaps, your surprising proficiency with an unforgiveable—I will pay attention. In the interim,” he considered the black wand in his hands, and Ollivander could hear it singing at the closeness of the one who had almost become its master—“This wand is inadequate for my purposes.”

“But my Lord, it is a perfect match—“

“Regardless, it is inadequate.”

He heard the wail of the wand like a strangled cat, and then sudden silence, the complete and shocked silence as even the wands on the shelves stopped gossiping at this abrupt murder. The bond was too fresh to affect the girl much, but even she flinched back.

The Dark Lord tossed the pieces to the ground like so much trash, and he could almost feel the smugness of the treacherous yew at its brother’s death.

“Another wand, Ollivander,” the man demanded calmly, turning back to his book.

“There are no other wands, my Lord,” he said desperately. And it, broken at his feet, had been her perfect wand—holly for yew, sacrifice for immortality, an equal and opposite for the Dark Lord’s match. He’d known what it meant the moment he made them. Brother wands weren’t rare, but their wielders were always connected somehow—always. And the association of these woods was so strong, the trees taken from the same churchyard—

But the Dark Lord had rejected it! Well, of course, people had to have some choices in these matters, but what was that to a wandmaker faced with a Dark Lord who wouldn’t take no for an answer.

“You keep old wands, do you not? After their master has died?”

“Yes…” the man hedged, “but none of those will bond as tightly, they’ll always have their own will—“

“We are not looking for the perfect wand,” the Dark Lord asserted, and then glancing at the girl, amended, “not at this time, at least. Find one that works, and I will cease to darken your doorstep.”

The man breathed deep. “They’re in the cellar. We have to go around the side of the house.”

“Fine. But if you make a single noise, I will gut you, man, wandmaker or otherwise. Heather—“ The girl came obediently to his side, defeated. He touched a single finger to a slender torc that collared her neck. She opened her mouth to ask a question. No sound emerged.

“No running away, or you can guess what the results will be.”

She nodded sulkily, and they followed Ollivander into the cellar.

It was more spacious than one would expect, given most of these were holes in the ground for
keeping root vegetables. Ollivander’s was a vast barrow, perhaps as large or larger than the shop above-stairs, and filled with shelves stacked high with more boxes. Each shelf was labelled, usually according to the family to whom the wands had belonged.

The cellar was silent as a graveyard to Ollivander. This was where wands came to die.

“A used wand will never fit you as well as a new one,” he said, for the benefit of the mute girl, seeing the Dark Lord preoccupied again, leaning with his book against the ladder. “Some say a wand takes on the character of its wielder. Others go as far as to suggest the souls of the dead them inhabit their wands, at least in some small part, after their death.”

The girl mouthed a word to him, and after some repetition in the dim light, he understood.

“I do have your parents’ wands,” he admitted, “though I’m afraid they won’t be much use to you. At least, not your mother’s. You broke a willow wand upstairs cut from the same tree as hers. Your father’s, I can let you try. Here.”

She gave it a wave, and though he felt a soft sorrow move through him, like echo of an empty house, sorrow wasn’t the right mood for a wand, so he gently pried it from her fingers and put it away.

“You aren’t a Potter,” he told her softly. “Potter wands are exotic, hardwoods cut out from the heart of jungles and then thrown out to sea in a shipwreck, only to wash up on a British beach. Spear shafts torn out of dead dragons. The bole of a bushwhacked tree recovered from a man’s thigh after the idiot has gone and tore a hole through his ass with it. You’re not like that. You burnt up those wands upstairs.”

He considered the man at the door.

“He isn’t like his family either, much as he’d like to believe it,” he hardly dares whisper to her, though he knows the man hears him. “They used swamp trees, the lot of them. Cottonwood, pin oak, the odd mangroves. He broke those too, his first time here.

“No,” he concludes, walking the aisles, listening amongst the sleeping wands for one restless dreamer. “The wand upstairs would have been your partner, but right now, you need a guardian. One powerful enough to handle you, and whose owner’s concern for your wellbeing might have overridden any incompatibility.”

He studied her, so like and unlike another girl he remembered, and mind made up, pulled a box from the shelf.

“Dorea Black. Killed 1975 by the Dark Lord. Magnolia and the heartstring of a Romanian Ripscale illegally hunted down during nesting season, the eggs were never recovered from the poachers.”

She waved it, and though it was slow, he felt a quiet stirring as the wand awoke again, the unused light of Dorea’s last curse shining greenly from its tip.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all so much for your response! *Hugs* I'm always so excited to see people are actually reading what I write. I mean, like, wow, I actually have an audience! *Dances* Kudos to all of you too, and have a lovely weekend!
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Warning for allusion to rape. Also, racism and bigotry.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When Bellatrix snapped awake, it was to the cold edge of a knife along her throat. Quicker than breath, her magic beat back against her assailant and threw her attacker against the wall, nearly dislodging a mirror. The body hadn’t even fallen to the floor and she was out of bed, wand in hand, summoning the knife to her palm. Her attacker moved to get up, and Bella kicked them in the side. A whispered word, they were immobile.

She stared at her reflection in the blade, seemingly deaf to the groans of her captive.

“Pretty thing,” murmured Bella, preening at her slim reflection. “Pretty pretty, never mind those ugly men in Azkaban, still Father’s lovely little girl. And she has Black eyes, the beauty.” She tossed back her hair, smiled at herself coyly, and slowly licked up the blade, before checking her now distorted image. And still smiling, felt its edge.

“A dull blade, dearie,” she said finally, sitting cross-legged by Heather, breathing heavily at the closeness of her. “See?” she waved it before the girl’s eyes, jabbed it towards them, and the girl flinched.

Bella tsked. “Silly stupid lovely.” The slap that followed hurt more for the unexpectedness of it. She reeled to the side, mouth bleeding.

She still tried to bite Bellatrix as the woman caught her jaw in one hand, before coaxing a bead of blood from her split lip. The woman licked it off her fingertip, consideringly.

“Not so dull as a dinnerknife, bitch-witch, but now, mine…” she ran the blade faster than breath along her palm, and flicked a finger through the blood welling up from the wound. Locking the girl’s jaw open, with her finger’s tight in the corners of her mouth, she slavered the blood along her tongue. Flavours burst abruptly in her mouth—smoked sausage, burnt meats dribbling over with fat, the taste of fire and conquest, and she swallowed reflexively, shocked.

Bella smiled knowingly, drawing her wand tip along the wound to seal it, and she saw, with some surprise, the faint, barely-there lines of old scars.

“Now my blood is sharp, lovely,” she whispered. “Sharp as a sword, and just as deadly, stupid girl.” She cancelled the immobilization. “Up.”

She got up. And tried to kick the bitch in the crotch.

Her foot stopped halfway.

Bella giggled.

“Oh, precious pet,” she murmured lightly, stroking up through the girl’s curls and embracing her. “Are you really so stupid as that yet?”
Heather said nothing.

“You are so stupid,” Bella said, sounding surprised. “Sit down, stupid.”

Grudgingly, she slunk onto the bed. Bella settled behind her and immediately began brushing her hair, which, judging from her sister, seemed to be an endless pastime for Black women.

No wonder Narcissa got along with Lucius.

“You’re stupid,” Bella repeated.

“I get it, I won’t try to kill you in your sleep again,” Heather muttered.

Bella blinked. “Oh no. That was fine.”

Heather turned her head to stare at her, and Bella thwacked the side of her head with the brush.

“Ow!”

“Keep still, silly doll! The braid will be uneven!”

“I tried to kill you,” Heather murmured, “and you’re more worried about a braid.”

Bella giggled. “It happens. Won’t again though. Because you’re—“

“Stupid, yes, I’ve been made aware of the fact,” Heather muttered exasperatedly. “So if it’s not stupid to try killing you, exactly what did I do wrong this time?”

Bella hummed, seemingly ignoring her question, before expertly tying off the braid and turning her around to assess her work. She nodded happily.

“Don’t swallow.”

“What?” she demanded at this non sequitur.

“No swallowing! You don’t know what you’re doing.”

Fuck. She hated BellaSpeak. It was like trying to decode the rants of a crazy person.

Hell. It was decoding the rants of a crazy person.

“The blood,” she exclaimed shakily. “I swallowed your blood.”

“Toujours pur,” Bella told her earnestly, throwing a corset at her head as she dressed herself.

“But why—“

“Old cold blood, sang-froid, not a single stupid Mudblood, and then,” her lips twisted, and she threw a hex. It seemed to slide off her arm and onto the wristband, hidden runes flickering briefly. She examined them, but they were all unfamiliar.

Heather thought through her fear and her caution, the mundane task of dressing made terrible by the difficulty of predicting Bella’s moods.

She’d studied magic. It was less difficult to do in the Muggle world than any of these wizards might have expected, because Muggles knew more about magic than anyone, including them, believed. It was buried in religion, ethnography, myth and history, language. After setting Dudley on fire one
day at school—and some mutual blackmail to the effect of, ‘I don’t tell Dad you beat me up and you don’t say anything about magic’—she’d begun to remember everything they learnt at school. Copious notes were taken on the Chronicles of Narnia in primary, the elder Futhark dutifully copied and memorized during a unit on England’s prehistory. Her parents couldn’t object to her reading Shakespeare—and indeed, they regularly bragged to their friends on their children’s literacy skills, never mind that Heather did Dudley’s homework by way of gratitude for him ‘dealing with’ certain boys in the class.

It never occurred to Vernon or Petunia, for whom Shakespeare was largely unintelligible though undeniably British, that Macbeth, the Tempest, A Midsummer’s Night Dream, could be treasure troves of information to the budding witch.

And from her studies, she knew that consuming another’s physical essence was considered to have great power in some cultures. African tribes ate the body of their conquered enemies, and in doing so, added their power to their own. A South American tribe ate the brains of their dead relatives to ensure they’d always be a part of them. Polynesian aboriginals once had their boys regularly perform fellatio on their elders, in the belief that absorbing semen would strengthen them—and avoided sex with women, since it was thought to drain a man’s energy.

She’d never even considered this. It wasn’t as though she’d had a partner to practise with, or someone she disliked enough to experiment on. She used her own blood and hair regularly—and she’d supposed that from the myths of voodoo dolls, she could use another person’s essence as a focus to control them—but from all the myths, it was the receptive partner who had the power.

“How come I can’t hurt you when you’re the one who lost blood?” she asked slowly.

Bella smiled.

“Because I’m not as stupid as you.”

And wasn’t that a mystery.

The Dark Lord, watching and listening through the mirror, smiled in turn.

Draco hated being a Malfoy.

It surprised him. After all, he’d grown up with the understanding that to be a Malfoy—let alone the Malfoy heir—was a status slightly higher than godhood. The family servants told him as much, so it had to be true. Besides. They revered his father. They revered him. They—who were older than Lucius—older than the Manor—even older, he expected, than that old crypt in France he’d visited on the night he came of age. If these people, who’d ascended to godhood in the common memory, emptied his chamberpots, then he must be greater than a god.

Except godhood sucked.

He didn’t know what he’d expected. He had gone to his father’s meetings since infancy after all. They were boring then. How to manage an estate. Investments. Persuading this or that Ministry Worker to finance this venture, or veto this bill. Acquiring old manuscripts or forbidden spells, most of which were beyond him, to add to the library. Somehow he’d convinced himself that this wasn’t it. That his father censored his schedule especially for Draco. He had to be saving all the dangerous work for when Draco was at school.

Imagining his father’s work was an occupation in itself for Draco. He’d spent hours on it, mostly in
History class, picturing Lucius blackmailing or threatening reluctant goblins into opening up their deepest vaults for him to claim their treasures—fighting his way out of Flamel’s house after securing the man’s research—working rituals by moondark, the corpses of lesser wizards strewn from the trees. He’d been eager, too eager, to join his Father, to prove he was worthy of this legacy—

Only to find the legacy involved paperwork.

Lots and lots of paperwork.

It turned out that what Lucius did when Draco was at school was pretty much the same thing he did the rest of the time. Except less exciting. Sure, there was blackmail—usually of minor government officials, based on who was sleeping with whose wife. Taking resources from the enemy though? It amounted to petty burglary. That was beneath Lucius Malfoy. The job was farmed out to petty thieves like Mundungus Fletcher, who usually didn’t know or care what they were being asked to steal.

And after a lifetime of worshipping his father, he had learnt Lucius Malfoy—the Lucius Malfoy, the heir by direct descent, first son to first son, from Indigenes Malfoy himself—didn’t know much more magic than he did, even if his Father was quicker on the draw. The closest thing to dark magic Lucius had done with him was take a few Muggle girls from a pub to satisfy themselves with—and even though he’d thanked his father for the experience, the whole thing, from the sex to the killing, had been unfulfilling.

He was… disappointed.

And maybe a little angry. Not angry enough to chase Granger out to Australia—the only place where a Mudblood bitch like her could hope to get a job—but enough to be grateful for the Dark Lord’s return.

That was a wizard. A god.

And suddenly, ordinary people—people like Professor Snape, Lupin, old pocked Rookwood—seemed inspired with their own divinity. Or maybe it had always there, and just been hidden. He’d never seen it though. To him, Severus had always just been his old Potions tutor. He’d never seen the man drag a werewolf into dead space and leave it splinched over the arena. Lupin. The man had delivered a letter and a werewolf who had earned Greyback’s ire to Riddle Manor just last evening. He’d always been quiet during his short tenure at Hogwarts, but now, his silence had become less meditative and more predatory. He’d lost that vague air of malaise. His eyes were gold, and his nails thick, in the way of those halfbreeds that were spending more and more time inhuman.

He didn’t want to consider Bellatrix or the girl. He’d never been so afraid of another person in his life. He never wanted to be again.

So he studied, this evening, on the balcony, conscious that tomorrow, the Death Eaters would train. He read through his elementary Runes notes, the very basics, and tried to trace the letters in the air, but nothing happened. He swore, in English and then Latin, leafed through his Arithmancy essay on balancing spell structures based on the metaphysical weight of their components, and then set the whole thing on fire.

He just knew that if Severus, or Heather, or hells, even stupid Granger had tried it, reality would have bent to their will. They were the real thing. They were actually gods. Him? Hells. He was just a bookkeeper. Even fucking Moneta, his old nurse, watching from the shadows of the upper window, could do better.
He got up and kicked his textbooks, and before he could lose his temper and incinerate those as well, banished them to his room. Kicked the stone pillars of the balcony hard enough that he swore he heard a bone snap, and cursed. Why had he wanted to be a dark wizard? He couldn’t even heal a broken toe? He’d get old Bonnie to do it for him, of course. His servants were more powerful than he was. Why the hell did they stay? To laugh quietly at how far his house had fallen? Did they have nothing better to do with their immortality?

He ignored the pain, and climbed onto the balcony, legs hanging over the side. Father had always hated him doing that. Told him he’d fall to his death. It made no sense. He was a wizard, wasn’t he? Or was he? He knew paltry tricks, as much as any Muggle magician described at school. He couldn’t save himself. Why should he?

He stared down, down, to the stone-paved courtyards, and wondered if he could serve the family better as a sacrifice to the wardstones than as a living humiliation.

“Draco,” came the whisper, soft as silk at the doorway, and with a start, he realized she had slunk up on him again. Uneasily, he clambered off the railing with a jolt of pain as his foot struck the ground. He leaned against it, and then gave up on looking like a man. Gave up on everything. He slid down and sat, until she joined him.

“Mother,” he said tersely.

“Draco,” she repeated. “You’ve been practising.” She nodded at the scorch marks on the balcony, and he scowled.

“Practising would suggest it was actually productive.”

“It wasn’t?” she inclined a brow.

He hit the slate floor with his fist, and laid back. “You know it wasn’t,” he snapped. “You watched the whole thing.”

“I did not.”

“Moneta did then. Same thing.”

“Contrary to popular belief, the servants don’t tell me everything that goes on in this house.” She lounged against the railing, languid and lovelier than any woman he’d ever had, and Draco hated her for it. “Tell me,” she threaded her fingers through his hair, and he felt himself unravelling despite himself. “Tell me exactly what the problem is, Draco.”

He blew out exasperatedly and remained stubbornly silent.

“Shall I guess then?” she stroked his jawline, feeling the coarse stubble where Lucius had always been hairless, and he groaned and scrunched his eyes shut.

He hated her.

She laughed, of course.

She counted it off on her long, gracile fingers. “You’re overwhelmed. You’re meeting real wizards for the first time in your life—real wizards that fight and kill and love with purpose. You feel outclassed. You feel like you’re expected to be able to fight with these men as an equal, and know you aren’t their equal. Not yet. Maybe not ever. Am I right so far?”
He breathed shallowly.

“I am,” Narcissa confirmed gently, and resumed stroking his hair.

It was some time before he spoke.

“How does Father do it?”

“He doesn’t,” Narcissa said idly. “Your father is an intelligent man, with many resources at his disposal, and these things carry their own power. It would be good for you to know how to use them. But place him in an arena opposite Fenrir Greyback or Severus Snape, and the man would be torn to bits. He can’t win a fair fight, so he makes it fair for himself by whatever means necessary. You can do the same.”

She was staring down at him intently, as though searching for a certain answer in his eyes, grey as his father’s, and he thought he knew the answer.

“But I won’t,” he affirmed quietly, and he thought he saw a smile quivering at the corners of her lips.

“No?” she asked, and in that moment, Draco wondered if he’d ever really known her.

“No,” he paused, sitting up. “Mother—“ he glanced sidelong at her, the woman who rarely spoke in his father’s presence. “I’ve never seen you cast a spell. A real spell, not petty glamours.”

“Really?” she considered. “Would you like to? See a real spell, I mean.”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?” she pressed, and slowly, he felt her closeness like a fever in his blood.

“You’re like them,” he said wonderingly. “You’re—“

“I’m a Black,” she said softly, silencing him with a finger on his lips. “And so are you. If you want to be.”

He was careful now. He knew the stories about selling your inheritance for a bowl of soup, sacrificing your soul to demons. Even if the devil was your mother, all the more reason for caution.

“Will it revoke my rights as the heir of Malfoy?”

“Would I ever do that to you, my son?” she sighed, sweet as Circe, so he repeated the question.

“No,” she said approvingly. “But my family is matrilineal, so you belong as much to us as to this House.”

“What will it entail?” he asked cautiously.

She looked at him.

“We’ll begin at the next moondark.” She drew a book out from her belled sleeves, and passed it to him. “In the interim—learn these spells. They’ll stand you in good stead in the Dark Lord’s lessons.”

She left through the dark doorway like a luminous shadow. He could still feel the tracks of her fingers through his hair.
Chapter End Notes

Thank you to all my fabulous reviewers! Hugs and lots of Valentine's chocolate to you all! Have a lovely, lovely weekend!
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Warning for attempted rape in this chapter, some non-consensual touching, and allusions to torture.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The basement of Riddle Manor was larger than it had any right to be. The prison began on the opposite end of the hall from the arena, and sunk at least another two or three stories below the house. Voldemort and Bella led her past the first floor, apparently the holding cells for those who were being persuaded to join the cause, or important hostages. The much larger second floor held ordinary prisoners of war. The third--

Voldemort hadn’t released the chains’ hold on her magic any, so she assumed the stink coming up the stairs was perfectly normal.

It was the second floor they stopped at. Bella moved impatiently, plying a thin blade through her fingers as went, turned a corner. Moments later, she heard the sound of a bolt being drawn, and a man screaming.

Not the kind of screaming she expected from the Cruciatuus curse. More the kind she’d heard when Vernon announced Dudley’s new diet. The Dark Lord drew the bolt of another cell, and she tried to ignore the yelling and focus on the issue at hand.

“So this is the bone Fenrir throws to placate us,” he murmured. “Lupin said he was otherwise occupied dealing with infighting and that you had volunteered as my teaching assistant in his stead. Is that true?”

“So true, of course if Lupin said it was true—“

“I do not trust Lupin,” the Dark Lord told him, boredom evident in his tone, “and now, I do not trust you either. I asked—is it true?”

“I don’t know—“

“You’re lying,” the Dark Lord said pleasantly. “No matter. We have means of finding the truth. Please follow me.”

He left the doorway, and the wolfman followed him.

Heather didn’t like the looks of this wolf any more than the other. He was just as unkempt—his hair and beard were a ragged, matted mess of yellow and grey that looked to have been cut with a knife at some point. His yellowed teeth jutted over his lip, and his eyes were the ghost blue of a husky’s. He wore only a loose pair of trousers tied up with a drawstring. His fingers were stubby and clawed, and the hair on his chest and arms and legs and back was straight and coarse as a dog’s. Skinny as a weasel, he slunk out, shoulders hunched, head down, and he stared at her, sizing her up.

She remembered what Aunt Marge had always said about not staring a dog in the eyes unless you wanted a fight, and avoided his glance.
He followed the Dark Lord, and at the prompting of her chains—the silver soles nudging her feet forward—she followed him.

Each block of cells on this floor surrounded a central room, which they entered now.

Heather swallowed.

She recognized some of it from touring the Tower of London. The rest wasn’t difficult to figure out. But Dark Lord moved instead to the comfortable set of chairs at the opposite end of the room. The wolf made to sit, and a bolt of bright light appeared, followed by a yelp.

“You may sit on the floor, dog, but do not presume yourself to be on my level. Miss. Potter,” he gestured to her, and she shakily took a seat in the chair at his side.

“Now, dog. The truth. Have you seen Fenrir Greyback lately?”

He remained silent. The Dark Lord sighed, and touched a hand to Heather’s bindings. Feeling returned like blood reperfusing a limb, all pins and needles.

“Unfortunately, girl, legilimency and veritaserum are all but useless on werewolves, one of the many reasons their testimony is not accepted in court. However, there is one way to verify his word that is uniquely accessible to us. What does he smell like to you?”

She sniffed cautiously, senses newly heightened.

“Not like that. Open your mouth. Lap at the air. You’ve seen snakes girl. I killed yours, remember?”

She glared at him, and tried again, flicking her tongue in and out and working her jaw in a swallowing motion. She felt his presence overshadow hers a moment later. She threw him loose from her mind with a snarl before he came again, holding fast, guiding her consciousness.

*It’s not just the physical motion you’re looking for. Any man can make a mockery of himself behaving like a snake. Try to imagine the shape of a snake’s tongue nestled up inside yours. You’re not a woman, you’re a snake in a woman’s skin. Forms are fluid as water.*

The taste of the man caught on her tongue, sweat-salt and rancid grease and rotting meat, but she couldn’t smell the lie.

The Dark Lord stared at her, unblinking as a snake himself. “I had assumed that your senses would be more acute. Muggles barely smell like anything. After smelling nothing but them for a decade, you should be able to find a needle in a haystack.”

She’d never smelled anything before coming here.

“What did you use your snake for then?” he demanded, and then, unexpectedly, looked pained at her next thought.

“Get the fuck out of my head!”

He backhanded her and hissed as his hand burned an angry red at the contact. “Language, girl. Perhaps your talents lie in a different area, but you will not be using Nagini for… for that.” He removed a wand from his pocket with his unburned hand.

“Now, this man—what is your name again, dog?”

“Susi,” he grunted.
“Susi,” the Dark Lord continued, “has been sent to me with Fenrir’s apologies that he himself was unable to come. Of course, since it is some insult to me for the Alpha to send one of his underlings to help with the lessons, he naturally does not expect the messenger to return in one piece. So the question is, what has this man done to make him expendable?”

Susi was silent.

“Fenrir didn’t tell me, since in the game of knocking off pawns, it’s considered gauche to admit you’re offering up a sacrifice. But Remus Lupin—he was quite talkative on the subject.”

The wolf bristled at the name.

“Oh, yes. It was you and your brothers who decided to massacre that little village, wasn’t it? Knocked on the doors as travelling salesmen to start with. Ran in, killed them husband, wife and children, every one, until blood dripped out every doorway. There were the mangled, half-eaten corpses of toddlers in the playgrounds. Except you were stupid, weren’t you? The whole pack wasn’t a kilometre away at the time, didn’t know you were busy entertaining yourselves, and a squib managed to send off an owl before you gutted her. The Aurors took a good quarter of you that day, didn’t they?”

He was still silent.

“What did Fenrir do with your brothers?”

Still silent. The Dark Lord turned to Heather, smiling viciously.

“Now, girl. Is what I said true?”

She breathed hard, smelling, and the smell was as strong as ever, and it told her nothing. He could be lying, the Dark Lord, and with that, she knew how to get the truth. She took his hand, and met his devil’s eyes, and hating him for it, lifted his hand to her forehead and leapt between them.

She hated them, all of them. They were all so stupid, so easy to play, so weak. Dumbledore alone provided any challenge, and the man had done everything to quash him as though he were one of these bugs, grovelling like the filthy wolf stinking like fear-sweat. He could open him up slowly with a scalpel, tease every artery out from the trappings of its flesh, empty its still-beating heart of blood. A waste though—Severus would have use of a werewolf, and they needed funding, wolf products sold well on the black market—but really, he should send him back alive to raise resentment against Lupin--

A feeling like a shock, and she was back in her body, gasping for breath, with a splitting headache.

“You wouldn’t let me see,” she choked, wondering when her vision had gone black.

“You stopped breathing,” the Dark Lord explained drily. “If you would prefer to end up comatose, however, you have my permission.”

“You never—stop breathing,” she gasped, heart pounding.

“I don’t leave my body completely when I use legilimency,” he told her, eyes glinting strangely.

“How?”

“I have no idea. Your soul is tethered to your body. You can’t just leave it during legilimency.”
“Then what did I just do?”

“A question for another time,” he told her. “For now,” he passed the wand to her, and she saw it was Dorea’s. “I am curious as to what our guest has to say. Please,” he flicked the wand, binding the man to the floor, “Do anything you want to him, short of killing him. I’ll ask the questions.”

“And I’m just supposed to play your sick little game?”

He looked bored again, and she wondered when the expression would become permanent. “He’s a murderer, a rapist, and a cannibal. Much like some of the men who killed her family. And this is the only opportunity I will be giving you to practise your spellwork.”

She threw a cutting hex at his arm, mostly as an experiment, and was unsurprised to find a thin line of blood welling up from her own.

“You see why I cannot practice with you,” he said ironically. “Now, please. Do it. Or I shall call Bellatrix in to do it for me, and she does hate to be interrupted while she’s visiting her favourite prisoner.”

She considered walking out. She considered beating on him, hands and fists. She considered sitting down and curling up into a ball, and crying.

Somehow, she did none of these things.

Bile rising in her throat, she cast the cutting curse again. This time, at the wolf. It was weaker than the first, a bare thread of blood rising up along his chest, and the wolf finally made a sound, that might have been a grunt.

Or a laugh.

It healed before her eyes.

“What was that?”

Heather pursed her lips. “It seems unwise, my Lord, to torture a man and then release him. It occurs to me that this is the way one makes an enemy.”

The Dark Lord looked unimpressed. “Is it? And yet, is that not exactly what you did to those young men the other night. One of them lost an eye.”

“They attacked me first!”

The man leaned back idly. “So that is what it takes for you to use your skills, is it?” he mused to himself. “Very well.” He motioned at Susi, and the binds fell loose.

“What are you doing?”

“Yes, I suppose some precautions should be taken.” A muzzle fit itself over the wolfman’s face, a second spell, and the claws looked much cleaner than they had been a moment before. She glanced back at him nervously, but he wasn’t paying attention.

“Wolf, the young lady requires some persuasion. You are entitled to give it to her by any means you feel necessary. Please note that I shall be taking over your session should I believe you are holding back for any reason.”
The wolf, loosed, advanced on her, and she tripped back behind her chair, her long skirts—all made by alien hands—for once hampering her movements. Susi slunk towards her in a hunting crouch, ghost-blue eyes hypnotic as a snake’s.

“Don’t be afraid, silly girl,” he breathed, low and guttural, as she continued to circle the chairs, like some absurd child playing tag. “It won’t hurt—much.”

He sprang forward, and without thinking, she dropped the wand, and spun her fingers through a warding sign. The wolf hit the ground as though he’d run into a concrete wall, and she felt suddenly exhausted.

“No!” snapped the Dark Lord. “No basic forms! They take too much energy! Use the wand, fool!”

But the wolfman had recovered, and had snatched Dorea’s wand up from the ground.

“Petrificus totalus!” he snapped, casting the spell. Her arms snapped to her sides and she fell backwards. Susi came up to her. Beyond the man, she could see the Dark Lord. Her eyes looked to him pleadingly, but he just continued to watch.

The wolf kicked her in the side, before straddling her. She could smell his fetid breath through the holes of the half-mask that muzzled him.

“There,” he snapped his jaws, once, twice, and she refused to shut her eyes, desperately felt for the Dark Lord through the link they shared. The man’s clawed fingers flickered down her neck, found the ties to her bodice, shredded them. “What’s a pretty bitch like you doing with the Serpent Lord, hmm?” His mouth came close to her ear. “I’d never heard he took women like every other man. They say he sleeps with his snake.”

His hand pressed close into her bodice.

“Are you really a woman? I guess we’ll see—”

She saw red.

He snarled and pulled back, his hand burnt an angry red, with weeping blisters. The jinx broke, and she tried to kick the man off.

“The wand, you fool,” spat the Dark Lord.

She paused to remember the spell, and the wolf smashed his hand against her throat, choking her. She had no words, but the wand came anyways. She slashed down in what could hardly be the right movements, and pulled the Dark Lord, and his hate, out of her memory and into the spell.

*RELASHIO*

The man was flung back. He spun back onto his feet, fingers curving into the claws of the nightmare wolves beyond memory, back elongating into his half-form. She sneered, feeling the well of power that was the Dark Lord lapping at the rim of her consciousness, and before she could think better of it, siphoned off a little of that strength, added it to her own.

“Imperio.”

The spell seemed to slide off his mind like water, but enough of it went through for her to try a hold on the man’s mind. It bucked and slithered in her grasp, and her vision wavered. Wary of losing her consciousness again, she relaxed her hold, spinning off the same jinx he’d hit her with. The petrification bounced off, and he rushed her, slamming her back to the ground before the Dark
Lord’s throne. He scrabbled for the wand and she felt her wrist bend back, break, as he took it from her again, slashed his fingers down her clothes, again, and she desperately pulled at her exhausted magic again to try something, anything.

Abruptly the man was pulled away, and she scrambled backwards, clutching at her gaping vest with her unbroken hand. The Dark Lord had the man grabbed by his greasy yellow hair, with a strength unexpected of his slim frame, and threw him backwards into a wall. The man’s skull cracked against it with a hollow thud. A gesture of the yew wand, and manacles bound him hand and foot. He hung suspended. The Dark Lord removed the mask, and the wolf spat—though even now, he seemed careful to aim anywhere but at the Dark Lord.

“No… Susi,” he addressed the wolf distastefully. “What would you have done to the girl here had I not intervened? Be honest.”

The wolf grinned between his broken teeth. “This your new Bella? Got a way to go.”

“She, fortunately for all mankind, is completely and wholly unique,” the Dark Lord replied drily. “Answer the question.”

“I’d of fucked her, of course,” he shrugged, still openly leering at her where she lay staring back. “Fucking hoity pureblood bitch like that? Most of us don’t get within a foot of their precious majesties. Turned her if I could. Cunt like that needs knocking down a peg or ten, preferably with fists. What is she, Lord? Never heard you taking a concubine.”

“I ask the questions here,” the Dark Lord responded, summoning his chair up before the man on the wall. “Now, girl, come here.” She trembled, but obediently made her way to him and the leering wolf. “What did you do wrong?”

She considered, and he shook his head. “No. Besides the obvious. What did I tell you about werewolves?”

“They’re resistant to legilimency and veritaserum.”

“And from this, you failed to extrapolate that they have resistance to the Imperius curse?”

She swore inwardly, and he laughed at her.

“The mindscapes of other species are often too dissimilar to our own for them to be accurately controlled with mindmagic, and most potions are compounded specifically for human metabolisms. There could be a dosage, or a modification, of truth serum that works, but I’ve never found it worth the time or energy to pursue. Now again. Where did you fail?”

There was really only one thing he was waiting for her to admit.

“I refused to take advantage of an enemy’s weakness, and in turn he exploited mine.”

“Good,” he said with some satisfaction. “In time, I expect you will be able to handle as pathetic a wolf as this without intervention, and using only your wand, but in the interim—you will practise as I direct, and obey my orders.”

She flinched.

“Now,” he settled back in his chair. “What will you do?”
He waited, expectant.

It came to her with an ease that should have horrified her, if her clothes weren’t shredding and her baps gaping out from her underclothes, and the dirty smell of the wolf’s arousal hanging in the air.

“Given what he tried to do to me,” she said slowly, “I think there is only one thing to do.”

Voldemort smiled darkly as she gathered what she needed into a kidney basin. Outside, the prisoners would hear the begging and the screaming, and then the sobbing, before the wolf would stagger out, limp and naked, before the stone-faced girl with the tattered clothing. They’d see what he had lost, and wonder, not for the first time, what new devil the Dark Lord was making.

She barely made it to her rooms before the shock hit. She moved in a daze. Stripped off her torn robes, considered sleeping, slid into the bathtub instead. It was bright and lovely up here, the bath filled with warm water and rose soaps, and she scrubbed and scrubbed with her right hand, until the soap slipped out of her hand under the water and she cried silently. Her left wrist was purpling and swollen.

She laid there, until the water cooled and the soap clung in a greasy film on the surface of the water, and she eased deeper into it, until her head bobbed like a dead thing. She wondered how easy it would be to fall asleep here, for the water to flush into her lungs, driving out all breath and thought and memory. She almost did fall asleep, and the room was dark, when she felt Nagini’s snout tickling along her hip, and heard Bellatrix enter.

“Oh,” she said, lighting the candles. “Oh-oh. The beauty hurt herself.”

She stared back, glassy-eyed. It didn’t matter what she did now. Nothing mattered.

“Poor baby girl,” Bella murmured. “Poor Heather.”

It had been the first time the woman had ever called her by her own name.

The bathwater drained, then refilled. Nagini swam into the tub with her, and Bella forced an awful potion down her throat that made the pain in her wrist ten times worse, and still she was silent. Bella washed her again, and sprayed the scratches down her chest with a disinfectant, and gently dried her, before putting her to bed.

She left the lights on.

Chapter End Notes

Kudos make authors happy! Comments make authors really REALLY happy! Thank you, and have a lovely week!
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Warning for this chapter: Incest, ritual sex, use of drugs in ritual, scarification. Also, sex involving power imbalances.

I probably don't need to mention this again, but portrayals in fiction shouldn't be taken as the ideal for what a relationship ought to be like. Physical intimacy involves trust and intimacy. Ever read that section in Corinthians about love? It could also apply to sex. Sex should involve patience and kindness. If it isn't, your partner needs a kick in the ass, and not for fun.

Also: Please don't actually do drugs. Sue me, I work in health-care, I had to say it.

Thing is: Some things that are taboo in our culture were commonly practised in other cultures, and it's impossible to write a story with an authentically diverse background without incorporating some of these elements—even though, yeah, I find some of them kind of disturbing, and I wrote this.

Anyways--nuff of the disclaimers. Happy reading.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

These days, the Order met in a farmhouse just outside London. It was an estate whose heirs had died in the last war, and its upkeep fell to the Headmaster. The man knew how to manage an investment. He employed some of the best of his Muggleborn students to work the farm after graduation, men and women who might not otherwise find work in Wizarding Britain. And in return, they coaxed from the land plants that needed the hand of Herbology Masters to grow: ghost orchids and helleborine in the woods and by the old quarry site, corpse flowers and rare mushrooms in the greenhouses. The fields were tilled with crops of the more mundane herbs that formed the bases for most potions, and the stables housed what animals Hagrid could not bear to raise for slaughter.

Some ten or so families lived here, along with their children and the temporarily single new graduates. It was joked that the farm was as much a breeding ground for wizards as it was for livestock—though for Severus, like all the others who knew how low their numbers had fallen, and the means the Old Ones had taken in trying to correct it, the joke had always fallen flat.

He wasn’t entirely guiltless in this. The Potions Lab in the basement had originally been run by a single Muggleborn man. When Albus had asked him to suggest an assistant, he’d passed over several equally or more qualified candidates to choose a girl that, while no genius herself, might make a man become one.

They had two children and a third on the way. It was inevitable, in the isolation of their residence, that they’d fall for each other. Easier than breeding dogs.

He’d always learnt his Masters’ lessons well.

Now though, they met in the kitchen. It wasn’t anyone’s first choice for a gathering place—no one wanted to draw attention to a home like this, overflowing with children—but until they could secure
another location near London, this would have to do.

The actual meeting actually had no real interest for Severus. It was all the usual—the Weasley woman’s usual fracas about bringing children into the war, sniping between their wolves and the Selwyn bitch about ‘how, exactly, these halfbreeds helped the war effort,’ discussions about monitoring the Ministry, plans for raids that elapsed into arguments. How the hell anything would get accomplished without the Headmaster’s intervention, he had no notion. If either the Death Eaters or the Order ever met a band of soldiers trained in conventional Muggle warfare, they’d be dead in an hour.

It was only afterwards, when the rabble left and the door closed with a silencing spell, that Severus relaxed.

Marginally.

Because it was impossible, really, to relax with a man who d était almost killed you—by accident—sitting across the table and eying you like he’d like to try it on purpose this time—and get it right.

“You smell wrong.”

“It surprises me you can smell anything through your own… odour.”

Lupin had never risen to the bait. His naris flared.

“No,” he said with that decisiveness that had grown since he’d begun to fight his way through the packs. “Blood and silver and wolfsbane—and kin, but diseased,” he looked pensive. “Fenrir bit you, I heard.”

Severus smiled viciously. “Strange, the rumours one hears.”

“He came back torn in half and knitted back together. The healers were up for nights stabilizing him.”

“I thought you were one of their healers.”

Remus’ smile now was almost as vicious. “Fenrir doesn’t want me near him when he’s well, let alone otherwise.”

“It seems to be a common sentiment,” Severus replied drily, hating the mid-afternoon sunlight that even half-filtered through the blinds, left a bright spot at the centre of his vision.

“You smell like a vampire to me,” Remus stared at him intently, his gold gaze unshakeable. “Except,” he sniffed, and froze.

Severus stared back, unblinking, and as luck would have it, this was the moment Dumbledore chose to enter.

“Professor,” Lupin addressed the man, “does the Order condone one of its members to use dark magic involving the blood or bodies of magical beings?”

The Headmaster sat down and regarded both men tolerantly.

“Remus, consider what you are suggesting,” he told the man tiredly, “and whether it is really of any benefit to anyone present.”

The man’s lips drew into a thin line, but he held his peace. Perhaps dealing with the ambiguity of
werewolf politics had changed Lupin for the better.

“Now. What do we know of Heather Potter, and how can we extract her from Riddle Manor?”

“I don’t know how easy it will be to get her out, or if it’s even advisable right away,” Severus began slowly.

The headmaster’s eyebrows rose. “Explain.”

“Riddle Manor is a fortress. It’s protected by Fidelius, wards, dark ritual. Anyone who has ever been killed there has had their blood offered up to the House, their body buried along the perimeter and their souls tethered to the fence. There’s a fence of bones. Even if someone could get through the Fidelius, they’d have to break the Wall of Souls—and no White Wizard has the heart for that. They may as well shield have shielded themselves with children.”

“This isn’t a frontal assault though, it’s an extraction.”

“I’m explaining why I can’t just walk out the front door with her, Lupin.”

“I’ve been there,” the wolf murmured.

“We know. Your infrequent visits make you an expert on the subject.”

“Severus,” the Headmaster warned.

Snape hunched over moodily and considered ripping out both their throats.

“The House or the Wards are conscious, to an extent. They’d probably restrict her from leaving, or at the very least, tell him if it was happening. She might break the wards herself—she’s willful enough—but even then, he has her chained with goblin steel keyed to him. It’s probable she can’t go more than short distances away from him because of it.”

“Then what happens when he leaves the house?” mused Lupin.

“Nagini,” Dumbledore murmured. “Or some other talisman of his power, like enough to him to substitute in his absence.”

Oh. A Horcrux.

“Can we remove the goblin steel?” continued Lupin.

“Only if you kill every goblin involved in its making,” muttered Severus, and Lupin gave him an exasperated look.

“Perhaps the Headmaster knows some means besides that.”

“Regrettably,” the Headmaster murmured, “I do not. Chains like the ones you’ve described are forged so rarely, their properties are obscure. And the goblins guard their secrets.”

“What about asking the girl to take them off herself?”

Severus rolled his eyes. “I’m sure she’s tried. Again: they’re keyed to the Dark Lord.”

“Could we take the snake with her?” Lupin suggested.

Severus pinched his nose.
“Have you *met* Nagini?”

“It is a possibility,” Dumbledore considered, “though preparation for the animal’s containment would have to be taken. It has killed as many Order members as any Death Eater.”

“It could be killed once we took Heather through the wards though.”

“I’m uncertain of that as well. It’s possible the chains could return her right back to the Manor without some piece of Voldemort to anchor her.”

“So. We take her out with the snake. By Apparition or Port-key?” asked Remus.

Severus sneered. “As you are undoubtedly aware from your multiple visits, Lupin, Port-keys can’t be activated inside the grounds at all. There are only two apparition sites I’m aware of. The main one is closely guarded, but the second is only used by his more experienced Death Eaters. It would be ideal. Although,” he paused, “I’m not certain we should be doing this at all now.”

Lupin looked incredulous, though Dumbledore’s expression just told him to continue.

“I thought she’d be dead within a day. I looked everywhere for her, used my every contact. I thought she *was* dead after the first month. Turned out he’d buried her under Fidelius with Narcissa Malfoy.

“Whatever he has planned for her, he’s not treating her like a captive. He’s treating her like a pureblood hostage, or a new recruit.”

Dumbledore seemed ashen at this pronouncement. “And knowing this, you believe we shouldn’t rescue her?”

“What will you do with her when we bring her back?” Severus demanded. “You can’t send her back to the Muggle world. I don’t know why, but the Dark Lord is obsessed. He’s possessive of her as he is of Nagini. He’ll hunt her down, and she’ll either end up living as a fugitive or be dragged right back into the same trap, under tighter restraint.”

“We would bring her to Hogwarts,” Albus said definitively. “It’s the seat of my power. And Minerva’s. Voldemort doesn’t dare assault it.”

“And what then? Enroll her in classes? Have her teach Muggle Studies? She’s already half a dark witch, Professor!”

“And you are a dark wizard. People can be remarkably blind to orientation if a person is discreet,” the Headmaster told him. “And if she is already so dark, all the more reason to bring her home sooner. We can’t give Voldemort a second Bellatrix, not one with so many reasons to fight on our side.”

“You’re assuming she wants to fight at all.”

“Would Voldemort give her any choice in the matter?”

“I’d think he’d try to protect her, like he does Nagini.”

This time, it was Lupin who spoke.

“I disagree.”

Snape opened his mouth for some snide comment, then thought better of it.
“I delivered one of Fenrir’s wolves who was due for punishment to the Dark Lord. He returned yesterday, lacking some vital parts.”

“No great loss in a wolf,” muttered Snape.

“In this case, I’d agree with you. What unnerved me was his mental state. The man was a rapist, and a cannibal, a coward—but a cocky one. He was almost catatonic. We found traces of the Cruciatus lingering in his aura, but not enough to account for that kind of psychological damage. The castration was almost surgical—none of the messes we usually see come out of warzones—but we think they did it when he was awake. He was still begging for them to stop when he came.”

“It usually is done when they’re awake. The precision suggests restraint on their part at least.”

“His head was shaved bloody. Someone branded the marks for ‘open’, and ‘pain’ into his scalp and beside his eyes. He was almost leaking thoughts.”

Oh.

“Torture in cold blood,” the Headmaster murmured. “Severus, you see why we need to bring her out of there.”

“It wasn’t in cold blood,” Lupin interrupted. “Thanks to the runes, we could see his memories. He tried to rape her right in front of the Dark Lord, and he stood by and watched it happen.”

Oh.

The bloodlust surged up in him, and the sun shone ten times brighter and seemed to hurt his skin like burning oil as it did. He could hear their hearts, a rushing turbulence loud as forest fires, and his own seemed to stop in his chest. His gums were itchy and dry, and he fought the urge to tear space open right here and now, to drag his masters into the void and hope they got lost there.

He forced it all back into the closet where he kept his secrets.

“We’ll have to take her back then,” he agreed. “There is a branding ceremony coming up for the new recruits. She seems to be attending the formal ceremonies now. I’ll see if I can’t get her alone. Do we have means of controlling Nagini?”

“None beyond the usual. If you can manage to bring the snake through the apparition portal to the gates of Hogwarts, I can have the Order ready to try to contain her once she arrives.”

“He’ll know it was me. You’ll lose your spy,” Severus regarded him cautiously. “Why are you so willing to give up my intelligence for her? What kind of asset are you planning to make of her? A figurehead for your new Order? You don’t really believe that prophecy? The Girl-Who-Lived?”

“If all goes well, I hope she can enjoy some anonymity,” Dumbledore told him. “She was the daughter of two of my best students, and I’ve known the Potters since time immemorial. Even if she does have a role to play in the war to come—why can’t I be acting in her best interest?”

Because, Headmaster. I know you too well. And you always act for the greater good, and damn the best interests of any single person.

“Very well, Headmaster;” he affirmed, and then, that was all.
It was twilight. There was no moon

He’d barely stumbled back from training. The older Death Eaters seemed to take great pleasure in beating the shit out of the new recruits. Lucius hadn’t been there, of course. Mulciber and Jugson had done it, and though they’d used no spells he was unfamiliar with, between their firing speed and their skill in brawling, they’d wiped the floor with him and Greg. He’d planned to wash off the blood and filth in the bath before taking a quick rest, and practising his duelling, again.

Instead, he found his mother in his rooms, dressed in a sheer shift and hair loosed to her waist. The bath was already steaming, but all the herbal oils had been removed and a bar of plain goatsmilk soap set out. A matching shift lay on the bed.

“Oh.” He remembered.

A slow nod from his mother, and her head inclined to the bath.

He’d been washed by his mother before—usually after those training sessions when Bella cursed him bloody, or, recently, when the Potter girl had burned him. Having servants to bathe you was a luxury, having your mother to bathe you, a comfort. He knew enough from talking to Zabini that this wasn’t exactly normal, and from Zabini, had learnt not to mention it. He didn’t think Lucius would like it. But then, he was caring less and less for what his Father thought or did.

He emerged from the bath, and she combed his hair and wove it into a short braid, secured with plain cotton twine. She laid him down on the bed and rubbed oil into his skin, head to foot, until his skin gleamed supple in the candlelight, and then, she clothed him in the shift, and they left the Manor, barefoot.

The lights were on in the East Wing. Father must be busy with a prisoner tonight. His mother saw his glance, and her lips twisted.

“Yes. Your father rather strongly suggested to one of those Muggle cows she tour the estate. I imagine she’s seeing the inside of his chambers as we speak.”

He’d never heard her openly acknowledge his father’s use of Muggle women. He opened his mouth to deny it, and she laughed.

“Don’t be foolish, boy.” She swung before, clutching his forearms, so they stood face to face, close as lovers, her lips hovering above his ear. “You think I never knew?” she asked, in dangerous hush that reminded him so well of her sister. “Every time your father defiled himself with one of those vermin, I knew. Every time you, my son, dirtied yourself and wasted your seed on those scum—I knew.”

“Mother,” he breathed, but her eyes were the blue of the sky reflecting from a blade. “It didn’t mean anything.”

“Would it mean anything if you used a dog in that manner?”

“Mother!” he exclaimed.

“Well?”

“It’s not the same—“

“It’s exactly the same,” she explained, coolly. “It’s bestiality. They’re animals. We do not use animals in that way. Maybe, right now, while you and I are in our infancy, they seem like us, but
you’ll see them rise and die like flies. Cygnus, your grandfather, was almost two and a half millennia old when I was born. How many of their lives, do you think, made up his?”

He was silent.

“And what, Draco, do you think will happen if you father a bastard on them?” she asked, cradling his head in her hands. “Whatever lifespan your child might have had will be split. Halfbreeds never live as long, and the lives of those Mudbloods are brief as their parents. Our race has diminished enough. I’d kill your child in a bitch’s womb and give it up to the Manor before I’d let it be born,” she told him, and he believed it.

They walked to the Manor’s Circle, a ring of stones that left a hole inside the wards, and his mother pulled an old comb out from her pocket—antler ivory, chipped and yellowed with age. The Portkey. A touch and a word, and he felt that horrible churning sensation as they ripped through void and back again.

When they set down, it was so black he could have sworn he was still in the void, though the clear coldness of the place, the crush of snow under his freezing feet, told him otherwise. His mother didn’t seem to have any difficulty moving at least. He guided him to a stone structure, high as his chest, and bade him climb atop it. He obeyed, and stripped off his shift at her bidding, before had him lie there on his back, and bound him hand and foot.

It was only then she lit a fire, and he saw they were not alone.

Bellatrix stood before him, monstrous in her nakedness. Her years in the prison had devastated her body. Her face was loose as a middle-aged Muggle woman, her heavy baps swung low as a hag’s, the nipples dark as plums. Her body was disfigured with bindrunes—wards, he realized in shock—from the notch of her neck to her navel. Her stomach was full and heavy as a wolf gorged itself on corpses and he was thankful he could not see lower. He could sit up through, a little. Enough to see where he lay.

His heart beat faster.

It was a stone cairn, the kind of place where the old witch-tribes of Britain and Gaul had once sanctified the land with blood. Someone had done it again tonight. He hadn’t smelt it. The bowels strung up between the trees had frozen solid, the blood cold on the snow.

If Bella was cold, she didn’t show it. She wore the blood of her victims proudly, her face anointed with it. His mother had disrobed in the dark, a vision next to nightmarish Bellatrix, pale as the moon, slim as a willow switch, and her sister marked her face quickly.

“Draco, son of Narcissa,” Bellatrix intoned with hushed excitement. “Why do you come to the altar today?”

He swallowed, met his mother’s eyes. They prompted him.

“I come seeking power,” he said in a weak voice. Bellatrix giggled, but he was too cold and afraid to feel any real anger.

“And Draco, dearest,” she said, bubbling over with eagerness, “is he willing to endure anything to get this power?”

He remembered when Zabini had come back after his majority, the way he seemed to barely suggest a thing for a woman to climb into his arms, and the way he looked after that, sated, brimming over with magic—the pale, drained girls collapsing happily into unconsciousness.
Remembered Bellatrix’s last lesson, her soul flaying open his mind, her dagger his chest, and his stomach seizing.

“Yes,” he affirmed.

The smile on Bella’s face was ghastly.

“Yes,” he affirmed.

Then this evening, we bring our son to our family, sacrifice him to himself in the way of the Allfather, that his blood might wake the souls in this our sacred place, and that they might take favour on him. Cissy, hold him down, I’ll start at his back.”

His mother handed him a steaming bowl, smelling of psilocybin, ambergris, blood, other things he couldn’t identify, things he shouldn’t be drinking. He took a long draw from the shallow dish before setting it back in her outspread hands. She tipped it back, and only then, he saw it was the cracked half of a skull.

He remained composed, he remained a Malfoy.

Until his aunt drew out a bone-handled stone blade from midair and hoisted herself onto the cairn behind him, seizing the scruff of his neck—his mother’s head settling between his bound thighs, her mouth swallowing his prick to the root in the moment Bella made the first cut, bone-deep. His mother pulled off, and the blade carved a second line in his skin, deeper yet, as though his aunt was trying to whittle his bones while they were still in his body. And again, again, quicker, his cock hardening despite the burn of the cold, the blood weeping down his back, and his mother climbed up and straddled him down, moving in tandem with her sister’s knife, and that was when he lost his composure. And screamed.

He threw himself back on the knife, thrusting against Narcissa, and screamed again, as it drove the upward cut of Mannaz deep as his lungs, and Bella laughed.

The ground echoed it from every ancient grave, the sound knocking about the hollow spaces of skulls and tombs, buried deep and fast as blood. It returned to her, redoubled, and when she laughed again, there was the ungodly echo of every Black that had ever been in that laugh.

She loved herself, loved the place that was her body, the safety of knowing the seat of her family was in every single cell of her, cozied away in the nooks of her joints and the seams of her eyes. No one could take them from her any more than they could take herself from herself. She was her own talisman to raise the dead. And tonight, she raised her father into herself, and wielded the knife.

The boy would be a wizard, or he would die. The wards of this place would guarantee it. And for Bella, all was right in the world.

Chapter End Notes

Happy Weekend everyone! Feedback always appreciated! Ooh, look at that pretty button down there. ‘Review’? Wonder what that means. Maybe we should press it!

Muhahaha!
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

As usual, the viewpoints of particular characters are not those of the author. Heather has a somewhat discriminatory (though sadly popular) attitude towards people with different 'cognitive styles' in this chapter. If I'm trying to write a normal girl who grew up with a sense of entitlement, this seems accurate.
Oh, and there's blood and corpses and catfights.

In case you haven't copped on yet... I'm not J.K. Rowling.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Unlike in Malfoy Manor, where she’d been sequestered in her room the whole time, there was nothing stopping Heather from exploring Riddle Manor.

She just wasn’t sure she wanted to.

Bellatrix, usually awake before her, invariably left her ‘work’ to do on the long table by their window. Usually that work was legitimate—a book of spells to be learnt, an etiquette pamphlet to memorize—though, as could be expected with Bella, it often took a turn into the bizarre and frankly unsettling. She’d never forget waking up one morning to the table dripping blood, the partially dissected corpse of a house-elf gaping open at her next to a blood-spattered anatomy text.

Bella’s explanation, when could be roused from the armchair where she’d dozed off mid-thoractomy? The house-elf was easier to obtain than a Muggle.

“And you really need to know where all the squirmy bits are if you’re ever to kill efficiently,” she explained charitably. She pulled a gory scalpel out from her hair where she’d stashed it like a pencil, and passed it to her, along with a spattered anatomy text. “Go on, dolly, the corpses won’t clean themselves, you know.”

She’d made to stab the bitch with her own blade, but her arm stopped mid-swing and toppled her over, much to Bella’s amusement. She hadn’t been forthcoming with an explanation for why drinking her blood prevented Heather from injuring her—not that Heather expected to understand any explanation Bella gave, but some clue, at least, would have been nice.

It was the Dark Lord who’d finally explained it, one day, in the torture chamber that served as their classroom.

“Clever Bella,” he smiled to her scowl, as they sat on the armchairs following a spell-casting session that had left both Heather and her opponent bloody. She held his kerchief to her nose to staunch the blood.

“What’s zo clever?” she honked through a pinched nose.

“It always amazes me, how people tend to underestimate that woman’s skills just because she doesn’t think or communicate in a conventional way.”

“You mean zshe’s crazzy,” Heather said derisively.
“Crazy is not, nor should be used, in the pejorative.” The man’s lips thinned. “The Oracles of Delphi prophesized the fall of kings and sniffed methane gas from a natural fault to aid their divination. Doubtless, they were ‘crazy’. They were also effective. Just because you can’t understand someone doesn’t mean there’s nothing to be understood—only that it’s beyond your intellect, or empathy, for this time.”

Heather gaped. The Dark Lord sipped his tea.

This place was crazy.

The man who just spent the last hour having her and one of his lesser servants hex each other by way of discipline—or more likely, entertainment—was lecturing her on empathy?

“Just because I lack it does not mean I don’t understand the general principle of the thing,” was the Dark Lord’s response. She groaned and clutched her head.

“How do you do that?”

He viewed her coolly. “Do you have to broadcast your thoughts so loud? Even if we weren’t linked, I’d know what you were thinking. Your eyes may as well be loudspeakers.”

“How do you even know what loudspeakers are?” she demanded, and then, “do you mean anyone can read my mind?”

“To answer your first question, I gleaned the information from your mind,” the girl’s mouth snapped open, “and before you can complain about the invasion of privacy, please keep in mind that it’s two-sided.”

“I haven’t been reading your mind!”

“No. Not yet,” he mused. “If yours wasn’t so over-brimming with your own adolescent emotions, maybe it would leave space for something to slip by. As it is, I dare say I’ll have a few more years of listening to teenage angst before this bond becomes more reciprocal.”

Years?

She managed not to tear up at that. The Dark Lord deliberately misinterpreted the question.

“Yes. Years. You need to learn to structure and contain your thoughts so that they don’t leak out everywhere. The only thing preventing every other man in this Manor from knowing what you think at a glance is this,” he fingered the chains on her hand.

She didn’t snatch her hand back. He couldn’t slap her for it, but he could make someone else do it, and she was bloodied enough today.

“The Goblin Steel blocks whatever magicks I ask it to,” he explained to her unspoken question, caressing her palm as he knew it annoyed her. “Legilimency, spellwork—your own or anyone else’s, though I’ve allowed Bella a loophole.”

Great.

“It can’t stop physical attacks or poisons. As a Parselmouth, most of the latter should not be of any concern. The former,” his mouth pursed, “may prove to be of some difficulty. You will have to establish yourself as being too strong to attack, or else, a lovely girl like you…” he left the thought hanging as he leaned closer to tease a stray curl of her hair, and she pulled away, shoving her
irritation at him violently.

He laughed.

“So you’re not hopeless.”

“Why can’t you just say I’m off limits?”

He eyed the distance between them. “Why should I?”

Her stomach curdled with indignation. But she considered the option anyway, for a moment, and felt hot shame in remembering the bodies of her family as his men pulled her away. She felt his smile through the memory.

“Never be ashamed to survive,” he recommended, easing back in his seat.

She was silent. And continued to drink her tea.

“How does the Goblin Steel work?” she asked, more to redirect the conversation than anything else. The man seemed amused at this question.

“Are you sure you want to know?”

“Unlikely, given that response, but now I’m curious. I noticed runes when a spell hit it. How does it work?”

The Dark Lord stared into the dregs of his cup. “Goblins don’t execute or kill their murderers and rapists like most societies. Instead, they make use of them. Their criminals put their lives into the Steel.”

Heather would have snorted, but she didn’t trust her nose to not start bleeding again. “Work detail. That’s not bad.”

The Dark Lord smiled. “You misunderstand me, girl. They put their lives into the Steel.”

“They kill them?”

“Their lives, not their deaths. There’s a difference, you know. They bind their life force to the Steel through the runes. Any spell that hits you…” he shrugged. “well, the criminals get to go back to their daily lives, with one difference. They never know when they’ll break a bone or just drop dead for no reason.”

Her mouth gaped. He snapped his fingers to call a house-elf. “Giblet, more tea please. Possibly some smelling salts for Miss. Potter.”

She swallowed. “Why not wear one yourself then? You’ve more cause for it than I on the battlefield, surely.”

He shrugged. “The goblins have been leaving failsafes in every piece they’ve produced for the last millennium. If I wore their Steel, it wouldn’t be long before one of them keyed the failsafe, blocked my magic or strangled me at an inopportune time, and hauled me in for the Ministry bounty. You, on the other hand,” he gestured, “are an unknown, and none of them realize we have this Steel since Dolohov dug it from a barrow on the Continent. You’re perfectly safe.”

Heather supposed her nonchalance at wearing a dead woman’s jewelry was a sign she was adjusting.

“Bella’s blood though?”
“Hmm? Yes—“ he put down the cup. “Most families curse their bloodlines to prevent their heirs from murdering each other—with magic, at least, which is really the only respectable way to do it.”

Heather did snort now, and a spurt of blood spattered into her tea. The Dark Lord chose to ignore the rudeness.

“It’s a necessity when you inherit via birth order.” Another swallow. “Though, usually it doesn’t work unless there’s a close relation, or both have undergone ritual to become attuned to one another’s magic. Given that most of the remaining Blacks avoid ritual, the woman can torture her relations to her heart’s content.”

“Her blood attuned me to her magic.”

“That, and living in close proximity to both her and Narcissa for the past few months. Using Dorea Black’s wand probably increased the effect.”

“Is that why you and I can’t use magic against each other?” she asked hesitantly. It was the first time either had broached the subject.

“Something like that,” he responded cryptically. “Now, kindly read your occlumency texts this evening.”

The or else was implied.

“I’m trying to,” she hedged, “but I’m not sure I can understand the theory without seeing it in practice.”

“Will wonders never cease?” the man laughed and steepled his fingers, “is the Mudblood actually asking me for lessons?”

She really didn’t want lessons in the mental arts. All of Bella’s textbooks seemed to graphically depict what could go wrong during legilimency in gleeful detail—exploding eyeballs, the webbing of the mind torn and leaking out the ears, lobotomized retards chewing on their own hands.

“She’s offered her services, hasn’t she?”

She gave him a desperate look. The day she let Bella into her head would be the day she got a lithium prescription.

He tapped irritably. “I suppose you’re right, Bella does not make an ideal teacher—though not for the reasons you seem to think,” he sneered distastefully. “Her approach to the mind arts is too individualized for you to abstract general principles from it. I can think of one other teacher, and I have no doubt he’ll be over the moon when I order him to stare into your pretty green eyes for hours on end.”

For once, the man sounded as unhappy about it as she felt.

“Why can’t you teach me? I mean, you’re in my mind all the time anyways.”

“That is precisely why I can’t teach you,” he murmured. “Conventional occlumency isn’t going to block our link. It’ll teach you to defend yourself against others, and to be quiet, both of which are worthy goals.”

She hadn’t pursued the issue.
Today, at least, seemed to be a holiday. Bella had left late yesterday afternoon and hadn’t come back to sleep. And while Heather would like to have believed it was her doing—Bella had tried to take her blood the day before and they’d had an awful fight over it, complete with hair-pulling and scratching—she knew that the fight, if anything, had only excited her. Why else would Bella resort to physical violence when it only took a word for the chains to immobilize her? The older woman had forced her blood down Heather’s throat again, after pinning her down, before taking a vial of blood from a long scratch she’d made down the girl’s neck.

She’d called for Nagini’s help. The snake hadn’t even stirred from the fire. Bella had just laughed.

“Silly, stupid girl. Just because you speak the same language doesn’t mean you can order everyone about,” she giggled, and then whispering, intimately, into the shell of her ear, “I’m training a dog right now. He doesn’t obey either. The trick is, the bond.” She raised her voice. “Nagi! Na-gin-nie! Come come, come to Mother Bella, loveling!”

She’d watched astonished, as the snake had moodily unfurled her coils and slowly ambled over to them.

“That’s a lovely thing, yes, she is,” the woman murmured, rubbing the underside of the creature’s jaw and lifting her great skull atop Heather. “Now, hold the girl in place for a bit, she’s been naughty.”

“Nagini, please move off me and bite that bitch.”

The snake’s tongue flicked out irritably. “She sacrifices others to my appetite,” the snake told her blandly. “All you have to offer is sulkiness.”

The girl hissed. “I’m a Parselmouth! Doesn’t that count for SOMETHING?”

The great serpent adjusted to wrap her coils firmly around her, before turning her head to stare her in the eyes. “You’re a hatchling,” she hissed, constricting her coils, and for the first time, Heather felt something like fear before a snake. “Barely broken off your eggtooth. I could swallow you too simply—” and she unhinged her jaw so that Heather could look down into it, into void, and the girl flinched.

“Except,” Nagini paused, “you are mine,” she snapped her jaws shut, her coils pulsing once more to punctuate this fact, “my warm thing, my landscape, mine—“ and again, as with the Dark Lord, she felt a mind insinuate itself into her, covetous and claiming, familial and alien at once. Her vision blurred, she saw through the floorboards, red and black, felt her hearts vibrating between her two bodies, and somehow, loosed her coils and walked to the bed, her other self following.

She slumped down, dizzy, when they dissociated into two minds moments later. Bella was long gone.

“You see,” Nagini told her, cradling her body.

She didn’t want to see. And she did.

And there was evening, and there was morning, and still no Bella. Perhaps she was off sleeping with the Dark Lord, or the prisoners, or even her husband. Maybe she was dismembering helpless Muggles, or killing the Ministry police. All seemed equally likely. For now though, Heather was tired of reading books.
She was going to see the rest of the Manor today.

Really.

Except there was the minor risk of running into God knew what servants of the Dark Lord, werewolves, the Dark Lord himself—

She glanced back at where Nagini was lazily sleeping by the fire, which was all she ever seemed to do in the winter anyways.

Why she had ever expected a magical snake to have any more initiative than the regular kind, she hadn’t the slightest clue. Ah well, it worked to her benefit. She opened the door, stealthily as possible, and glanced back.

Nagini’s second eyelids were open, and staring at her.

Daringly, she slipped out.

The eye closed.

She breathed a sigh of relief.

“Miss?”

The resulting scream was probably loud enough to wake the house. She whirled with her fist, kicking out at the same time. She made contact, the Steel for once an asset as it smashed into her assailant’s face. The woman went flying through the air and landed on the ground. Heather rushed her, pinning the bitch before she could get up, knocking the wand from her grasp, before fishhooking her legs through theirs and pressing the heel of her hand against the woman’s throat.

“Miss,” she gurgled, looking panicked.

Briefly, it did occur to her that people trying to kill or otherwise incapacitate her usually didn’t bother with an honorific, but if they did, it would probably be a great way to get her to let down her guard. She kept the pressure against the woman’s throat, briefly diverting her attention to send a pulse to Nagini. The woman almost got loose with the brief dizziness that accompanied the effort.

Of course the effort was useless as the snake. It was easier to get Dudley out of bed in the morning than call Nagini away from her fire.

Footsteps came running down the hall, presumably towards the disturbance. She hauled the woman up by her throat and tossed her at the pursuers, before slipping back in and shutting the door in their faces.

She latched it, for all the good that would do against wizardry, but then, she doubted anyone would want to deal with whatever traps Bella might have set up for undesired guests. She sat down, back to the door, listening as bits of conversation filtered through—

“—What on earth?”

“—Alecto’s going to kill her, can’t believe—“

“Well, what did you expect?... vicious little cunt to begin with... and the Master gave her to Bellatrix! The Black bitch probably has her trained to kill on sight by now—“

A choked voice. “… not her fault…”
“Open up!”

She didn’t have to answer that.

The door blew open, sending her sprawling, and in marched a very irate looking black haired woman, followed by an older lady with greyed, wavy hair and a nasty set of welts on her face just beginning to bruise. Heather got up, ducked her chin and turned sideface, shoulder forwards, eyes glancing warily one to the other.

“Oh, for Herpo’s sake,” the younger woman snapped, casting a spell. It glanced harmlessly off the Goblin Steel, and Heather spared a twinge of pity for whatever criminal was sharing her bad day right now. “Hells, doesn’t this thing work?” she shook her wand. “Nagini? Nagini, restrain her,” she yelled.

The snake didn’t deign to answer her. Apparently she didn’t sacrifice regularly enough for that.

“Fucking useless snake—“

“Alecto,” the woman reproved, and then, very unexpectedly, sat down in one of the plushy armchairs where Bella liked to read stories to Heather at night. They weren’t very nice stories. “I’m sorry for giving you the scare, Miss. Potter.”

Alecto looked disgusted at this apology.

“Who are you?” she asked warily, not leaving her corner. Alecto sneered.

“This, Miss. Potter, is the best and only healer we’ve got at the moment, who you so thoughtfully tried to kill a moment ago—“

“I wasn’t trying to kill anyone,” she muttered.

Alecto huffed. “Could have fooled me, look at her—“ she made to turn the woman’s face so that Heather could see it more clearly, but the Healer batted her hand away.

“Enough, Alecto. No harm done, I’m sure the girl didn’t mean to do it.”

Alecto’s black eyes burned into her like she thought otherwise.

“Now, would you please step outside the room? I’m sure that Miss. Potter and I will be fine.”

Alecto took a step towards the door, thought better of it, and then stepped in front of Heather, brandishing her hand like she meant to take her eye out with it.

“If you ever set hand on her again,” she spat, “I’ll rip you limb from limb with the wheel downstairs. See if your Goblin Steel saves you from that.”

She strode out, shaking with anger, and slammed the door. Heather watched her leave, considerably rattled.

“Never mind her,” murmured the witch. “Children.”

Taking a closer glance, she didn’t see much similarity between Alecto and this woman, but maybe that was because Alecto’s face so twisted and peevish. “You’re related?”
The old witch smoothed out her shapeless grey robes. “My daughter.”

“Oh,” Heather realized, studying the woman’s bruised face and feeling guiltier by the moment. She’d split the woman’s lip, and the edge of the rings had actually flayed open the skin on her cheeks. She would have killed anyone who’d done that to her mother—except she hadn’t yet, had she?

“I’m sorry,” she offered awkwardly. The woman shrugged it off.

“I’m five hundred years old, girl. I promise, I’ve had worse.” Her black eyes, sharp as Alecto’s, eyed her up. “For that matter, so have you. Hand me that mirror.”

Obediently, she took the mirror down from the wall. The woman considered her ripped face for a moment, then ran her wand—a lithesome willow switch—over the cuts. They sealed themselves, and she set aside the mirror.

“Could you—could you please teach me that?” she asked.

The woman blinked. “Healing spells?”

“Please. It would seem so much more useful than all of—this,” she gestured vaguely at the various manuals of medieval torture and dark grimoires that Bella kept at hand, and the woman looked a little tired.

“I’m not sure.”

“I’m sure the Dark Lord would find it useful for someone else to be trained as a Healer.”

“He would,” she agreed. “Actually, that’s exactly why I’m here—to assess your chances of learning the healing arts—but having just met you, I’m not sure you’re at all suitable.”

“Why not?” Heather demanded.

The woman gestured at her face ironically.

“I didn’t mean to! I’m sorry!”

“Oh, I don’t doubt you are, girl,” the woman said, not unkindly, “but the areas of magic open to a witch are largely limited by her temperament. Most dark wizards can’t heal—most fighters in general are sloppy at it. The Arts demand too much passion, aggression, risk. A Healer would stop and ask questions before attacking. A dark witch would attack and ask questions later.”

“You must not know many Healers who’ve had to bunk with Bellatrix,” she muttered.

“No. But I’ve known plenty of dead ones,” she said quietly. “One way isn’t better or worse than the other. It’s simply a personal bias that shapes your magic. You’re young yet, it could still change in the next thirty years…” her hand came forward, and felt the long rent Bella had left in her skin the night before. “Still, you’ve gone through a traumatic event. It tends to leave a lasting impression.”

She hated them for this, hated even more that she couldn’t even guess what effects it would have on her.

“What makes a witch dark anyways?” she demanded. “What’s white magic? What does the Ministry use, and why have I never seen the Ministry before? I’ve tried asking, but no one tells me anything!”

The woman had rummaged through her robe pockets and brought out several bottles of stuff, along with squares of gauze and cotton tape. She got up and filled a shallow bowl from the washbasin and
without so much as a by-your-leave, began to wash out the cuts left by Bella’s scratches.

Which was fine. She was as gently impersonal as any doctor she’d ever gone to, and a relief after Bella’s giddy catfights and the Dark Lord’s teasing.

“You’ll hear a lot of explanations. Essentially, white magic is impersonal, altruistic, for the greater good. It’s fuelled by socially acceptable feeling—the positive emotions, yes, like love and joy, but even sorrow or anger will work. It came about with the rise of civilization. Dark magic,” and Heather hissed as she poured alcohol into her cuts, “is personal. It runs to excess. It’s primitive, the kind of magic that brings green things from barren soil because a man is starving, and never mind that the spell was fuelled by his neighbour’s life.”

She applied some astringent—witch hazel?—to the cuts, and left them open to air, before beginning to apply a bruise salve to the girl’s neck, where fingerprints from her last tussle with Bella could still be seen.

“That’s awful.”

“So is dying,” the woman commented mildly. “So is watching your family die.”

“My family was slaughtered by the Dark Arts.”

The woman bade her skin down to her shift so she could finish, and snorted.

“That wasn’t the Dark Arts. That was a waste.”

Heather turned and glared fiercely at the woman, who still seemed unperturbed.

“Ask your snake there.”

“I don’t want to hear her harp on about eating people.”

“Well, she’s a predator,” the woman explained calmly. “A very efficient one, who makes good use of every living thing.”

“If by good use, you mean laying about digesting for months, then sure,” she grumbled.

“She gorges herself to become stronger. The same as her master.”

“Who committed that very waste you mentioned a moment ago.”

She looked contemplative. “Aye.” She bound a cut, and sat back down. “And maybe it wasn’t a waste. The Dark is, above all, personal.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Heather asked, incensed.

The lady raised a brow. “Language. I don’t suppose Bella knows what decorum is, but I know Narcissa had you for months before you came here.”

“So what does it mean,” Heather repeated, low and impatient.

“They say a dark witch is born twice in blood, once on entering the world and twice on entering her magic. How better to ensure you’d be a dark witch, if not to destroy your whole life and set you up with the very people who did it to you?”

Her head was pounding and dizzy, she could feel the pressure of the Dark Lord’s annoyance at this
sudden spike in her emotions, and she didn’t give a fuck.

“Voldemort,” she snarled, saying the name for the first time, and with relish, felt his irritation spike at the other end. “Voldemortvoldemortvoldemort.”

“Miss. Potter, please—“

She fixed the Healer with an ugly glare. Did she really expect to drop a bombshell like that on her and for nothing to happen?

“Please. I apologize, I should not have mentioned it, but you did ask, and I thought, well, you of all people, should have some insight into their motives—“

Oh, she wished she could rip the shining cartilage of that man’s throat from his neck as she’d practised with the house-elf corpse the other evening—but no, this was what he wanted her to think, to feel. She swallowed convulsively, breathed deep, tried to calm herself.

“It’s fine, ma’am,” she found herself saying, though it really wasn’t. “Thank you for stopping by. However did you get past Bella’s wards? And I hadn’t caught your name.”

“Bella use wards? The woman is her own deterrent,” the woman told her. “And it’s Thester. Thester Carrow.”

“Will that be all for now?” she asked dismissively, impatient to get the woman and her awful insights as far from her as possible.

“No, actually,” she said apologetically. “I’m afraid there is something else. The Dark Lord—well, he said you were using your old snake for something rather unorthodox that should be best discussed with a woman.”

Somehow, hilarity bubbled up through her anger, and she cackled loudly as Bellatrix. This was it. Her nerves were shot.

“The Dark Lord can torture a man for hours,” she choked, “but he’s too embarrassed to ask a girl about her period?”

“I beg your pardon?” the older witch asked politely, while Heather struggled to find words.

“I never started my period,” she explained, high on the shock on the morning. “I was sixteen, and I expected it would never start. So I, I guess I synchronized my body, somehow, to my snake’s shedding. We were attuned, I used her like you’d use a wand sometime. It made sense, that we’d slough our skins at the same time—and she was young, so it was once a month, which was normal.”

The woman had gone abruptly still.

“What?”

“That’s not normal,” Thester said, voice wavering, though not with the disgust she’d sensed from the Dark Lord—and well, every other guy her friends had forced to suffer through this topic.

“Well, yeah, most people don’t use snakes—“

“No. The timing,” Thester said abruptly. “No witch bleeds once a month.”

“Lucky them,” muttered Heather. “Once I tried it, I didn’t want to either. That’s pretty much the only good thing about Lady being dead, it stopped my cycles.”
Thester shook her head. “Girl, if you had any idea what most witches would give to have a monthly cycle…” she breathed deep. “Do you have any idea why the world isn’t overrun with witches and wizards, despite the fact that we live for thousands of years if nothing kills us off in the interim?”

She shrugged. “Awesome birth control?"

“Of a kind. Most would consider there to be nothing awesome about it,” she told her. “Witches only very rarely go ‘into season’. We usually have a brief fertile period in our thirties, lasting for maybe five years if we’re lucky. Then nothing, not for centuries. It’s impossible to predict if we’ll be able to conceive again. Every cycle we miss is a child we didn’t bring into our house. Alecto was a miracle—I’d never expected her.” The piercing black eyes fixed her again.

“Snakes are ancient symbols of fertility and resurrection, you know. Healing as well.”

“Yeah,” Heather acknowledged warily. “That’s kind of where I got the idea.”

Thester considered her. “There’s never been a confirmed female Parselmouth in our history either, though there were always rumours about the Egyptian goddesses… well.” She packed her case. “Dark witch or not, there may be something for us to work with. Come down to the infirmary as you like. I’m there most days, and the Dark Lord and Bellatrix can’t keep you busy all the time.” Her lips twisted ironically. “I wager they’ll have taught you your anatomy at least.”

“Goodbye, Thester. I’m sorry—“

The older witch shook her head impatiently.

“—and thank you,” she finished bitterly. “For the insight.”

Amidst all this talk of woman’s troubles, she hadn’t forgotten.

She was going to kill the Dark Lord.

Or do something vaguely impersonal and altruistic that wouldn’t be in his favour.

Except that wouldn’t do anything for the horrible need to make him pay that overflowed her mind—

She cursed.

Like it or not, she was changed. Irreparably.

He had made her a dark witch. And she would make him pay like one.

Chapter End Notes

Special thanks to QueenLyssa and angelaneahwalker for all the wonderful feedback!

Feel free to say hello and comment below!
Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Wow. I still don't own Harry Potter. Who'd'a thought?

Warning: Description of torture.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

His eyes were almost crusted shut with congealed blood. His mouth hung slack, his neck stretched long in the noose, lips blackly ischemic. A cold mist in a driving wind rocked the man’s body to and fro like the tongue of a clock ticking out the hours, a metronome to her pulse. She closed her eyes in the comfort of it.

The wind sluicing through the trees, the hush and murmur of the conifers, the yew bough creaking as it rocked the hanged man to sleep, cradled in strange dreams.

It was cold as death here. This too was a comfort.

The sky was blue.

She loved the early morning, this time between times, a dreaming time, when the sun had not awoken and the whole world seemed to be on the verge of telling her something, something great and mysterious, something she had forgotten long ago. It was like the pause before a kiss.

The sun always rises. The dream ends.

She would go back to rummaging thought from the bellies of dead man, scrying for herself in the convexity of their glassed eyes. When the sun rose. Not now.

For now, Bellatrix Lestrange watched Draco Malfoy hang from a yew tree, his chest rising and falling with unnatural life, and leaned back against the altar, stroking her sleeping sister’s sweetly golden head.

She smiled.

Bellatrix was gone for over a week. Longer, maybe, but she’d lost track of time.

Her absence changed nothing, and Heather distantly acknowledged the possibility that the woman had rubbed off on her.

It was irrelevant. What mattered now was learning. And there was so much to learn.

She could almost cry at the volume of it. She’d known everything in the real world—calculus, algebra, biology, French, literature, history. She was an honours roll student, could hold her own against any university freshman from the time she was sixteen. And now, to find there were whole fields of knowledge central to the world she found herself in—it was worse than the time she’d gone on an exchange trip to Germany by herself, without knowing a word of the language. It was like learning how to walk again.
She learnt though. She pulled the cracked tomes from Bellatrix’s bookshelf and set to memorizing them. Curses in the mornings, over the sumptuous breakfasts the house elves delivered her, handwritten journals and histories in the afternoons. In the evenings, she’d study the anatomy texts Bella kept on hand—similar to the Muggle ones, but with curious deviations that seemed to detail chakras, glands alien to any human she’d ever seen, and diseases she’d hope to never encounter.

If the Wizarding World did have any comprehensive textbooks for beginners, they weren’t to be found in Bella’s library. Any information she did find was suspect, being written largely from the perspective of her captors. The Ministry was incompetent and corrupt, bureaucrats obsessed with limiting the old families’ power to retain their own. Mandatory public education was used to brainwash the young into accepting Ministry policies. Profiles of juvenile ‘offenders’ were forwarded to the DMLE for future observation, or used to justify search and interrogation of their guardians.

It didn’t seem unlikely. Narcissa had mentioned dealing with a Ministry raids on Malfoy Manor after her son had bragged about their dark arts library to the wrong person.

On the other hand, Bella’s books seemed to carry the same scorn for ‘Muggle-Lovers’ that some people had for vegetarians or animal rights activists.

When her vision finally blurred from reading, she walked around the room, practising the wand strokes of her curses with a pencil.

If Voldemort noticed a new violence to Heather’s curses, he didn’t say anything. He didn’t need to. His wordless approval at her lack of hesitation washed through the bond, warm to the belly like a swallow of hot soup. She retaliated through the link, her irritation sparking like static on the periphery of his consciousness. He hated her for it—especially when it distracted him from delicate negotiations—and they returned to a comfortable opposition.

On the fifth day of Bella’s absence, she’d had it. Outside of whenever the Dark Lord escorted her downstairs to practice her spells on unarmed men, and seeing the house-elves as they passed through to fetch her meals, she saw no one. She’d been locked in one room or another for—gods, how long had it been?—and she was going to go batty as Bella at this rate. Especially if she kept cramming texts into her head as though she was studying for finals.

She was going out.

This time, there was no Healer waiting behind the door.

Giddy with fear, she rushed down the length of the hall, looking for the stairwell, when a man opened a door.

She didn’t skitter back against the wall like a startled hare, but it was a close call. She felt the Dark Lord wake in the back of her mind, and his annoyance gave her courage. She looked back squarely at the man, who was grinning rakishly back at her.

“Well, hey-lo, sweeting. Come out to join the party at last?” His eyes glinted. “Plan to give us another show like the other day?”

She opened her mouth to exclaim that the whole thing with Thester had been an accident, but thought better of it. Instead, she curled her mouth in a wicked smile and hoped she looked as much like Bella as Narcissa always said.

“May-be,” she drawled. “If you make it worth my while.”
He grinned wider, dipping his head to her genteelly. “Magnus Mulciber,” he introduced himself. “A pleasure to meet you at last, Miss. Potter.”

She curtseyed. It was less difficult than she’d expected. Death Eater or not, his casual flirtations reminded her of Piers, and his craggy face, furnished with a short black beard and messy black hair, could have belonged to any co-ed.

“The pleasure’s all mine, Mr. Mulciber,” she cooed, mentally gagging at her tone. Seriously, did these people talk like a Jane Austen novel 24/7, or just when they weren’t torturing someone’s nuts off?

“Please, call me by my Christian name.”

“I can hardly allow such liberties with a man I’ve just met,” she told him, with all the hauteur she’d ever heard Narcissa use before the house elves. His eyebrows rose and he laughed.

“Gods,” he whispered conspiratorially, his blue eyes bright, “aren’t you a proper girl?” He straightened up a little, adjusting the hem of his rather ill-fitting robes. “Magnus. I insist, milady,” he said, smiling, bowing to tuck a kiss to her hand before she could stop him. She’d spent too many uneasy hours considering the use of essences to ever want any wizard kissing her—but she supposed the minimal saliva from a kiss to the hand couldn’t do much harm.

She hoped, anyways.

“Magnus, then,” she agreed.

“So what brings a girl like you into a place like this?”

She shot him an annoyed glance. “Beyond kidnapping?”

He looked distinctly perturbed. “I meant, more like, into the hallway. You’ve been in there with Bella for weeks. You wouldn’t believe the rumours that’ve started up.”

She leaned against the wall.

“Try me.”

“Well. There’s a lot of the guys gambling on you two starting up a secret lesbian love-nest,” he deadpanned.

Her own laugh caught her by surprise.

“Yeah, I didn’t think so either,” he acknowledged. “Then there’s a few suggesting she’s training you to be the Dark Lord’s sex slave.”

She went bug-eyed and wanted to retch.

“Hey, hey,” he put up his hands. “Don’t knock it ‘til you try it.”

She wondered if she could steal his wand and try that Entrail-Expelling Curse she’d read about that morning. She settled for intimidation. “Magnus,” she said pleasantly, “would you mind telling me who suggested that? I’m sure our Lord would love to know who’s been speculating on his intimate affairs.”

He paled considerably.
“Ah, never you mind that then. What are you doing in there?”

“Reading,” she muttered.

“Ah. Now there’s something no one expected. The boys will be devastated.” He regarded her merrily in the candlelight. “So, what brings you out this evening?”

Her breath hitched in her throat, but she arched her neck and smiled guiltlessly. “Believe it or not, you can only read so many books before you go batty as Bellatrix,” she laughed breathily. “I’d thought to finally get a glance around the house, while there’s less Healers lying in wait to jump me.” She set her arm through the crook of his and looked up at him through her lashes. “Don’t suppose you’d like to give me the grand tour?”

The look he gave her said he knew she was full of shit, and he couldn’t care less.

“It would be my honour,” he said, tipping his head to her again. “Where to start?”

“How many floors does this house have?”

“Five,” he said lowly, as not to wake anyone else as they slowly strolled through the corridor. “Not including the basements, of course. There’s the attic, but no one ever goes there. The Master keeps the entire fourth floor to himself. And this floor,” he murmured bitterly, “is for the Dark Lord’s most faithful.”

“Oh?” she prompted.

“Permanent apartments for those of us with a price on our heads,” he explained helpfully as they reached the stairs, and her stomach dropped.

“How did you end up there then?” she asked lightly, considering how best to excuse herself back to her rooms.

If it were possible at this point. The man’s grip was unshakeable. His teeth, yellow as Bella’s, gleamed by the gas lamps as they descended the stairs.

“The Dark Lord took me out of Azkaban,” he commented nonchalantly. “Broke me out when he raided the place, oh, four years ago. Didn’t just loose his own people—no, he let out every petty cutthroat and burglar and revolutionary stashed away in there since the Ministry started throwing people to the Dementors an age ago. Wouldn’t some of the sorts we found rotting in the depths,” he grinned. “Lot of them were too sick to move, and others just wanted to scuttle off to whatever lives they had left—but there were plenty right pissed at the people who put them there. You’d not believe the havoc,” he said cheerfully.

He picked a candle from the wall, and lit it. “Now, this is the second floor. Bit more easy to lose yourself than the third since they built additions onto the house that lead off oddways. Never you mind those—it’s just housing in the back anyways. The most important bits are here—“

And gods be thanked, he loosed her arm.

“The laboratory,” he gestured to the right to a door made of—stone?—with a heavy iron lock on it. “No one but Thester, Snape, and our Master have the keys. Thester usually recruits a couple of us with more potions knowledge into assisting with healing potions during the weekdays, but Snape gives her the boot and shuts himself up in there doing gods know what all weekend. Infirmary’s at the end of the hall, and on your left here is a classroom.”
Useless to her, at least for now. She didn’t know how to tell a potion from a poison, much less brew either. And though they probably stocked herbs she’d recognize, unless someone was careless and left the door open, there was no way she’d be spiking Bella’s tea with foxglove any time soon.

She followed Magnus back to the stairwell, and onto the first floor.

“Why did they send you to Azkaban?” she asked, though she thought she shouldn’t.

“Loyalty,” he shrugged. “Oh, and I suppose I was a bit too persuasive with some Ministry Officials,” he grinned.

She’d spent enough time with Bella and the Dark Lord to know a euphemism when she heard one. “The Imperius,” she murmured.

“Got it in one,” Magnus told her, flipping his wand through the air and catching it idly. “Lovely little trick that, though a bit too over the top. The Lord’s been teaching me subtlety since he took me home.”

He guided her along the corridors. “You’ve already seen the dining room. The Ballroom isn’t that interesting unless his Lordship’s called the whole court in.”

She peered disinterestedly into the room with its high windows and great marble fireplace, when something caught her eye. She looked past it, turning casually back to Magnus.

“Is it very difficult to use the Imperius successfully?”

He stopped dead in his tracks. “What, you’ve never done it before?” Her silence was enough. He whistled lowly. “Tough luck, lovely. What does he have you doing down there?”

“Cursing the prisoners.”

“Oh, yes? Which curses?”

She tried to look nonchalant. “Accio, tergeo, diffindo. A few others.”

He seemed confused for a moment before something seemed to click. “Oh,” he laughed. “Tell me. How did those work for you?”

“Fine,” she said tersely. She really didn’t want to think about it. If this was the Dark Lord’s way of corrupting her—and something more than intuition said it was—her diminishing guilt pointed at its effectiveness. Whether it was because anyone in her situation would have to lose their conscience to retain their sanity, or because of her proximity to the Dark Lord’s mind, was anyone’s guess.

“No, how did they affect your subjects?”

Victims, she thought sourly, and hoped that she reminded Magnus enough of Bella not to become one herself. “Oh, I summoned fingernails and hair—I rather wanted to take a heart, but our Lord insisted they be left alive,” she said airily. “Scougified the skin off that tattooed man Bella’s taken a fancy to. Hopefully it grows back in good time—I know she so hates for anyone else to play with her toys, but our Lord did think she wouldn’t object to me borrowing that particular one.”

Magnus laughed appreciatively, and Heather relaxed. “Creative. I’d not have thought of teaching elementary charms that way, but effective.”

She frowned. “Elementary?” They had seemed awfully difficult to her, particularly to cast quickly
while being rushed by a half starved madman, but he nodded his head in confirmation.

“Most of that isn’t above, maybe, a fourth year level.”

She goggled. He shrugged.

“You’ve never had a wand before, have you?”

She didn’t think he’d believe her if she denied it. She shook her head.

He sniffed. “Thought so.” He leaned loosely against the wall. “Wanded magic is like playing an instrument. It’s all muscle memory and timing the movements. You have to start when you’re young.”

“Eleven doesn’t seem very young.”

He grinned wickedly at her. “Mudbloods start at eleven. The rest of us teethed on toywands. The ease of a spell really depends as much on the difficulty of the wand movements as the power and theory behind it. Everyone learns the elementary charms first because they teach the basic motions that you need to attempt more difficult spells. If you don’t learn that…” he shrugged, but she got the idea. It was like someone who could barely play ‘Mary had a Little Lamb’ in 4/4 time on an electric piano trying to attempt a full concerto on a grand.

“But I can use the Cruciatius,” she argued.

“Everyone in this house can use the Cruciatius.” He took a pipe from his pocket and began polishing it. “Why do you think the Ministry makes such a kerfuffle about the Unforgiveables? They don’t take any particular skill—just power, and the desire to use it.” His eyes glittered. “No wonder the Dark Lord has you trussed up in Steel. He doesn’t want a stray spell taking you out before you can protect yourself.”

She really hadn’t considered it from that perspective. “Why would he bother? If you’re right, I’m never going to be ‘another Bellatrix’, so he can’t be thinking of recruiting me.”

Magnus snapped his fingers and took a long puff of his pipe. “Why indeed! Well, don’t sell yourself short, Lady. It’s not as though you’re a damned Muggle. You could learn to use a wand yet.”

“You think so?”

“Sure,” he agreed, and winked. “Just take you about five centuries to catch up to the rest of us.”

She was going to slap the bastard.

“So, what else can I show you?” he asked. “My forge, perhaps? The Dark Lord showed me the remnants of your runework. It’s brilliant. Everyone knows runes are supposed to be used in permanent pieces—shields and staffs and suchlike—and then you come along, and make exploding doorknobs. Nasty things,” he grinned, “usually we don’t bother expending the energy on runes for objects that will only be used once, but the Dark Lord was so impressed with your little bombs that he asked me to try making a few for the raids. You should be proud.”

She was going to be sick.

“Maybe you can come by and give your opinion?” he pressed, and waggled his eyebrows lasciviously. “I can think of any number of ways I could compensate you for the information…”
She smiled politely. “I will consider that,” she said diffidently. “For now, however, I would like to know the location of the library. I find Bella’s collection to be somewhat… lacking in variety.”

“Completely focused on interrogation methods and battle magic, you mean?”

She nodded, not even blinking now at his euphemisms for what was really torture and terrorism.

“Ahh. It’s actually down in the basement, on the way to the Arena. I’ll show you.”

As he guided her down the hall and the next flight of stairs, she risked a question. “You were in Azkaban.”

His confirmation was less blithe than usual.

“How… why aren’t you as… affected as Bella?”

He snorted, tugging open the door to the library. It was small and silent and cold, the great hearth positioned far from the books and burnt down to coals, the shelves lit by blue light of captive faeries slumbering under bell jars.

“We’re all affected,” he murmured. “The Dementors winnow away bits of you until there’s nothing left but the bare essentials. I was just lucky I’m whatever I am.” He slipped his still smoking pipe into a pocket of his robes, and she wondered that he didn’t catch fire. “Bella’s a bloody conduit.”

“A conduit,” she repeated.

“You see a lot of them in the Black family. Medium, oracle, diviner, berserker. Whatever. They can channel the dead. Rumour has it the Blacks pushed inbreeding to ensure their bodies are compatible enough with their ancestors to allow possession.”

“That’s awful.”

He shrugged. “Actually, it’s damn useful. The old wizards and witches have been slaughtered in droves for the past five hundred years—if not by the Muggles, then by the thrice-damned Ministry. You know how much magical knowledge you lose that way? If any other family had their grimoires destroyed and their old ones killed, it would be devastating. The Blacks—” he shrugged. “Nothing is ever gone, not forever. Their bloodline ensures an immortality of a kind.”

“So she’s crazy because she’s listening to dead people.”

“Probably. I never really wanted to ask for details,” he grimaced. “Being stuck in a high security cell by herself for a decade, with nothing but the Dementors and equally crazed prisoners for company, probably has something to do with it too though. I at least got to share my cell with Nott.”

“Oh.”

He leaned against the door.

“Well, if there’s anything else I can help you with—or if you’d like a tour of my apartments,” he winked, “give me a knock. Shall I escort you up to your rooms?”

She steeled herself, and tried to quiet her fluttering heart, lest the Dark Lord feel it and grow suspicious.

“No,” she said, “no, that’s quite alright. I’ll just browse. Thank you very much for your help, Magnus.” She smiled graciously, and the man left, as though he had no idea she wasn’t supposed to
be here, and so, she waited for a minute, two minutes, three, and when she was certain he was gone, she carefully exited the library, and trying to be both fast and silent, slunk back onto the ground floor, to the ballroom.

The doors were still unlocked. She slipped in and walked across the huge, echoing hall to the fire in the great hearth, where a small glass bowl filled with green dust sat over the mantel. Her breath caught in her throat.

This could go badly. She didn’t really know if this was what she was looking for, let alone how to use it, if it were. Her hands trembled as she picked up the bowl, and with sudden decision, pitched the whole thing into the fire.

The fire rushed up greenly, and she felt elation course through her, right before she felt him rouse curiously in response, a snake uncoiling at the periphery of her consciousness. She laughed and flung her spite into the link, her own personal fuck you to the man who’d destroyed her life, right before she stepped into the fire.

“Ministry of Magic!”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to QueenLyssa, cora_ceisg, history, Purple People Eater, and Skendo for reviewing! I really appreciate everyone’s feedback!

Have a lovely week!
Her first thought when she cannonballed out of the chimney and careened headfirst into the floor was never again.

She laid there a moment, dazed, while the pressure from her other mind turned a bump on the head into a bona fide migraine.

Her second thought was that this didn’t look like the Ministry of Magic.

Granted, nothing so far in the Wizarding World had been remotely normal or decent so far, so why should she expect otherwise? Given Voldemort’s disdain for the Ministry though, she at least expected it to look like a civilized office. Cheap linoleum flooring, corkboard ceilings—gods, she would die to see fluorescent lighting again. Granted, given the Dark Lord’s insistence on living as though he were in pre-Industrial England, she probably should be happy for his concession to indoor plumbing and toilet paper.

The Malfoys, on the other hand, didn’t seem to recognize that the only use for a chamberpot was in a museum. Of things that were, emphatically, no longer used.

She groaned, and took in her surroundings.

It was warm and dark, the uterine glow of a fire barely light enough to see by. The floor was soft—she glanced to confirm—red shag carpeting. Dark objects resolved themselves into furniture—high armchairs to either side of the fire, a table, a canopy bed. Caution reasserted itself.

This was not the Ministry of Magic.

A high laugh from the canopy bed, and she shrank back against the closest chair, wishing she’d only thought to save a little floo powder in her pockets in case things went wrong. A flash of red eyes from the darkness under the canopy, and she felt as much as saw the Dark Lord rise up in her mind and the room, too cruelly amused to be annoyed at the hour. Her vision doubled, as she saw through both their eyes at once, and her head hurt, as though straining to accommodate two minds was too much for it. It probably was.

She hated him. Why didn’t he get these headaches?

He chuckled maddeningly. He knew the answer, she was sure, but she’d be damned if he’d tell ever tell her.

He approached her slowly, smilingly. Gone were the warlord’s robes, heavy with hidden daggers and flasks of heal-alls. He didn’t really need them. He was the kind of man who seemed more secure in his skin than her father had been in a three piece suit. He wore a pair of black draw-string pajama pants—the most ordinary clothing she’d seen any wizard wear so far—and that was enough.
Unsettlingly, his skin was flaking thickly in places, as though from a sunburn or scab. His body was leanly muscled, as a dancer or runner, and his black hair, she noticed as though for the first time, was cut chin-length, short as a youth’s, or a Muggle’s. Not the long braids of the patrician wizards.

She pushed the thought to the forefront of her mind—and his—peeved at his closeness.

The Dark Lord, kneeling beside her, seemed only bored at this latest tactic. Irately, she tried again, imagining his reaction if she made him a profile on Grindr, maybe, or hid Crup dung in his pockets. He seized her chin, and she hissed at the burning.

“Do not be crass,” he snarled. “It is unbecoming in a woman of my house.”

She twisted her head to bite him, stopped when she felt her teeth on her own hand. He sneered, set his hand to the Steel, and it tightened abruptly, leaving her gasping for air.

“It seems that the Fates are remanding me for being so unsympathetic to my followers for their trials in dealing with their offspring. Not that they would ever dare use their sprog as an excuse, but even I knew when Lucius’ tardiness was caused by that brat of his.”

She strained for breath. “I’m not your offspring,” she hissed.

“No?” he said, surprised. “Well, I suppose, not in the conventional sense. But, in every other…” he trailed off, tapping her lip with his forefinger in a maddeningly intimate gesture. “Children are their parents’ hope for immortality.”

“So far—doesn’t sound—at all like—me,” she parsed between breaths, glaring.

“No? Miss. Potter,” he leaned in, his red eyes gleaming viciously at hers, “you are not, as you believe, one of those scummy ‘Dursleys’. You are not even a proper ‘Potter’,” he sneered, “though that body might be. What you are is a piece of me, transplanted into the Potter girl by accident the night I killed her mother.”

She stared dumbly at him, barely noticing when he loosed her collar.

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“It doesn’t,” he agreed blandly. “I would have thought a piece of my soul wise enough not to be so blindly enamored of a bunch of powerless Muggles as to reject its own world—“

“It doesn’t make sense! I’m not you!” she snapped. “I don’t remember being you! You can’t just snap off a piece of soul and say it’s a bit of the same person! A soul is—the entirety of our experiences and memories and desires! It’s totally individual! You can’t just clone it or whatever—“

“Apparently not,” the Dark Lord mused, “or we would not be having this argument.”

She huffed, holding her knees to her chest and looking purposefully away, into the fire.

“The soul can be torn by events of great consequence. Murder, torture, rape—“

He felt her anger rushing through the gap, even though her voice was quiet. “You’ve been making me tear my soul up.”

“That wasn’t the primary reason for those exercises, merely a side benefit,” he scoffed. “If you would rather refrain from learning self-defence, so that a werewolf can rape or turn you without my intervention, then please, hide in your room.”
She hated him silently.

“If a piece of the soul is torn off, it can be placed in a physical container which then acts to anchor the original spirit should the person die. This container is then called a horcrux.”

“And I’m supposed to be a horcrux,” she said flatly. “What makes you so certain?”

“Do you know why no one ever uses the Death Curse to commit suicide?”

She shot him a disgusted look. “Of course, suicide methods are all I think about in your presence.”

Her bonds wrenched unpleasantly, but that was all. “The Death Curse can’t be used on yourself. It deflects. Of course, no one ever tried to use it on their own horcrux before. It deflected off you, and destroyed me.”

“Sure.”

“Normally, I give a horcrux some sense of its purpose, some memory. You were an accident.”

“That’s what happens when you don’t use protection,” she snarked. “Wait. There are more—“

“Were,” the Dark Lord’s lips twisted bitterly. “When my most loyal servant raised me from my ashes, we found that every known horcrux had been destroyed. It was only a matter of luck that one survived for my resurrection.”

Her stomach turned.

She was keeping him, this monster who had slaughtered her family, alive?

He sneered.

“They’re not even your family, girl. They belong to whatever soul you dislodged when I set you down in that body to begin with.”

She slapped him, and felt the blow across her own face, kicked and punched and welcomed the pain in her own ribs. She was a fucking witch, they could heal her, they could make her body right again, no matter what she did to herself. They couldn’t make her life right again, not ever. She might as well be looking up suicide methods.

The Dark Lord hissed, and her wrists and ankles froze, bound in mid-air.

“Try it,” he hissed. “Kill yourself. You might even be able to do it. You should know though—the soul bond works both ways. Do it, and I’ll just resurrect you again. Maybe I’ll let you live disembodied for a little while, see what it’s like. Agony beyond imagining,” he traced her scar, and she swore at him in the tongue they shared. “I wouldn’t even have to put you back in your body, though I’ll admit it’s a pretty package. How would you like to be a locket, or a ring, for a few millennia?” His face tipped closer to hers, and she closed her eyes in revulsion, though she could still see through his. “I promise I’d always keep you close to my heart.”

He kissed her sweetly, and she bit him until her lips bled, and cursed herself when she felt him lapping it up.

“I had thought Bella was teaching you better than that, love.” He settled back, leaving her locked in place, stroking her immobile hand. “I’d never heard of a living Horcrux before, but I can now say I vastly prefer them.” He smiled. “A slip of soul in an object stays the same, forever, dies with its
vessel. A slip of soul, set in a fertile mind? It grows to fill its container, has its own existence apart from the source. You’d never even know you weren’t always yourself.” His voice lowered. “I could shatter you, and it would be like breaking a whole new person apart.”

Her disgust was answer enough.

“Ah, in time, girl.” He loosed her bonds. “I only have eternity to convince you.”

She stumbled to her feet, wishing she could kick him in the head, but not wanting to worsen her headache for today in the attempt, didn’t bother trying.

“It’s not going to happen.”

“Very well,” he said, humorning her. “The door is that way. I can turn on some more lights if you’re having difficulty finding it.”

She ignored him, blundering on in the dark, before trying to chisel into his mind and borrow his eyes. He pushed her from his thoughts with an embarrassing lack of effort, and got to his feet, taking her forcefully by the elbow and guiding her to the door.

“By the way,” he advised her, “feel free to wander the Manor at a more ‘normal’ time of day. You’re less likely to run into my vampires that way. If you’d like to see the main road out of Riddle Manor, it’s straight out the front door. I’m terribly afraid you won’t be able to leave the property though. Your Steel is keyed to me, and I am keyed to the wards.” She stared back at him. “Feel free to use the Floo anytime you wish to visit my chambers though,” he grinned cruelly. “A pinch will suffice though, unless you are so much a masochist as to prefer getting a concussion on my walls—and if that is the case, I can think of better outlets for your desires.”

She hated him.

She was going to cry.

She was going to find a way to destroy both of them.

“Oh, dearest,” he smiled. “The bare fact that I have horcruxes is protected under Fidelius. Do try to tell someone—it seems Dumbledore found a way around—but I’m afraid it’s all wanded magic. Perhaps in a few centuries, you’ll make some progress in that area. Good day.”

He shut his door on her.

For a while, she just breathed. If she concentrated, she could feel him on the other side of the door, entertaining himself in counting how long it would take her to gather herself up, and leave.

She left. She ran down the stairs and into her room, and into her bed, and cried, and even that had no privacy, no comfort. She could still feel him, sickly amused at her grief, and she stopped before she was ready, moved dully to where she could feel Nagini’s petty and animal irritation, not unlike her old familiar’s. She laid a hand on the snake’s sleek coils and stared into the half lidded eye.

A living horcrux.

She buried herself in Nagini’s gaze, in her slow, unfeeling dreams of sunshine and dying things, in the false relief of being, for awhile, anyone but herself.
Draco hung suspended somewhere between sleep and waking.

He lost his sense of time. The first night, Bella’s knife seemed to notch the minutes on his skin, the cuts tallying time. His mother had switched off with her at some point, one woman straddling him down while the other flayed open his skin.

At dawn, they hung him from the tree. His spine snapped, and with it, his sanity. He drifted. He dreamed.

He had been hung before a hundred times, by women far more beautiful and terrible than any he’d seen in the last three millennia. The Black One appeased him, wicked lovely as any of the barbaric witches in this land, mind open as any priestess of the old country. Unlike her golden sister, she was like enough to him for possession. Blood calls blood.

The boy was nothing. Without the woman’s blood in his body, he should have died. As it was, she still tended him the many nights, her blood sluicing from an open palm down his throat, while he moved breath in and out his body, soul in and out his mind, and they changed him.

Draco dreamed.

He dreamed he saw his corpse hanging from a tree, neck long as his forearm, lips blue as ice, body bloating, the ravens eating him as tribute. A good sign, he knew, and could not say how. A movement, and he was the raven, cannibalizing his own body, he turned and he was the sleeping tree from which he hung, and the woman, whose body, he realized in shock, bore the same marks as his own under the clothes.

She turned to him, and laughed, speaking more clearly than she ever did in real life. “My father had no son. His brother’s sons, while warriors enough, were treacherous. Who else was there to lead?”

He spun through her consciousness, and she let him, as she let all the souls in this place.

“Am I dreaming,” he demanded through the clamor of memories from a thousand lives. She heard him, somehow. She was practised.

“We all dream, little boy,” she said—or someone said for her. He began to suspect the thing he called his aunt might be more complicated than any one person.

“Will I awake?”

“A better question,” they approved. “I don’t know. Will you wake up?”

“This is stupid. Answer the question.”

“I can’t,” they told him mildly. “I don’t know the answer.”

“There are thousands of you here,” he shouted at them through the void. “You can’t say none of you know the answer!”

“One of us does,” the thing that was Bella told him.

He screamed, in frustration, and turned to the tree, slipped, cut himself on a rock.

It hurt.

He examined the skinned palms of his small hands, the strange balance of his body, the heft and fall of his breasts and grace of his limbs—their limbs—and they laughed.
He approached the dead man hanging, and cut the rope.

Draco woke up.

He couldn’t guess for how many days he slept after that, healing from the terrible ordeal of his initiation. His mother bathed him and tended his wounds, and he had a vague sense of Bella’s presence, though he couldn’t slip into her skin as he had while he’d hung on the tree.

Everything hurt. No one gave him any opium to dull the pain, no matter how much he begged. His mother tried once, and Bella removed her from the room. This too, was hazy, but at least he knew it came from him.

When his mind finally cleared, his mother was still at his bedside, and he didn’t want to be awake.

“What did you do to me?” he snarled feebly. He had barely the strength to utter the words, and his voice sounded strange, flatter.

Of course. It had been crushed during his strangulation. Was it still strangulation if they’d already snapped his spine?

His mother brushed his hair away from his eyes. She at least pitied him, but there was a certainty about her expression he’d never seen before. “You wanted this.”

“I wanted to understand magic!” he coughed, “not fuck my mother, or get carved up like a Christmas pheasant by my psychotic aunt, while we were all high on shrooms! Why—why would you ever do that? To me?” He tried to rise up on his elbows, and gasped at the pain. “I thought you loved me!”

Narcissa was quiet.

“I love you. More than my own life, or anyone else’s, more than principle or wealth.” She fixed his eyes. “More than my comfort, or yours.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” he swore.

“You are entering our war. You’re a child. You’re vastly unprepared, and while the Dark Lord may be a great teacher, he can’t teach you survival in a couple of months after a lifetime of pampering. Your father,” she continued, a vindictive light in her eyes, “can’t teach you war. Not when he never waged it outside the Ministry. So I asked for Bella’s help.”

“To kill me before I ever set foot on a battlefield?” he choked.

She smoothed his hair, brushed his shoulder before he winced at the pressure on a rune, and she thought better of it.

“The Blacks,” she started, “aren’t like the Malfoys. Your father’s people were patricians. They founded Rome and shaped it after themselves. Decadent, verbose, prideful. You ever wonder why they worshipped the Roman emperors as gods? Muggle imitators, really, but divinely appointed in the sense that your great, great grandfather put them on the throne.

“The Blacks, on the other hand—“

“Were crazy, incestuous fucks,” he coughed.
“Had a mixed ancestry,” she continued as though she hadn’t heard him. “Unlike every other ancient family, that holed up in a place and held it, the first Black travelled. Some say he was a Greek man, a warrior, fathered by Ares on the Oracle at Delphi. Others say he was older than that, and Eastern, cursed to wander the earth forever for killing his brother. Whatever he was, he travelled for ages looking for his equal, and in France, he found them. A coven of witches.

“They fought him to a standstill, and tried to sacrifice him to their fathers, but they could not kill him.” She smiled bitterly. “‘Hung on a wind-rocked tree, for nine long nights, and to Odin offered, myself to myself.’ At the end, they cut him down and decided to keep him. At the end, he didn’t want to leave.”

“I want to leave,” he groaned. “We’ll be lucky if father doesn’t kill you for this.”

“Why don’t you kill me yourself?” his mother asked him, and he turned his head to her in shock. “What? Your father cannot protect you forever, least of all from your own choices. Or should I kill Lucius? I have grown fond of him. He has given me a beautiful son, to say the least,” Narcissa pressed his shoulder with her hand, and he nearly gagged from the pain, “but if that son is not strong enough to fight his own battles, I’d rather not another Malfoy be sired on me.”

He was quiet, for a moment. His mother never said anything she didn’t mean.

“What the fuck does any of this do anyways?” he asked her, sullenly.

“Come now,” she chided. “You can’t be that ignorant.” She swept off his thin covers, and summoned a mirror to the bedside, before pulling him upright herself. He breathed tightly.

His body, once smooth and unblemished as marble, was marred with scabbed over cuts the length of his torso, and tucked below his collarbones. Bindrunes, spells to turn away blades or mute an incoming spell, spells to sharpen perception. Spells of binding. He turned painfully, his wounds tearing open with the movement, and saw the cuts all along his vertebrae. His eyes were still grey, but the roots of his hair had gone dark.

“What did you do to me?” he gasped, and she laid him back down. His voice rose. “It’s disgusting. What did you do—“ his protest dissolved in a bout of coughing.

“I gave you the opportunity to earn what protection my family could give you. You saw the girls’ runes, saw how effective an untutored girl’s power could be. You wanted power?” she sniffed. “Your father’s gold can buy some kinds of power. This, you purchased for yourself.”

“I don’t feel powerful. I hurt.”

“I know, Draco,” she kissed him on the forehead, and he was too tired to recoil. “We’ll discuss this later. For now, rest. Heal. The Dark Lord plans to initiate his new Death Eaters in a few days, on the Solstice.”

Dread tipped deep into him, and she left the room, but he could not sleep. He felt betrayed. Exposed. Vulnerable. Unexpectedly, the face of the last Muggle girl he’d taken out in the woods came to mind, and he shuddered. That was exactly how he felt before his mother and aunt. As helpless as a Muggle cow.

Too late, he realized how little he knew any of them—his mother, his aunt. The Dark Lord. His father. It was one thing to warn his schoolmates that the Dark would take care of them, no different than telling them to go to hell. It became quite a different thing when the devil himself strolled up to
escort them through inferno.

If he’d known, he would have ran. He still could run, he supposed, and then he thought uneasily of the binding spells, and whose blood he’d drank.

He was too tired to reason out the consequences, but there was one he could guess with fair certainty.

Running was never an option.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you SO MUCH to everyone who's reviewed so far! I really, really appreciate, and it makes my day to know you enjoy my work! Have a lovely weekend!
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: If it isn't already apparent, I don't own Harry Potter.

Warning: For desecration of corpses.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Riddle Manor was almost beautiful enough to assuage her grief.

Or, maybe, any place in the world would be beautiful after being holed up in a room since the end of July. She didn’t question it too much. Questions were painful. It was easier to accept small graces as they came.

Despite her fear of the Death Eaters, she left her room every morning now. She moved through the corridors quickly, head lowered. For the most part, she avoided speaking with the denizens of the Manor, or gave as short a response as possible if they forced a question on her. Strangely, they seemed to respect her silence—except for Magnus, who remained boisterously unaffected.

She visited him in his forge most afternoons. He was usually busy with his work, but he always made time to tutor her through some basic skill he deemed essential to a Runemaster.

Well. One basic skill, at least.

It was easy to forget, given Magnus’ looks, exactly how old he was. When he first told her, she hadn’t believed him.

“Fifty. Try again,” she said flatly.

He’d shrugged, rolling his bone wand through his fingers. “How old do you think the Dark Lord is?”

“I’m not answering that question. In case he’s as sensitive about his age as every old lady I’ve ever met.”

Magnus seemed confused by this, until she explained how Muggles were about age. Then, he laughed uproariously at the very idea of someone denying their age. For wizards, it was a mark of prestige. They might well be almost immortal, but they weren’t invulnerable. The longer you lived, the more likely you were to be killed off in war or some freak accident. If you survived past the century mark, you wanted everyone to know it.

But Magnus was fifty. Which made the flirting just… creepy.

She was being hit on by a man older than her father.

With age came experience though, and Magnus knew everything you could expect from a man who’d trained since infancy in a tradition she hadn’t known existed. He specialized in metals, knew every step of creating a sword from smelting the ore to sharpening the blade. Even with magic, it was frankly ridiculous that he could fit the work of a refinery, manufacturer, and jeweler in such a small space, and she told him as much.
He just grinned stupidly.

Besides metalwork though, he knew how to cut stone or gems, how to carve wood, to blow glass. He wove magic into the material as he created it. And his runes—they were elegant, like the Arabic script embossed on an old copy of the Koran at the library back home. She thought of her own work in wood—usually chicken-scratched idly into panels with a key or pocketknife—and shuddered.

If only Hogwarts had told her this was possible, instead of sending that form letter with its nonsense about toads and broomsticks, maybe she might have considered it.

There was no way she could even approach Magnus’ skill, not without a few more decades of practice and the use of her magic, but there was no reason she couldn’t start learning the more mundane aspects of his craft. He started her on blowing glass.

Even Heather, with her tendency for combining Runes with unstable materials, had never touched glass. Mostly because it hadn’t been convenient.

“There’s a better reason than that,” Magnus told her. She huffed and resorted to physics. “Well. Glass is technically a liquid, and has an amorphous structure in comparison to most media…”

“Huh?”

“Muggle science.”

“Right. That’s why it sounded like Gobbledygook. No, it’s magically inert. That’s why we use it for holding potions.”

“If it’s magically inert, isn’t it useless for Runes?”

“No if you need to contain or block a powerful bindrune. A closed glass container can hold a lot of things—a spell, poisons, even explosives,” he grinned. “Bit messy those, but that’s war for you.”

She dropped the metal pole she’d been handling. “I am not being conscripted into making bombs for your little Nazi bunker.”

Magnus blinked. “Bombs? Oh. Well. Don’t worry about those. Make flasks. Those stupid new recruits are breaking enough of them upstairs. You’d think they didn’t learn anything from Snape, given the sludge they churn out.”

Heather gave him a curious look. “Blast, forgot, you aren’t a Hogwarts girl.” He stirred the coals and took up the bellows. “Snape teaches Potions at the school. Making in Potions in a stocked lab with bought ingredients is completely different from making it out on the field though, with whatever crap you’ve got to hand, when you’re wounded. She and Alecto are drilling them on survival tactics.” He pumped the bellows furiously for a few long minutes. “You should go.”

In truth, Heather wasn’t sure how she felt about taking lessons with what amounted to the bloody Nazi Youth. She had a feeling it would please Voldemort, which was reason in itself not to do it. Thester had been teaching her first aid, wasn’t that enough? Besides, she couldn’t be completely sure none of them would be holding a grudge for the night she’d tried to escape. She was sure Thester had probably magicked all their wounds away, but she couldn’t restore their pride or standing. She’d humiliated them before the Dark Lord, and they were more anxious to impress him than Dad had been with the directors at Grunnings.
“I’m not sure,” she murmured.

He snorted. “Listen, Lady. Not all the men here are as sweet-tempered as yours truly. That little display of yours with Thester and your likeness to old Bella Bitch might have made them step cautiously around you for a bit, but it’s not going to last forever. Sooner or later, someone’s going to get jealous that you’re so high in the Lord’s graces, and decide that the best way to step up themselves will be to knock you off.”

She felt sick. Granted, this was starting to be how she felt all the time.

“Why are you helping me?”

He stood up from his brazier and gave her a rakish grin, swiping the sweat off his forehead. “I’ve got eyes, Lady.” He gave her an appreciative glance. “You’re a lovely sweet thing. Kind of thing really shouldn’t be in this war. But if the Lord wanted to drag you in here, as you are, and trussed in Steel no less--well, I’m not stupid either. You mean as much to him as that snake of his. I could kill you, but it wouldn’t get me honoured. The Lord would kill me and bind my bones to the Wall.”

That ended that conversation.

The Wall of Souls encircled the perimeter of the property, and had only been put up in the last fifty years.

This was a terrible thing.

In the abstract, Heather knew that thousands of people died in war, but it was different from seeing the evidence of it in the flesh.

The Wall was made of bones.

Muggle bones, mostly, with the powerful carved skeletons of wizards and magical creatures spaced out evenly between. The long bones stuck into the ground as supports, tied thick with sinew and scraps of tanned skin, verbebrae scattered loose at the base. She would have expected the structure to be flimsy, but someone had trained ivy thick through the bones, adding more femurs and ribs as the vines cemented the old in place. The Death Eaters each claimed their own special bit of wall to display their victims. Some enterprising souls, Magnus told her, with a sick grin on his face, buried their victims alive at the posts, or magicked the vines through their bodies so that they joined the wall, still breathing.

Bella potted roses in the skulls of her toys and hung them along her section.

She was almost grateful to the Dark Lord that she couldn’t feel magic through the Steel. She didn’t want to know what the wall felt like.

And yet.

She caught glimpses of it, as it was in summer, from the Lord’s mind. It was lovely then, the roses blossoming in the empty eyes of a skull, the greenness of the ivy to the white of bone, songbirds flitting through the ribcages of his dead enemies. It was almost beautiful now, the rough dark boughs wove thick through the smooth pallor of bone.

She shook her head as though it were an Etch-A-Sketch, and the movement could somehow erase the irreverent thought. Block the Dark Lord’s feelings that, more and more, seemed to colour her own.
She loved the grounds though, in spite of the Wall. It was quiet and peaceful there in the early morning. Most people preferred the Arena for training now that the snow had drifted waist-deep in places, even though they could easily clear paths with their wanded magic. She didn’t care about the height of the snow, or even the cold. The Goblin Steel kept her warm, and she ran barefoot through the gardens on her silver-shod feet, collecting holly and evergreen boughs as she went.

For, as she was slowly realizing, it is impossible to grieve forever. Sooner or later, whether you want to be or not, you will be happy again.

Perhaps what she was feeling was too muted and interrupted by fear to be properly called happiness, but it wasn’t all bad either.

Because Christmas was coming, and even the bloody heathens in Voldemort’s Court made concession to Christmas. She’d expected them to practice pagan ritual—Saturnalia, or Solstice. Magnus had laughed at the supposition.

“Saturnia? Solstice?” he guffawed. “As far as I know, Saturn died years ago.”

“He was an actual person?” She shook her head. “Of course he was a real person.”

“Yeah,” Magnus raked his hair back. “Most of the old families had days when the Muggles of old paid them tribute, but hells if the Dark Lord is going to force everyone to celebrate one group’s rite. Christmas is something everyone can agree on. There’s a bit of every cult mixed up in it.”

She really didn’t want to ask the question, but she did anyways.

“Was Jesus a wizard?”

The man gave her a look.

“Girl. Don’t talk blasphemy.”

She went away somewhat bewildered from that conversation.

The house was beautiful. If the long years in Azkaban had taken the sanity of the Dark Lord’s men, it had removed none of their desire for creature comforts. Heather still avoided all the Death Eaters but Magnus, but down the corridors, she could see them stringing up the conifer boughs she left by the door after her rambles and spelling them with fairy lights. Mistletoe hung over every doorway. And for awhile, someone had magicked a light to flash green in the front hall—until the ratty Death Eater she’d taken a bite out of fainted dead on seeing it, thinking it was the Death Curse.

She didn’t dare go to the Dark Lord’s table, but as it turned colder, the fare brought to her by the house elves became progressively more festive. Caramelized ham with pineapple, shepherd’s pies, spiced pheasant. Fruitcakes. Her pancakes, bacon and eggs were invariably arranged in a smiley face, as though somehow the house-elves knew how unhappy she was, and sympathized with her. When she snuggled by the fire by nights, a mug of hot chocolate and a plate of smiling shortbread men at hand, she almost felt at home.

She was reading by the window when Bella kicked the door open, shoving a heavy trunk through the air to land at the foot of the bed. “Heather, dearest, we’re home!” she sang, clomping in with her muddy combat boots before she flung herself on the freshly-made bed.

Heather shuddered— as much at the dirt as her cousin’s unwelcome return—before a lighter set of
footsteps in the door distracted her.

“Narcissa,” she exclaimed, slipping a ribbon into her book to mark the page before standing up to greet her. They embraced briefly, before the older woman tucked one of her curls back behind an ear and kissed her cheek. “How have you been? What’s going on at the Manor?”

Narcissa scarcely parted her lips to reply before a mad loud laugh cut her off. They turned to find Bella shaking with mirth on the bed, slamming her fists down against her thighs in merriment.

“At the Manor?” she gasped, before pausing for breath and bounding off the bed to the girl, before seizing her cheeks in her hands. “All manner of things mad, bad, and dangerous to know, is what. Silly lovely, did you miss me, sweetness?” She pecked the girl on the lips, a kiss light as a razor. “We merely initiated your stupid cousin into the family.”

“Bella,” Narcissa fixed her sister with a look before moving to one of the armchairs. Bella paid her no heed.

“Don’t be silly, Cissy. Your son is stupid and craven,” Bella herself flopped down in an armchair, her back against one armrest and her legs hanging over the other. “I’m surprised he survived.”

“Should I ask?” Heather addressed the question to Narcissa, before folding back the now muddy comforter to sit primly at the edge of the bed.

Narcissa’s lips were a thin line. “There are rites of binding used by the ancient families that can draw their heirs closer together or strengthen someone’s access to ancestral magics.”

“Sounds useful,” Heather ventured cautiously. “So what did this rite involve?”

Bella laughed gleefully, while Narcissa looked profoundly disturbed.

“Never mind then,” Heather murmured.

“Oh no, lovely,” Bella sprang up. “I can teach you everything you want to know about binding a man with your blood—we can begin with the idiot I’ve been keeping downstairs—“


“No, wait.” Heather pressed. “Binding with blood—does that have anything to do with why you took my blood before you left?”

Bella giggled helplessly.

Narcissa eyed her sister through slitted lids. “Probably. Even though you’re not as close a relation to the Black Family as the rest of us, you’re closer to the ideal than many. Brave. Clever. Unyielding. She probably hoped to encourage the same qualities to surface in Draco.”

“You’re trying to change your son’s personality with a ritual,” Heather confirmed flatly.

Narcissa shrugged. “The effects of ritual are poorly documented, but no magic can bring forth and sustain something that doesn’t already exist, at least in part. It can’t make you brave, but it can still the part of you that wants to run. It can increase your magic. And,” she paused, “there are other benefits.”

“Like?”

Narcissa ignored the question. “Bella and I came here for the initiation ritual of the new Death Eaters
on the Solstice. The Dark Lord is having a soiree that evening so we may all express our congratulations to the new recruits. He informed me that you were to attend, and asked that I drop off your new robes for the occasion.” She floated a large paper bag full of parcels onto the bed. “These are for you.”

Heather teased apart the wrappings, before setting it down and giving her mentor a slow stare.

“He cannot honestly believe I am wearing these.”

Narcissa gave her a slow, assured smile.

“He hasn’t seen them yet. I am the one who honestly believes you will be wearing those, and doing so with all the grace I have taught you.”

Heather glanced back into the bag dubiously.

“Clothing,” Narcissa whispered, voice soft as a shudder of silk, “is a woman’s armour. We don’t paint our house insignias on our shields as the men, because the insignia itself is our shield. The right symbol, at the right time, can make you untouchable.” Her voice became tender, almost apologetic. “Even it does belong to a man you dislike.”

The girl had no words.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to all you lovely people who reviewed! Please remember tomorrow is Ravenclaw House Pride Day, so wear lots of navy and bronze! Have a lovely week, and please do say hello on your way out!

Cheers!
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter.

Warning: For torture, violence, sexual innuendo, inhumane treatment of animals.

Heather had never been physical, or competitive. Fighting had always been Dudley’s shtick. She would much rather be reading, thank you very much. If she’d attended his boxing matches at all, or suffered through sports on the telly, it had always been in the name of family solidarity.

Which was why her abrupt pleasure in the little battles Voldemort staged for her in the Arena took her aback. Sure, a good portion of her enjoyment was suspect—she couldn’t defend her mind and her body at once. It no doubt pleased the Dark Lord to flood her mind with his own feelings—but if she was being realistic, it was more complicated than that.

She was angry, and frustrated, and maybe just as cage-crazy as any other prisoner in the Dark Lord’s keeping. Fighting was as much an outlet for her as it was for them.

So when the man collected her from the library for another skirmish, she found it difficult to conceal her eagerness.

“What are we doing today?” she asked neutrally, hustling to keep up with the Lord’s much longer stride. Honestly, was he always in a rush? She never expected a terrorist to have a busy schedule—not that she’d given it much thought before arriving here.

He gave her a distinctly unimpressed look, that said very clearly he did not enjoy being compared to Muggles, whatever their profession. “Time is a precious resource. No matter how much you have, it’s never enough. I am disinclined to waste mine.”

“You’re,” immortal, she tried to say, though the second word wouldn’t even be shaped by her lips. He smiled.

“Yes. And yet, having a surplus of a resource does not allow one to squander it.” He held the door to the first level dungeons open for her. “Or were you never told to clean your plate because children are starving in the colonies?”

She stepped in, and he followed, at her back. “A very philanthropic sentiment from you, my Lord.”

“I never said I believed it, but it seemed to be the kind of reasoning you’d accept.”

“Why do you really rush?”

He was silent.

“You enjoy it, don’t you?” she pressed. “Perhaps the Dark Lord has human foibles after all.”

She tasted, rather than felt his annoyance this time, acerbic as vinegar. “It is hardly a weakness, and
therefore irrelevant.”

“Things don’t need to be relevant to be interesting.”

He ignored her. “You’ve proved competent in dealing with minor threats to your person. Today, I will be giving you the opportunity to deal with someone who truly wants to kill you.”

She gaped.

“Don’t be ridiculous. If I did not think you capable of defending yourself, I would not place you in this position. Needless to say, I will be very disappointed if I am forced to resurrect you.”

“You and me both,” she muttered.

He came to a cell Heather knew quite well—one that had ‘Property of Bellatrix Lestrange’ carved crudely on the door—and threw open the door. A bucket smelling of unspeakables came flying at them a moment later, spattering over the Dark Lord’s robes. His response was delayed a moment by the hilarity coruscating through Heather’s side of the bond.

“Crucio,” he snapped, enraged.

Even as the man seized, Heather couldn’t stop herself. She giggled. The fury radiating from the Dark Lord increased exponentially, as he saw himself through her eyes, covered in shit, and that only made her laugh harder. She clutched the side of the door for support, hiccupping as she tried to stop, realizing the more she laughed, the worse the man would suffer.

She sobered.

The crucio still lasted a full two minutes, leaving the man jerking and tremulous in his chains. A narrow line of bloody drool tipped out his mouth. He’d bit his tongue during the seizures. And after all that, he was still coherent.

“Fuck oo, bastard,” he mumbled, glaring disfocusedly at them. “And fuck oo, stupid Bellabitch.”

The Dark Lord spelled his robes clean with unnecessary violence, so that the threads pulled loose and the fabric warped on the ends. She could still see shit in the detailing on his boots. Apparently cleaning and home ec weren’t required courses for his career path.

Then again, given how many bootlickers the man had, his footwear ought to be clean in no time.

The Dark Lord massaged his forehead in irritation as he unchained the man from the wall wandlessly, and dragged him forward on his hands and knees.

“This,” he shook the man for emphasis, “is what you’ll be dealing with today.” You are equally annoying to me and share the same misbegotten sense of humour, so I intend to let you punish each other for it.

“Who is he?” she eyed him up. She’d practised spells on him before, of course, but usually the Dark Lord or Bella kept him bond and gagged—“To protect your virgin ears,” Bella had explained fondly, and Heather hadn’t bothered correcting her.

“A souvenir from Azkaban,” the Dark Lord said with finality. “He’s killed many men, and has a penchant for vigilante justice.”

“So you decided to keep him isolated from the public out of the goodness of your heart,” she muttered, as they dragged the man up to the Arena.
“He had the potential to be more of a nuisance to me than my enemies, and Bella was rather set on keeping him as a pet. It seemed prudent to give her a hobby.”

“Why not crocheting or needlework?”

The Dark Lord gave her a Look. “Such as you do? I would prefer not to find my home leveled when I return to it.”

She flushed.

There were a couple Death Eaters sparring in the Arena, but on seeing the Lord enter, they both bowed and went up into the Stands. She followed the Dark Lord into the Arena, and he cancelled the suppression and handed her the wand.

“Now,” he told her. “Kindly do not lose this. If this prisoner gets loose, I’d rather hate to put him down by way of defending my other servants. Please use nonfatal attacks.”

A snap of his fingers, and the bonds on the prisoner were gone.

He stood shaking in the ring, his matted dark hair hanging past his shoulders, the beginnings of runic tattoos visible at the neck of his loose black robe. His eyes were glazed.

“Bella,” he whispered.

“Why does everyone think I’m Bella?” she muttered, eying him up.

He laughed madly. “Not going to do anything, Bella? What’s the matter? Why’d you drag me out—can’t be for the change in scenery.” He sniffed, and an odd look came on his face. “You smell wrong though. Smell like you know who. You been fucking him again, Bella?” he stepped towards her. “Course you have. But you smell like James too.” He sniffed again, his expression turning crazed. “What did you do to his body, Bella? Where is he?”

She prepared to strike.

“For the first and last time, I’m not Bella.”

He grinned manically. “And I’m not serious.”

That was all the warning she had before he lunged forward in a smear of shadow that coalesced into a great black dog leaping for her throat. She fell backwards.

“Petrificus totalus,” she snapped. The thing shifted shape in mid-air to avoid the curse, the shadows spinning onto the ground before it coalesced once more, ready to pounce.

Shadows, huh? Let’s see how this thing does with fire, then. She retreated a step, and as it lunged again, drew a swath of blue witchfire before her like a shield. Its fur caught fire, but it kept coming, and leapt for her side.

Fuck non-fatal attacks.

“Accio corum,” she snapped, dodging to the side.

For the first time ever, her wand failed her. It wasn’t her. She’d done the spell perfectly before. But for some reason, the magic died in the wand, and the brute’s teeth ripped into her thigh a moment later. It shook its head, tearing. Fuck Voldemort. She chucked the wand into her pocket, grasped the underside of its jaw in one hand, hooking her fingers into the corners of its lips. With the other, she
jabbed the thing in the throat.

She might not know magic, but she’d be damned if she didn’t know dogs.

She’d triggered the vomiting reflex with the pressure to its throat. It retched, whirling back at her a moment later. She shot another series of petrification jinxes at it, forcing it to disperse into the shadows to avoid it.

This time, she was ready.

She flung ring after ring of the bluebell flames into the teeming mass of motion and darkness that broke it up like a mass of oil in water. She refused to let it reform. It pulsed towards her. Where it touched, it seared her skin. When it touched, it broke through her mind like a nightmare, terror washing through her.

The untouchable calm of the Dark Lord grounded her, but barely.

So the thing was sensitive to light?

“Lumos maxima,” she bellowed. Her wand lit up like a magnesium flare, and she crushed her eyes shut at the brilliance of it. Opening them, she found a fine dark mist floating above the Arena. Lips narrowed, she prepared the spell once more.

A slow clap came from the Dark Lord, joined a moment later by the two Death Eaters sitting in the wings.

“That will be all for today,” he told pleasantly. “Let the beast reform.”

The mist grew denser, until beads of black oil seemed to hang in the air.

“What the hell is that thing?” she gasped, clapping a hand to her wounded leg and limping over to the exit.

“Language,” he reprimanded her. “And it is a Grim.”

She gave him a look, and made to stump through the doorway, but he stopped her. “No, I believe it would be informative for you to watch it regain its shape.”

“I’m bleeding,” she pointed out flatly. He ignored her.

Irately, she stripped off her outer robe and muttered a diffindo to create some makeshift bandages.

“What’s a Grim anyways?” she asked, mostly because he seemed to expect the question of her.

“A rare animagus found exclusively among the descendants of the one of the first covens established in the British Isles. Little is known about their actual abilities, and I doubt this one has bothered to learn much himself.” He stared with interest at the thickening mist, swirling lazily like smoke as it gathered itself.

“He’s moving purely on instinct. Well done—this is the first time I’ve seen him forced into an intermediate state. A simple solution—light. How ironic.”

At this remark, she sent a questioning sensation through their minds. He brushed it aside, to her irritation, focusing instead on the roiling mist. It shouldered up against the perimeter of the ring, made the defensive shields light up like a laser array, before sinking to the ground, shuddering into the figure of the man.
Heather stared.

The man hadn’t been exactly of a normal weight to begin with, but now—he sprawled emaciated out on the ground, cheeks hollow as a skull’s, hair burnt, his bare legs thin as bones. Heather stepped forward in shock, the Dark Lord laying a hand on her shoulder to stop her.

“Magic always has a price,” he murmured. “Jugson, Dolohov—do please carry our dog back down to his cage. Gently—you know how Bella does hate those who wreck her toys. And please, ask Thester to examine him.” His lips twisted, and he gestured for Heather to follow him. “I ought to have had her on hand, but I hadn’t thought you’d be capable of such damage.”

“He was unarmed,” Heather said dismissively.

“Arms mean nothing to a shape-shifter—or have you forgotten Severus’ duel with the werewolf?”

She winced.

“As you are aware, one does not need a wand to use magic. As for your opponent’s condition—animagi, unlike ‘natural’ shifters like werewolves, need a considerable amount of energy to change shape, and even more to assume an intermediate form, if it is available to them.” His gaze shifted to her. “I will stress this again: avoid using the basic forms. As effective as they are, they consume too much energy. Deplete your reserves, and the energy has to come from somewhere. It will come from your body. You can sacrifice yourself to power a curse if you are careless.”

“Why not sacrifice something else? Can’t you, oh, pull in energy from your environment?”

He stopped ahead, so she almost ran into him.

“Why indeed,” he murmured approvingly. “There are ways. Perhaps I will teach you some.”

Somehow, she doubted this meant anything good.

And then, it was the Solstice.

She originally had no intention of leaving her room while the Manor was over-brimming with raucous Death Eaters in varying states of intoxication—but then, the Dark Lord had ordered her presence at the initiation and after-party that evening.

“And if I don’t come?”

His bald stare had ceased to unsettle her.

“Then I will possess you and walk you into the room myself.” His lips curled slyly. “I trust you will avoid the indignation.”

She tore their link wide, barely registering his surprise at the action before she slapped him. The pain was worth the knowing that he felt its echo. She doubled back to hit him again before he grabbed her arm.

“Creative,” he approved, while she seethed. “I should almost hesitate to give you an occlumency teacher, if this is the use you make of our bond.”

In truth, she was growing accustomed to the link and reluctantly beginning to see its benefits. As little as she enjoyed feeling the Lord’s comfort in the aftermath of torture, feeling nauseous at the
mere sight of blood was worse. She couldn’t hide what she felt, not well enough to fool any of the Death Eaters here. Channeling the Dark Lord’s mind balanced her, helped her look stable when she least felt it.

And besides. The bond was her only means to hurt him.

“Would you at least give me back the use of my magic? Just for the Solstice?”

He laughed at the request, sprawled back in his armchair in their macabre classroom, while their practice dummy for the evening flinched at the noise.

“I should, shouldn’t I?” he considered. “You ought to be learning duelling, and the new recruits will be eager to test their mettle.”

“I don’t think I’m ready to duel any of them.”

“I doubt they’d try it if you were,” he smiled. “However, they seem to recognize you as off-limits, despite my discretion in favouring you. Pity.”

Heather didn’t think it was a pity at all, especially if it meant no one was likely to attack her on the sly.

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that,” the Dark Lord murmured. “My men do tend to indulge one way or another on these occasions. They might not be lucid enough to recognize you as out of bounds. I’ve had to euthanize a few exceptionally stupid ones myself on these occasions. It would be kind of you to do it for me, I suppose… but you wouldn’t use your magic in that way, would you?”

Heather stilled her mind and was silent.

The Dark Lord nodded. “Of course you wouldn’t,” he confirmed. “You’d hide in the shadows and look for the foundation stones and do your very best to destroy this Manor by way of vexing me.”

He didn’t sound angry. If anything, his tone was indulgent—like that of Aunt Marge when one of her prize pups had managed to chew a boot to shreds while it was still on Dudley’s foot.

“I could just use Muggle means to do that,” she told him stubbornly.

He turned his most condescending look on her, and she bristled.

“You cannot and you have not. As you have no doubt noticed, there are fire retardant charms all over this house. Or do you think Bella would not have mentioned your little attempt to cook her in bed?”

She flushed with embarrassment, and he laughed.

“If you are nurturing a penchant for cannibalism, however, there are far better ways to prepare the meat, ones I might even find permissible. Take this piece, for instance,” he gestured to the man, and dragged him before them with a flick of his wand before ungagging him roughly. “Ted Tonks, tell me what you know of the whereabouts of your wife and daughter.”

The man lay like a dead thing, lips sealed stubbornly shut.

“Oh, lovely, if you’d really like to have your magic for awhile—prove to me you can use it proficiently. Encourage this man to speak.”

She stared disgustedly, and even the Lord’s amusement colouring her thoughts was not enough to
change her mind. She flung the magnolia wand at his head and stalked out of the room, the magic suppression in the Steel dulling her perceptions a moment later.

She’d have to hope Narcissa’s armour was enough.

The next evening, the Lestrange brothers appeared by their door, offering to escort Bellatrix and Heather down to the ballroom. Heather eyed up Rabastan from his nicotine yellow fingers to his missing teeth, and demurred. He sniffed, offended.

“Hoity-toity for a mudblood bitch,” he muttered, moving to grab her chin. “The Lord should have put you on your knees where you belong—“

Bellatrix smoothly intercepted his hand, twisting it into an armlock with one hand, while the other jabbed a wand up into his jaw. She turned into him, close as a lover. “Now, now, brother dearest,” she coaxed. “Mudblood she might be, but she’s my mudblood, and the Dark Lord’s. She,” she put some pressure on his joint for emphasis, “is not the one forgetting her place.”

Rabastan panted while his brother just looked on in amusement.

“And my place?” he gritted out.

“Why,” Bella said brightly, “at my side, of course!” She released his arm, and he nearly sobbed in relief before attempting to slap her. She ducked and rushed him, slamming him back against the chair so that it upturned itself. They rolled over the side until she forced him to the ground.

“Or under me, I suppose,” she murmured, considering their current position, “though it is rather early in the evening for that.” She stood up, dusting off her skirts, while the rather bedraggled Lestrange brother stared grumpily up at her. “In any case, loveling,” she grinned, with teeth as yellow as any of the Azkaban escapees, and offered an arm to help him up, “I will make sure you don’t enjoy our games as much as usual. Come on, Rabbit.”

He grimaced. The elder Lestrange brother, much neater for not having fought, took Bellatrix’s left arm. Rabastan reluctantly grasped Bella’s left.

“I hate that name,” he muttered.

She turned a smug smile on him. “But it so suits you. Come along, my mudblood bitch.”

“Not yet,” Heather extemporized. “My hair isn’t fixed right.” She pretended to fuss with the hairpins Magnus had gifted her, long narrow things made of silver encrusted with smoky quartz.

“Come on, Bells,” the elder Lestrange brother urged. “The Lord does not tolerate lateness.” He eyed Heather irately. She returned his glance with an icy hauteur. “At least, not from most of us.”

“Yes, the Master should not be kept waiting,” Bella conceded. Rodolphus opened the door, but there was someone there.

“Young Malfoy,” he scoffed. “Missing your Daddy already? Come to look for him? Maybe cry to your Aunty Bella because your duelling teacher is too mean to you?”

“Hardly,” he said. To his credit, his voice didn’t crack with fear. “I’m looking for Lady Potter. My mother sent me up to escort her.”
“Lady, now,” muttered Rabastan, before a pinch from Bella told him to mind his tongue. “She’s in the room, boy. Fitting he sends a whining whelp to mind the bitch anyways.”

Bellatrix moved through the door, and Rab, with his arm interlaced with hers, had no choice but to follow. Draco moved behind them.

“Close the door,” Heather ordered coolly. Her cousin did so, and regarded her in the mirror. There was an awkward silence.

“My seamstress made those robes.”

“Well, please thank her for me. I’m unfamiliar with the material or the stitching used on it, and I would enjoy learning her techniques.”

“That’s servants’ work,” Malfoy protested, and she turned to him.

Servants’ work cost your friend an eye, and you the Dark Lord’s favour.

She didn’t say it, of course. No need to encourage enmity where it already had a chance to thrive.

“Let’s go,” she told him. She took his arm, and they progressed in relative silence down to the ballroom. The festivities had already started, and it was crowded with dancing couples. A band played classical waltzes in the corner.

“I would not have thought any of the Dark Lord’s men musicians,” she murmured.

“They’re not,” Draco replied. “But most of us keep a few captive songbirds to entertain our guests.”

Just when she thought wizarding society couldn’t get any more medieval…

“You keep Muggles as slaves?”

“Well, it’s not like they’re good for much else,” he defended. “We take good care of them. We feed them and house them and give them the best instruments money can buy. I doubt they could do so well, living outside our patronage.”

Human trafficking. Yes, they’d sunk to a new low.

“Does the Dark Lord keep Muggle servants?” she asked.

Draco sniffed. “Probably.”

“Where?” she asked, perhaps a little too eagerly.

He grimaced. “So you’re one of those,” he said disgustedly.

“One of what?”

“One of those people that goes around campaigning for the rights of animals and half-breeds and servants. You’ll be protesting for werewolf employment and knitting hats to free house-elves next.”

“Of course not!” she exclaimed. “I’m not stupid. Dangerous creatures should be kept where they can’t infect anyone else—“

“Mr. Malfoy, Lady Potter, while I may agree with your sentiments, I fear this is not the appropriate forum to discuss them given the mixed company,” came a low voice behind them. Draco paled—a remarkable feat, given his skin tone—and turned abruptly.
“Minister Crouch!”

Heather goggled. “Minister?” What on earth was a Ministry official doing in Voldemort’s house? Unless…

“You can’t be imperio’d,” she murmured.

“We do not often invite our puppets to such festivities,” he agreed. “It would be a shame to waste wine of such a vintage on people who can ill appreciate it.” He finished sipping his beverage and set it on a platter as one of the waitstaff walked by. “Thank you, Armand.” The butler nodded an acknowledgement and continued on through the crowd.

“How,” she asked lowly, “is a Death Eater positioned as the highest man in the country?”

Barty smiled. “I’m flattered, Miss. Potter, but I rather doubt anyone in the know would call the Minister for Magic ‘the highest man in the country’. The Ministry is a relatively recent innovation of the last millennium. As such, we have jurisdiction over the younger, weaker wizards—“

“Mudbloods,” Draco clarified.

“But the Old Ones and the ancient Houses tend to manage themselves as they always have. Granted,” he mused with annoyance, “most of the Ministry Staff are too idealistic or ignorant to recognize their boundaries. The Auror Department is clamoring for me to declare a State of Emergency, but they don’t have the least notion how to war against real Dark Wizards, let alone our Lord. The moment I give the word, their blood will be running through the streets.”

He sounded pleased.

“As for my position, well, my allegiances are not common knowledge. I’m sure my father had his suspicions, but they’ve dried up since I’ve shaped up into such a competent, ethical man of office, in keeping with the family tradition,” he laughed. “And since I’ve been running the Ministry for the last four years—well. Pride covers a multitude of sins.”

Heather didn’t know what to say to this, but there was something she wanted to know.

“If the Ministry is practically useless—why isn’t the Dark Lord running the country openly?”

Barty’s lips twisted sourly.

“Not all the Ancient Houses support us, and the only other Lord-level wizard in Britain who bothers with public affairs, Dumbledore, is constantly bungling our plans.”

“Dumbledore,” she murmured. “Is he more powerful than the Dark Lord then, to suppress him?”

“Such insolence,” sneered a man who had come to join them, “though I’d hardly expect anything less from a Mudblood.”

“Amycus,” Minister Crouch greeted.

“To what do I owe this pleasure?” Heather asked flatly, stepping forwards, ignoring Draco’s warning hand at her elbow. “We’ve never met, have we?”

“Forgive me,” he said mockingly. “Wherever are my manners? Amycus Carrow,” he said, with a silly little bow that was barely a dip of the head.

Thester’s son. He looked at least as old as her, though it was difficult to tell a wizard’s age.
“And you will not introduce yourself to me?”

She looked at him disdainfully. “You address me so familiarly already, I believe we are past introductions.”

He mimicked her words back to her. “So haughty,” he sneered.

“I’m no different from any of you then,” she told him irately, wondering if she could make it to the banquet table before the rat-man ate up all the smoked salmon. Amycus followed her gaze.

“No different?” he repeated. “You really mean to say no one’s told you?”

“Told me what?” she snapped.

“They haven’t,” he realized, gleefully. Draco looked uncertain as to whether he wished to be present for this.

“Do you even know who your parents were?”

She ignored him, and started dragging Draco towards the banquet tables.

“James Potter, a white wizard. A pureblood, is what, and he dirtied himself with that mudblood mother of yours. Dark Lord put them down like the dogs they were, should have killed you in the cradle—“

She turned and slapped him.

The conversations in the vicinity hushed.

“You dare,” he snapped, drawing a wand from his pocket, and she stepped up, heart pounding with adrenaline and poorly contained rage.

“I dare,” she said icily, toying with her hair, allowing it to float down as she palmed the long silver pins and considered him. “Go ahead, Carrow. Curse me.” She raised her head a little. “It won’t do you any good. The Dark Lord’s Steel will absorb the blow. Funny that,” she sneered, “whatever his intentions might have been for me in the past, he seems a lot more concerned about protecting me at the moment than you. But I’m sure he won’t take offense at a man trying to damage his property when he’s so clearly marked it as out of bounds,” she lifted a hand and shook the chains bitterly. To her surprise, Carrow put his wand away.

“You’ll never be one of us,” he sneered. “You can wear his colours and his Mark, but you’ll never be one of us.”

“Who said I wanted to be one of you?” she responded tartly, stepping in. “I plan to be much, much more than that.”

“Like his whore?” he spat.

A curse flew by her ear, and she had a breathless moment before she realized it was not aimed at her after all. Carrow was red in the face and choking for air, and the ugly tall man was stalking past her, wand trained on the man.

“Amycus,” he said drily. “I believe the countercurse to this spell is ‘I apologize’. Would you please say it?”

The man mouthed something that looked appreciably like ‘Fuck you.’
Severus sighed and twitched his wand a little more. Amycus began drooling at the mouth. Thester came running up.

“Severus!”

“I apologize, Thester, but I am rather preoccupied at the moment. Could we have this discussion later.”

“Severus, please, you know how stubborn he is—“

He huffed. “Very well.” A moment later, he cancelled the curse, and Thester rushed up to her son, who slumped to the floor.

“Come, Miss. Potter. Draco,” he eyed the boy, “I would have expected you to take better care in defending your cousin’s honour.”

“She was doing just fine by herself,” he muttered.

Severus took her by the arm. “Some juice, I think, as a tonic for your nerves, and then we’ll sit down for awhile.”

Amycus wheezed with hideous laughter from the floor as they began to turn away. “Figures,” he muttered, Thester trying unsuccessfully to shush him. “Figures you’d be chasing this bitch’s tail, given how much you liked her mother. But then, you always liked rolling in the mud, didn’t you, Snape? Reminds you of where you came from, doesn’t it?”

Snape turned back furiously, but Amycus was already snapping a curse at him. Severus deflected it by instinct into the walls, where it exploded.

The Dark Lord’s eyes snapped to them from the dais.

“This is hardly the forum for this discussion,” Severus told him.

“Another ‘demonstration’ for the new recruits then?” Amycus’ eyes glittered. “I never remember you being this eager to participate—but then, since Greyback bit you, you’ve changed, haven’t you?”

“Duel me,” Snape said viciously, “and you’ll find out exactly how much. Miss. Potter—“

“She doesn’t know, does she? That you sold out her parents just as much as that rat Pettigrew. They’d be rolling in their graves right now, to see her in those robes,” he snickered. “Actually, take her downstairs in those robes. Let her godfather see her. The reaction would be just as good.”

Heather tried to turn back, but Severus kept her walking, Draco following behind. “What does he mean?” she hissed at him.

Severus poured her a glass of red juice before gesturing for her to take a seat in one of the hard-backed wooden chairs scattered around the perimeter. “What is this?” she asked dubiously, sniffing the juice. “Blood of the innocent mixed with rohypnol?”

“Regrettably no. Doubtless that would make it more palatable. Nothing more corrupt than fruit punch, and it’s early enough in the night that I doubt your keeper has had a chance to spike it yet. Just drink it, you don’t have the expertise yet to identify a potion by scent anyhow.”

She refrained from mentioning how as a Parselmouth, she probably could, before abandoning her mother’s warnings about drinking at parties and just drinking. It was bitter with cranberries and
carbonated, and tasted no different than the stuff Petunia put out for parties.

Draco had drifted off to see his friends. She set the empty glass aside.

“What was he talking about?” she pressed. “My godfather? And you knew my parents?”

Snape had an awful look on his face.

“I cannot believe no one has explained this to you, but this is neither the time nor place for it.”

“It might be neither, but I mean to know, and now,” she glared at him.

He pinched his nose irritably. “You really want to know?” he said lowly. “Fine. Your father was as arrogant a man as any of these pureBloods. Your mother was a fine woman, but horribly naïve about her place in this world, and her death was probably assured from the moment she married above her station, but getting mixed up with an Auror just hastened it. Pettigrew over there,” he curled his lip at the fat, balding man bumbling about the other end of the buffet table, “was the Secret Keeper for your parents’ location. He gave it up to the Dark Lord.”

She watched Pettigrew distantly. His long-sleeved robes covered the place where she’d bitten a chunk out of his arm last summer, when he’d dragged her screaming from her home with the other Death Eaters.

“And you?” she asked bitterly, forcing her eyes from the fat man. “What did you do?”

“I did nothing,” he told her.

She glanced at him. Liar.

“Sometimes nothing is the worst thing you can do.”

“Spare me your platitudes,” she told him, and he felt a sense of déjà vu, as she spoke to him the way he often did to the Headmaster. “Where’s this godfather of mine?”

“In the dungeons,” he offered. “Everyone assumed he must have been the Secret-Keeper, and Pettigrew framed him for his murder. The Dark Lord brought him back from Azkaban.”

“Why would he bother?”

“The Blacks are an Ancient House, and have turned out some of the Darkest wizards in history. Even if Sirius Black was, at one time, a white wizard, I expect a decade in Azkaban under false charges is enough to make anyone rethink their life. He was the Ministry’s Bellatrix at one point—ruthless and reckless enough that you doubted his sanity. If he used the Arts?” Snape snorted. “The bastard would probably burn half the country just to demonstrate how unhappy he was.”

Heather was feeling a certain amount of sympathy for this Sirius Black.

“Why not just kill him then?”

“Being of both pureblood and an ancient House grants one a certain degree of immunity,” Snape responded.

“But you’re not pureblood, are you?” she pressed. “I’ve never seen the name Snape in any of my books.”

“My mother was a Prince,” he explained. He surveyed the room. “Unless you dearly wish to speak
with Jugson or Dolohov, may I propose a dance?”

She noticed the men moving vaguely in their direction. She’d seen them in the halls before—supposed that a public venue, really, was the best place to introduce herself to them—but, in all honesty, she didn’t feel like talking. Not after everything she’d just learnt.

“Please,” she said, offering him her arm.

Most of the couples dancing here were male, given that there were almost no women in the Dark Lord’s forces. A few die-hard loyalists brought their elder daughters here to mix and mingle, but she guessed there was a certain degree of distrust regarding the sanity of the Azkaban refugees who lived here.

Agility runes notwithstanding, she stepped on Snape’s toes. Narcissa hadn’t had time to teach her the waltz, and Bella’s teaching, while enthusiastic, was rather lacking in rhythm or reason. She fancied she was getting quite decent though when they were interrupted by the dais.

“Severus,” the man’s voice rose above the music. Reflexively, Snape stopped dancing, turned the girl out of the whirling pairs.

“My Lord,”

“And Heather,” the man stepped down the dais, eying her up unpleasantly. “Green and black suit you. It brings out her eyes—wouldn’t you agree, Severus?”

The man murmured assent.

“Severus will be your Occlumency teacher. I am also ordering you to join his Potions classes with the new recruits, as you have not taken the initiative to do so yourself yet.”

She glared mutely at him.

“Now, a dance please, girl, before the ceremony starts. It does well to reassure my followers that I am a kind and merciful Lord in seeing me treat the daughter of my deceased enemies as my ward.”

She followed him onto the dance floor.

“I want to see my godfather,” she demanded, as he began to lead her through the steps.

“Already?” he chided mercilessly. “But my dear, you just saw him the other day.”

An image of the tattooed man came to mind. To the Dark Lord’s pleasure, a flush of anger suffused her cheeks in place of the pallor of shock he’d seen the last few months. She’d grown comfortable enough, bold enough, to be angry. A frisson of rage shuddered through the bond, but didn’t turn into hate.

You can’t hate yourself. It hurts too much.

“Dear, dear,” he grasped her closer. “So angry.”

“Did you expect otherwise?”

A muscle in his cheek twitched. It could have been the start of a smile.

“Little horcrux,” he murmured, “you defy expectation.” He moved her fluidly into a New Yorker, their backs pressed against each other, palms out, and drew her back in again. “You are a stranger
thing than I could have expected to find in my soul. I wonder,” he mused, “if this is what it feels like to be God—to wake up and find your Creation won’t be contained by your intentions.”

She curled her lip. “You’re not God. And all you ever intended, if Amycus is to be believed, is that I should have died.”

“Not God?” he pondered. “Well. Not your god, at least, though I suppose some might view me in that light.”

Colonel Fubster, a stalwart Anglican, would have gone red in arguing this man out of heresy.

“Colonel Fubster, is it?”

She froze and nearly tripped on the next step, but of course, he caught her, held her upright.

“An interesting thought to keep in mind, if I ever think you need more incentive for good behaviour—”

She caught the drift of his thoughts, and sneered, though it was more by habit in his presence than anything else.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she told him. “Is this supposed to make me frantic? Angry? You’ve already made up your mind to kill him, haven’t you? You can’t tolerate the fact I ever had a life outside this house. You want to annihilate any memory you’re absent from, make me in your own image—my Lord.”

The waltz ended, and he escorted her up the stairs of the dais and set her on the seat to his left, before taking his throne.

“But if I did let him live—what would you give me?”

“What can’t you coerce from me?”

He was silent. And though he closed his mind to her the best he could, for once, she felt his disappointment.

She had won this round.

If he was going to keep her here, it would be on her terms. He couldn’t hurt her—not really, not the way he wanted to, not like a servant—so she’d be damned if she’d kiss his boots like one and beg for mercy.

“Perhaps,” he licked his lips, “you and I are not so different as all that.”

She gave him an arch look, so reminiscent of Walburga that it was no wonder she gave all the Blacks pause, and settled back in seeming indifference, Nagini coiling her great head atop her lap.

For the first time in a long while, he considered doing something reckless, and for the first time in a far longer while, he did it. She turned to him before he himself knew what he was doing, unclasping the Dark Mark pinning her robes closed and baring the torc at her neck.

You will behave yourself, he menaced.

What she heard was, don’t make me regret this.

She smiled painfully at the abrupt sensory overload, closed her eyes, and still took her wand from
him blindly without any fumbling. She remembered, as though in a dream, the feel of it twirling through their fingers, spinning with the hands of the clock, through the long dull hours and duller company. The little Potter bitch might relieve that boredom in part, if she didn’t burn down the house first.

I’d enjoy it, she whispered, to the part of them that recognized they were separate beings, and he saw a vision of fire sweeping through the house, saw his own corpse. A wish, she could not and dared not. She’d have to die before he ever did, and she didn’t strike him as the type to sacrifice herself for ideals or spite or nameless individuals.

The ones she would have died to protect were already dead.

She hissed at the thought, and he raised a brow.

This, he thought, might well become his favourite trophy. What would the white wizards think, the condescending Old Headmaster, to how he possessed their Chosen One?

His will pulsed through Barty’s Mark. The man gave the ten minute warning, the Death Eaters finished their wine and their games, lined up by rank, the trembling initiates readied in the front row.

When the men glanced up from bowed heads, it wasn’t to look at them.

It was to see the girl sprawled in the throne to the Dark Lord’s left hand, in her poison green silk shift with the snake coiled over her lap, positioned as queen.

Fuck the Dark Lord. If he wanted to keep her in his house, she was going to own it.

Chapter End Notes

Well! I’ve been waiting to get Sirius in :D Sorry, QueenLyssa, but it had to be done.

Thank you so much to all my lovely reviewers! I hope you all have a wonderful Easter holiday or long weekend. Do please feel free to say hi on your way out :)
Head bowed and kneeling, Severus stared up at the dais. The girl’s dress under the robes was indecent—the deceptively modest length foiled by a slit running down the left thigh, the silk almost too suggestive for anything worn outside a bedroom. He recognized Narcissa’s touch, hoped the Black sisters had limited themselves to corrupting her appearance. He had seen Slytherin girls wearing far more revealing outfits with their mothers’ blessings. Never Lily. Maybe the memory of her, in this girl, made him revert back to the prudery of his Cokeworth upbringing.

Or maybe it was the thought of every other man in this room—many of them obscene in the worst ways—staring up at her with want.

It wasn’t like she was any great beauty. She was pretty. Any other attraction came from recognition of the influence she might wield, for the Dark Lord to sit her at his side—like an equal.

Her hooded eyes were strangely glazed as the Dark Lord set his wandtip to Goyle’s arm, and the boy gave out an inhuman howl of pain. Severus suppressed a wince, his mark prickling in sympathy. The girl arched back with hooded eyes, lips falling open in pleasure, and it was that moment that decided it.

Albus was right. They had to separate the Dark Lord and the girl, before she lost any sense of self apart from him.

He didn’t think he could do it tonight. There were too many people, there was no way to lure the giant snake into the portals with the girl without anyone noticing—or the uncanny serpent calling the wrath of the Lord upon him. But with Albus working on other ways of getting the girl through the wards, and his new status as her teacher—

Well. There was always hope.

If only he could be as confident of that as Albus.

Goyle was white with shock, limp.

“Arise,” the Dark Lord commanded.

Despite his gargantuan build, the boy stumbled, weak-kneed and trembling. He wouldn’t get up, Severus noted with detached interest. Every year, the new recruits would stumble to their feet, with forced smiles and shaking, get piss-drunk, and compete to see who could defer the inevitable trip to the infirmary the longest. And every year, there would be at least one whose body and magic resisted the changes effected by the spell. The Death Eaters made a game of betting on it. Usually it affected
those from a White lineage—Barty, it was said, had been comatose the week after receiving his Mark—but every now and then, there were surprises.

A few guffaws broke out down the ranks—Severus recognized MacNair’s laugh and heard the chink of coins being passed. He did not envy Graham Goyle the harassment that would follow. At a nod from the Dark Lord, the senior Goyle lumbered quietly up to the steps and picked up his son, bearing him uneasily to the stretcher Thester Carrow kept on hand by the wall, just in case.

Whether the Lord’s lips were curled in a sneer or sinister amusement, he couldn’t tell.

He’d seen this ceremony twenty times over, more than that. It ought to have been boring, repetitive, by now—except it couldn’t be, because there was always new blood to spill, another student of his getting dragged into the war. He watched the Malfoy heir present his arm.

The boy’s face was pale as his hair. But he was silent—grim, even—and somehow, that bothered him more than Goyle’s screams. He glanced down his row, furious, and saw Bella staring up under her hood, smiling knowingly, and suppressed the urge to curse. A quick glance to his left saw Lucius had also noticed. The man’s expression was even more inscrutable than usual, which in itself seemed dangerous. He did not envy Bella one bit.

It would seem he had an ally.

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“What the—‘ fuck ‘—was that?” Heather hissed as Voldemort saw the last of his new initiates stumble off to join the celebrations. She edited out the curse. She didn’t know why she bothered. He heard it in her mind anyways.

“Did you enjoy it?”

She glared.

“You did enjoy it. Excellent.” He snapped his fingers, and the portly man—Pettigrew—came stumbling up. “Wormtail, if you would? The Merlot, vintage 1840. Miss. Potter will have the same. A small platter of cheeses as well.”

The ratty man bowed away, and the girl watched him go with disgust.

“He was one of the ones who came with me to retrieve you,” the Dark Lord reminded her. “Along with Bella, Dolohov, and Jugson.”

“Why did you ever bother to recruit him? Granted, few of your men are presentable,” she sneered, looking at Egbert Crabbe sloshing back a pint of beer with his mates, “but that thing hardly qualifies as a man.”

The Dark Lord turned to her with his usual detached expression, and eyes bright as a cat’s on some unfortunate bird.

“Are you discriminating against Wormtail based on his appearance?” he murmured, seeing the rat man come trotting up with their drinks to set on the table the Lord had conjured before them. “How superficial of you, girl. Wormtail, Miss. Potter thinks you’re ugly. She has some things to say to you—don’t you, my dear?”

She imagined herself giving the finger to the Dark Lord, and he smiled. Wormtail was quivering at their feet.
“Ask him,” the Dark Lord pressed.

She didn’t really care to. She didn’t know how she felt.

“Did you really betray my parents? Is that why he keeps you here?”

The rat-man stared up, mute.

“I think, lovely, he needs more encouragement than that,” the Lord said meaningfully. “Would you like to give it? He has been rather clumsy at his work as of late—a little reminder of what would await him if he were ever caught by the Aurors would be beneficial. I can do it, if you’re unwilling—but then he won’t answer your questions, will he?”

She slipped the magnolia wand from out her pocket, raised it in a move that had become habit—

“No,” the man babbled, crawling to her feet, “mercy, I’m sorry, I never meant—never meant for Lily or James to die, I thought they’d take the chance to join us, it wasn’t supposed to happen—”

She kicked him with one of her silver shod feet when he started to kiss her toes—fetishist—and he crawled back, crying.

“Pretty—I’m sorry, my Lady—you’re pretty as Lily—should never have been left with those dirty Muggles—”

Heather, who up until now had been more disgusted than angry, flicked her wand in sudden rage, until the man began to spasm and caterwaul, the seizures worse than she’d ever drawn forth before. The magnolia wand purred through her fingers, pulled up her magic and spindled it along his nerves into an endless scream. He hadn’t killed her family, but he’d been there, standing by, as Bella had ripped open her father and the men raped and tore apart her mother. He’d tried to drag her away, and she should have killed him for it.

She still could.

The man’s screams increased in intensity. A sudden knock through her consciousness broke her focus, the cruciatus weakened and died.

The Death Eaters nearby were staring at her, in admiration, in horror. Wormtail was lying prone, a wide ribbon of bloody drool from his mouth, his eyes rolled back, shaking.

Bella raised her glass to her in a toast. She felt a hand on her shoulder.

“I’m sorry to have interrupted you,” the Dark Lord murmured. “You were exquisite, there. Unfortunately, he’s of more use than he looks, and I would prefer he remain sane, for the most part.”

There was laughter, and one of the men started clapping. She lowered her head at the applause and raucous approval, ran her fingers under Nagini’s great head to ground herself.

This was sick, she thought, watching the way the Death Eaters walked around Wormtail, ignoring the fact that a man they’d fought beside was lying on the ground while they went back to their party. And she was no better. She’d done it to him, hurt him worse than Voldemort would have. She watched as someone stepped on his foot, and shifted Nagini aside with the intent of getting up to help him. Her scar burned, and she felt her left arm grasped abruptly.

“Let’s not be ridiculous, shall we?” the Lord chided. “Picking him up now would be interpreted as weakness. Everyone would know you don’t have the stomach to avenge yourself. Show weakness
—And they’ll exploit it,” Heather finished drily, getting up. “I’m surprised at you—my Lord—that you care so much for what your underlings might think. I’ll be taking this thing to the infirmary. The sooner it recovers, the sooner I can pull more answers from it.” She glanced sideways. “Assuming you approve, of course.”

“Why not ask me yourself?”

“Would you really tell me?”

“No,” he said abruptly. “No. Not while it amuses me to watch you find the answers yourself.”

“Well then,” she sniffed, pulling on her robes and, for the first time, using a levicorpus for its intended purpose.

“Girl,” he called out. She huffed and turned back to him.

“Mind yourself. If you need a respite from the festivities,” his lips curved, “my room is open to you.”

She turned her back on him spitefully and floated the twitching Wormtail up to the Infirmary, never minding the looks the Death Eaters gave. A group were drinking in the alcoves, a Muggle girl trembling between two of them as she accepted her drink from a house-elf. Heather’s lips thinned.

She still had to dump off the rat, she reminded herself.

She stomped into the brightly lit Infirmary, and without a word to Thester, plunked the rat on a bed and rummaged some potions from out the cupboard before slamming them on the bedside table.

“Can you drink?” she demanded of the quivering mess.

It nodded its head. She pulled the cork from a nerve restorative and thrust it into his hand. He looked uncertainly at her.

“Now,” she snapped.

He swallowed it so quickly she thought he might choke. She passed him a couple of other draughts. He took them without question. She turned to stride out of the room.

“My lady?” he whispered from the bed.

She paused.

“Thank you. For my life.”

“Don’t thank me yet.”

She meant to go to her bedroom, but the sound of Bella’s laughter, twinned with heavy grunts, sent her running from the door. She made a mental note to look up cleaning spells and heavily disinfect all the furniture after her inconsiderate roommate was… finished. A quick listen at Magnus’ door, and the sound of heavy masculine laughter—coupled with the unmistakeable noise of a body being slammed up against a wall—sent her scuttling from the third floor.
This was just sick, and awkward. It wasn’t like she was any blushing virgin—she’d had the normal, healthy experiences any other teenage girl in Surrey might have expected to have. Making out with Piers at a kegger while her parents were out of town though, or sexing up some cute college boy on vacation in Majorca—that was normal. Normal. Not fucking three-ways with twins—and who the hell had ever heard of a woman taking two guys at once—or—well, whatever Magnus was. He flirted with her, but she was sure that was a man in his room. What the fuck was he anyways?

She just wanted to find someplace quiet and barricade herself there for the night, but the revelry had become more raucous in her absence. She heard drunken laughter from the alcoves. A group of unsteady initiates spilled out from the ballroom as she passed it. She felt a hand grab her sleeve, and turned to slam the heel of her hand into her assailant’s face.

Or, where his face would have been if he was her size.

Vincent Crabbe stumbled backwards over another wizard and they both fell into the wall.

“Damn,” he swore, his words slurring as he fought to regain his footing. “Milady—“

He still wore the eyepatch.

“You would do well not to touch your betters without permission,” she snapped, gathering her black overrobes around her and striding off. Draco, emerging from the doorway, watched her go as he helped his friend to his feet.

The library, she thought madly, rushing down the stairs to the first floor. She opened the doors to the library—and quickly slammed them shut.

There ought to be laws against doing—that—anywhere near books. At this rate, she was going to have to slip in with the prisoners to keep herself sane, but knowing the Death Eaters, they’d probably decided that a drunken stupor was an ideal state in which to work on their torture spells. Thester would be up all night undoing the damage.

She heard the sound of spellfire from the Arena and stepped in. For whatever reason, violence seemed a relief to her after the assorted perversions taking place over the rest of the Manor—even if couldn’t really say why.

She slowed, seated herself quietly as she took in the combatants.

It was Amycus Carrow and Severus Snape.

The older man pivoted about a single point as he fought, never turning his back to his own shadow. He’d pulled water from midair. She watched, mesmerized, as he manipulated it to ice and back again, throwing sheets of rain that fell as frozen arrowheads. And Snape—no longer ugly, somehow become predatory, gracile under the Arena torches—spun under the shadow of his own cloak, and disappeared before the ice could hit him.

Severus cursed himself again for daring to pick a fight with Amycus Carrow.

He was in no danger—probably—of death or permanent injury. Marked or not, the elder wizard had been compelled somehow to respect the Dark Lord’s rule—if not through Alecto’s persuasions, then by force. If he were to die in this house, it would by the Dark Lord’s will, and none other.
Still. That didn’t mean he wouldn’t be left a bloody mess on the dirt.

Carrow was his mother’s first child, five centuries old. Severus knew his limits. He knew he was powerful, that his experiments had left him with powers unknown to most wizards—and that, at forty-eight years old, he was a child next to the man.

He threw himself through one of the holes in reality, and cast a quick succession of curses at the man as he tore back through the void on the other side of the Arena. The man’s shield absorbed the blow, right before he threw the whole thing at him on the rebound. He swam back into void before it crashed into the side of the Arena, and emerged in Carrow’s shadow. The man’s eyes and dagger were on him before he could think to move. Carrow turned, shielding his shadow with his own body, even as he struck Severus in the arm. The blow grazed his arm even as he spun the arm of his cloak over it, tangling Carrow’s arm. He moved to pull both of them down into his shadow, as he’d done with Greyback—

--Only for a light bright as a magnesium flare to explode in his eyes. He cried out, as he never did, his whole body shaking with the rebound. Even a normal failed apparition felt like running headfirst into a steel door. This? His only consolation was that Carrow had to be feeling just as bad—minus the pain in his eyes, which had only become more sensitive since the last time he’d fought here. Somewhere, he could hear Carrow laughing.

“Can’t run away if you can’t see your own shadow, can you?” he snickered. A curse pulsed close to him, and he rolled aside blindly. A pummeling hex hit him in the ribs.

“Do you know what that was, Snape?” He cursed, turning aside. “I’ve been trying to decide how you can punch through the Apparition wards on the Arena. How you aren’t howling at the moon every month. You know what I’ve decided?”

The flash came again—his eyes were blind to it, but his skin crawled at the sensation.

“You’re a fucking vampire. Or, at the very least you’ve messed with one—disgusting thing to do,” Carrow snapped, and Severus thought he heard the crack of a whip to accentuate this point. He felt it a moment later.

‘Course, you’re half beast to begin with, with that Muggle father of yours—” the whip cracked off a hastily raised shield, while he fumbled blindly to his feet. “Can’t believe your mother, that any good pureblood woman would dare foul herself with swine like that—“

Severus sneered. “Oh? Would you rather I have fucked my mother to make myself a sister?”

“Ignorant slime,” screamed Carrow, the whip falling down harder for a moment, the shield buckling under the pressure, before another flash of light caught him off guard, and it collapsed completely. The light didn’t go away, Carrow himself had to be almost blinded by it. He felt drained. He cursed himself, again.

“And now,” the man sneered, “let’s see how dirty your blood really runs. Exsanguio.”

He dodged the first curse, the second, shielded the third, didn’t dare try offense when he couldn’t aim in the dark, and was thinking madly when it finally caught him. The thin graze on his arm earlier suddenly hemorrhaged a volume of blood impossible for the size of the wound or the blood vessels in the area, and he felt his veins contract painfully at the loss, his throat abruptly dry, and still, he thought madly.

Casting wandlessly, he thought. Not the words, the intent. The shadows meant nothing, the sunlight
meant nothing. It was all a concept, being and void, the Let There Be, the is and is not that founded all things. The shadow was not in his eyes, in was in his heart, its bloodless hollows. He found it there, in cursing himself, in all the disdain and self-loathing that accompanied him, and wished he was not—

--at least not here.

No one ever really wants to stop being, after all. They just want to be another way.

He wished himself at the crook of Carrow’s neck, and the bastard was still gloating as he bared his teeth—still blunt as any man’s—and tore open his throat.

He didn’t know how long he drained him. Long enough that the blood slowed to a trickle, and the light dimmed, and when he opened his eyes, he could see again. Carrow fell limply to the ground, and Severus wiped his mouth with the tattered sleeve of his robe, frowning at the blood in the dark fabric.

Oh well. Dark wizards wore black for a reason. It was stylish, slimming, and you couldn’t see the blood.

At least, that was Bella’s take on the matter.

A slow clap from the stands brought him to himself.

The girl had seen the whole thing.

He was going to be sick.

“Why are you here?” he hissed.

She smiled coquettishly, an expression that may as well have been lifted off Narcissa’s face. “Would you rather I rejoin the revelers upstairs? I’m sure they would enjoy my company much better than you, if your tone is to be believed.”

A sour look stole over his features. He could well imagine how they’d think to enjoy her company.

“I’ll escort you to your room,” he told her tersely. Her mouth opened as though she’d considered a retort, then thought better of it. “It’s three in the morning. You ought to go to sleep.”

“Fine,” she acquiesced, easier than he’d expected.

“Please assist me in taking this up to the Infirmary,” he told her, levitating Carrow. She regarded him skeptically.

“Why?”

“Because I told you to. My lady. Now, come along.”

“No. I mean, why bother? He just attacked you.”

Severus pinched his nose irritably. “If I left him here to die, the Dark Lord would be displeased. Nothing ever happens in this house that is not of the Lord’s will. If you’ve lived here this long and have yet to discover that, I shudder at the unpleasantness your life must be.”

“He doesn’t scare me,” she said offhand, with a bravado that was vintage James Potter, as they guided Carrow’s body out of the Arena and made their way towards the second floor, dodging the
revelers as they did so.

“If you’re not afraid of him, you’re stupid,” Severus said bluntly. “He didn’t become a Dark Lord by winning knitting bees.”

The smile she tipped over her shoulder at him made his skin crawl more than sunlight. “Is that all you think I do? Knit?” She laughed girlishly, which was worse. “You’re right. Some of your students sampled my work earlier. I dare say one of them was even… blinded by the artistry.”

Gloating over what she’d done to Vincent Crabbe. The boy would wear an eyepatch for the rest of his life. Being nearly immortal didn’t make you invulnerable.

“Bragging does not become you, and is very stupid for one in your position. The boy you injured was well liked—” if only because he was too subservient and dull to pose a threat to anyone, he added mentally. “You, from what I can see, are not.”

“Why should I care?”

“Because you are a halfblood who has incurred the Dark Lord’s favour for unknown reasons, and are living in a house full of cutthroats, girl. They will want to kill you for it. Since that option is unavailable until the Dark Lord gives the order, they will settle for defiling or torturing you if the opportunity presents itself. You need allies, witch, and you have no sense on how to make them.”

“I seem to have managed fine to date.”

“By hiding in your room?”

She huffed irritably, so like Petunia that he wanted to strangle her. “Does everyone know about that?”

“For those forced to live here, there is precious little entertainment outside of studying, playing with the prisoners, or practising the arts of war. Largely, they just exchanged Azkaban for another, pleasant prison. You’re the most interesting thing that’s happened to them for the past four years—outside of raids. Now, kindly take Carrow in to see his mother, and ensure he gets a Blood Replenisher.”

“Why don’t you do it yourself?”

Did she backtalk Bella like this, he wondered?

“Because, if I take Carrow in like this, I will be obliged to explain to Thester that his injuries will were incurred by my hand, and she will be obliged to curse me. I do not feel like fighting a second time this evening. Now, if you will.”

Shrugging, she levitated him in—rather clumsily at that, he noted—and wondered that the Dark Lord thought a novice like her could hope to learn Occlumency. She spent a good fifteen minutes in there before emerging.

“Thester didn’t look happy.”

“How did you expect her to appear?” he snarked as they walked down the corridor. As they turned into the stairwell, a shrieking girl ran past them—naked from the waist up, her Muggle jeans shredded and bloody. A man came rushing down after her—Macnair?—and caught her as she stumbled drunkenly on the last step.
“Ah, lovely, what the hell you running for?” he guffawed, thrusting his hand into her pants, while the other encircled her neck. There were bruises there, as though she’d been strangled already.

“Can’t have you leaving the party early—didn’t you say you wanted to see a real magic show with me, pet?”

She was sobbing. Snape ignored the scene—too common during times like these—and moved up the stairs, but when he looked back, the blasted witch was still standing, a little back from them, as though stunned.

“I didn’t—I didn’t want---” slurred the Muggle girl. Macnair threw her to the floor.

“Didn’t want what, dirty cow?” he laughed. “Tentigo,” he breathed, and the girl’s eyes abruptly dilated. “Now, then, what did you want? You want me to fuck you?”

Her mouth was lax and drooling, and she moaned incoherently, nodding. Macnair made to strip off her jeans—before jumping back at the flash of green light.

“Avada Kedavra.”

“What the bloody fuck—bitch! She was mine!”

It didn’t take any more skill to use the Killing Curse than a gun. Just point. Desire, and power? You couldn’t learn those. Apparently the girl had them, in spades.

“She’s still there, if you’re into necrophilia,” the witch sneered. “Fucking someone who’s drugged isn’t so different from fucking a corpse that a sot like you would notice anyways.”

“You fucking bitch!”

“Such originality,” she simpered. Snape saw him grasping for his wand, and made to hex him, but the witch beat him to it. “Imperio,” she hissed. It took a moment, but it took. Not that Macnair ever had great mental defenses, even while sober, but it was still more than he’d expect from most of his students. The man’s eyes glassed over as the Muggle girl’s had.

“Now,” she told him, disdainfully. “You will go downstairs. You will drink yourself sick. And if you have to fuck someone, you’ll fuck a willing Death Eater.”

He stumbled off like a zombie, and the girl, shaking a little from the effort, climbed the stairs as proudly as any Malfoy.

“Coming?” she demanded.

“You shouldn’t use the unforgivables until you develop your magic more. You’re unaccustomed to using many spells in quick succession. Keep this up, and you’ll go unconscious in battle.”

“So my Lord always tells me,” she murmured.

“The Lord is as wise as he is cruel. You would do well to heed him in this.” They arrived before her door. “This is your room—good night.”

“Wait—“ she said, alarmed. “There’s someone in there.”

He froze a moment, listening. Sure enough, he could hear rustling, and moans. He rolled his eyes, and opened the door, and strode in.

Heather smirked. She didn’t think he realized who else lived here, but if anything could scare Bella’s
orgy out of her bedroom, it’d be the man who’d just torn someone’s throat open with his teeth. Sure enough—

“Aughhh! Snape, who invited you—“

The thud of a body hitting the floor.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Rabbit.” A sucking sound followed, to Heather’s disgust, along with a purr of feminine contentment. “We’re very proletarian in our pleasures, aren’t we? And Severus’ presence would give us even numbers—“

“No. For the first and last time, woman, I am not going to be dragged into this debauchery—“

“Whyever not, Severus?” Heather could hear the woman pout, and peered through the crack of the door to see the woman’s fingers spidering up Severus’ chest, before they flicked open the top button. He slapped her man away, and she turned aside and gagged in disgust. “All work and no play makes you a dull man.”

“Be that as it may, I am simply here to clean out Miss. Potter’s room so that she can retire.”

“Mmm? She’s even duller than you are. Can’t even stand to see a woman dressing.”

“If the woman is you, I’m unsurprised.”

A spell flashed through the doorway and hit the opposite wall, leaving a scorch mark.

“Unsurprised! Bastard!”

“How original.”

“Mudblood!”

“And again, with the originality.”

“Or—do you prefer men?” Bella wondered. “Roddy, would you like an experiment?”

“I most certainly am not in the mood for an experiment, Black.”

“But Sevvy, you’ve had fun before—“

She was tired, and had had enough of their squabbling. She wasn’t going to get any sleep here. Irately, she trekked down to the single stairway at the end of the hall, and barely hesitated before stepping up it and knocking once on the heavy door there.

It opened, as he had been expecting her.

Here, at least, it was warm and dark and silent. She shed her outer robe and slipped over to the fire, taking the unoccupied armchair. Fatigue made her bold.

“Whisky?” he offered her. She’d never tried it before.

“Sure.” He poured her a small snifter, and she knocked it back like a shot. It burnt red-raw along her throat and she coughed a small fireball onto the carpet. The Dark Lord extinguished it lazily.

For awhile, they just sat there, gazing into the flames, the Lord turning his snifter over in his hands contemplatively, and Nagini, lying inert as a log before the hearth.
“You are tired,” he said finally. “You may sleep in my bed.”
She blinked slowly.

“But then, where will you sleep?”

He raised an eyebrow at her.

“Oh.”

He arose, and sorted through the wardrobe with an ease that should not have been possible in this darkness. A few minutes later, he pulled out a garment and threw it to her. An old-fashioned lace nightgown, high-necked and Victorian. “Wear this.” He turned away from her to change into his own nightclothes. She undressed.

When she had finished, he turned aside the comforter, and tucked her into his bed before getting in himself. He stroked her hair meditatively. She listened to his breath. The closeness of him, of his familiar magic, felt like safety. Like home.

One night, she thought. She could accept this comfort for one night, and try to kill him in the morning.

It was some time before either of them slept.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you everyone for your feedback :) I always appreciate hearing how people like my work, and I look forward to implementing changes if I ever get around to a final draft--for now, I'm going to try not to get crippled up with writer's block by just writing without too much attention to editing as I go.

Have a lovely week, and please say hello on your way out!
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Warning: Nudity, non-con groping, philosophizing, sex magic.

Reminder: The views of the characters are not necessarily those of the author.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

She slept fitfully, past the hour when she’d usually be shocked awake by Bella’s raucous laughter, a well-placed hex, the squealing of the latest experiment. When she awoke now, it was to silence and darkness, and a chill draft through the bedcurtains.

She couldn’t pretend she was home. Home would have nothing so premodern as a canopy bed. But this wasn’t a bad place to be either.

She laid there for a long time, Nagini’s cool weight spread along her leg, listening to the creak of an open window, and the scritch-scratch of a quill. Finally, she pulled herself upright—an action that displeased her almost as much as the snake—and peered through the heavy velvet curtain.

A wide window, previously covered with heavy curtains, was set in the opposite wall. Beside it was a writing desk, and there the Lord sat in the grey light, penning his missives. One of the window panes was open, and a pair of ravens stood watching on the lintel, their beady eyes tracking the motions of the gilded quill. He stopped, seeming to have reached a finishing point in his letter, and scanned the document. She’d never heard of a terrorist proof-reading, but then, everything in this world was abnormal—why shouldn’t the radicals be the same?

She slipped out of bed in that awful Victorian nightgown—the ruching at the neck itched horribly—and hissed irritably back at Nagini when the snake told her off for letting in the cold air. The Lord looked up.

“Ah. You’re awake.”

She gave a non-committal grunt.

“I recommend staying here until at least midday, possibly longer. It will take that at least that long for my men to finish any last-minute business from last evening and set the Manor to rights.”

She slumped grumpily down in the armchair before the fire, nonchalantly displacing the newspaper that rested on it. “Business,” she repeated disdainfully.

The Dark Lord’s lips twisted. “Yes. Business. You disapprove.” It was not a question. He knew, of course, what was on her mind.

“Miss. Potter. As disagreeable as it may be, even the vaunted Muggle Saint Augustine understood the need for prostitution. It provides an outlet for the carnal desires of those lacking in self-control, thus ensuring the safety of women like yourself who are more valuable to me.”

“You can’t throw people away just because they’re not of any use to you.”
“I can and have done just as any other leader in history has done—including your Muggle politicians. Whether or not one is willing to admit it, running a group successfully involves an honest assessment who is able to contribute, how their productivity can be increased—and who is useless. ‘Whatever tree does not produce fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.’ Isn’t that what happens?”

“We don’t rape our girls.”

“No? Of course, that would be too honest and forthright. Instead, the Muggles perpetuate a system where disadvantaged children are excluded from opportunities afforded to their wealthier peers, discriminated against for behaviours innate to their class culture. They grow up as pawns and playthings to the same people their parents served.”

His red gaze caught hers. “Thank me, girl. Without me, you’d be still an ignorant cog in the social machine, turning happily until it wore you out.”

“I really don’t care about that shit.”

“No?” his voice turned mocking. “That wasn’t what you said a moment ago.”

“I said I don’t like rape. I didn’t say I wanted to hear all this abstract crap. You’re dodging the issue.”

“Very well. Find me a way to keep a man like Macnair happy in my employ, without giving him useless Muggles to play with, and I’ll be happy to accommodate.”

She couldn’t think of anything, and he knew it. She scowled.

“Why keep him around anyways?”

“A man uses the tools available to him. Any other questions? No? You may use the bath while I order breakfast.” He arose and brushed past her, opening another velvet drape on the other side of the room to reveal a bathchamber. “Here.”

“Thanks,” she muttered, and stopped dead in her tracks.

The bath was more or less the same as the one in Bella’s room—a claw-footed tub, a toilet, a washbasin, and ample supply of toiletries—with one difference. Piles of thin, leathery strips—like sloughed snakeskin, but finer—were scattered along the wall. She picked one up, gingerly. It was long, tubular, open on one end, with the other narrowing to a fingernail. The outside was the faint tan of human skin such as she’d seen on the binding of some of Bella’s books—the inside, the brittle tissue and diamonding of snakeskin.

She dropped it.

“I told you,” the Lord said with some amusement. “You’re not human. You’re a snake in a woman’s skin. You simply have to learn to shed yourself.”

“Shed myself,” she repeated, dubiously. He loved ambiguity for vexation it caused everyone around him, didn’t he?

“Rather I find metaphors can approximate the truth better than brute fact—even if they are ill-suited for explanations to one such as you.”

Did he just call me stupid?
“More or less,” he agreed amiably.

“So what do you mean by ‘shed yourself’?” she asked irascibly.

He raised his eyebrows and sat with damming grace on a chair facing the bath, and watched her expectantly.

“Pervert,” she spat, shucking off the Victorian smock as violently as possible and balling it up to chuck at him. He swat it aside reflexively, blinked in surprise, and his smile deepened.

“Why does everyone treat this house like a giant peepshow anyways?”

His gaze could have been appreciative, could have been indifferent. “Many of the taboos of the lower species have become meaningless to our kind.”

She flopped down in the bath as unattractively as possible. Water splashed over the side.

“Most rituals require the celebrants skyclad, naked as the day they were born for the symbolic rebirth. Shedding yourself—it involves removing all pretensions, all restraints, paring yourself down to your elemental being.” His voice lowered to a rasp, like the rattle of snake. His eyes held hers.

She felt as much as heard Nagini enter the room, like a vibration between their minds. He slid off the chair to the bath, boneless as a serpent himself, and gathered up her hand in his. Memory collapsed her mind into his—of a sudden, her skin felt like a straitjacket, itched like old wool. She clawed and writhed, but it kept to her, snug as a chrysalis.

He released her, and she came to, hyperventilating in the tub, her chest torn up and her own blood under her fingernails.

“You felt it then? Good,” he approved, still on his knees beside her.

She held her knees and gave him a very unimpressed look, trying to center herself.

“What was that?”

He just looked at her.

“A memory,” she muttered, trembling. “Of—you sloughing your skin?”

“Nagini’s, actually,” he said smugly. “Though mine are similar. How else do you think I look so young?”

“Horcruxes,” she bit out, “that, and a hell of a lot of moisturizer.”

She hadn’t really considered the Dark Lord’s age, in all honesty. His presence and maturity made him ageless—but, she supposed, detachedly, he did look about her age, even if he was in his seventies.

He sniffed. “Horcruxes are a tether to this plane—nothing more. They cannot stop aging, and unless I want to end up looking like a sibyl, I had to find other means of preserving my youth. The snake shed its skin, and is reborn.”

She licked her lips. “I can’t shed my skin.”

He eyed her torn chest, and she flushed.
“Not for want of trying, it would seem. Of course, there are no female Parselmouths in the records.” He eyed her with interest. “All Parselmouths develop serpentine qualities, with practice and maturity—who knows what you might do, with a little help?”

She could hardly concentrate on his words, remembering that awful sense of being constricted in her own flesh.

“It is easier to master the skill by bonding to a serpent. You should know the rudiments of this already from your old familiar. You will be able to channel yourself through Nagini easily—her magic is sympathetic to ours, after all.”

He climbed to his feet. “I’ll leave you be. We will discuss this further over breakfast.”

He left the curtain open as he exited to the next room. The water cooled before she stopped shaking.

----------------------------------------

When she had finished, the Lord was lounging in a chair before table for two, reading over a rather ratty-looking book. He flipped it shut on his awareness of her entrance. Her accusation caught between their consciousness.

Why need they bother with words? When they always knew how the conversation would end?

“You can predict how most conversations will end,” murmured the Dark Lord. “It doesn’t obviate the necessity of having them.”

“If that’s supposed to be a metaphor for the human condition, you can tell it to bugger off,” she snapped.

He sighed, tut-tutting. “Such obscene language, and in a lady.”

“If this was supposed to ‘pare me down to my essential being’,” she mocked, “I don’t see why I should censor myself. There’s no one but us here. Why make me live through that memory?”

He rose, pulled out the chair opposite him. “Milady,” he said, with a courtesy she doubted to be in earnest. “Seat yourself.” His tone turned blunt. “Before you faint, and I am forced to host you an additional evening.”

“Such an awful thing.”

“Hardly for me. However, I doubt you would relish explaining to Bella why no one’s seen either of us for two days straight.”

She blanched. He poured her a tall glass of juice, and she downed it, too faint to argue.

“As to that memory—experiencing the world as the snake is one of the first steps to binding yourself to it.”

“I thought you didn’t want me to ‘do’ anything of that nature with your Nagini.”

“Of course not,” his lip curled. “Unfortunately, you are proving utterly useless as a fighter, forcing me to find other means for you to defend yourself.”

Her jaw opened a little. “Defend myself?”
He sat back a little, eyed her coolly.

“Yes. There are any number of those in the outside who will be happy to kill you simply because you are mine.”

“But I’m not a Death Eater,” she exclaimed.

“No,” he said mildly, buttering a scone and setting it before her. “You’re much so much more than a mere Death Eater, and rest assured, my enemies know it and will stop at nothing to eliminate you.”

“That’s not fair. I never had a choice.”

“That plea will not hold back Dumbledore when he stands to execute you for the greater good,” he snapped, pushing a newspaper across the table. “No, girl. I will not pin my immortality on a child who hides in her room all day and can barely shield herself against a stray curse. If you cannot learn to battle with a wand, you will every other art that might keep you alive—whether it offend your delicate sensibilities, or not.” His lip curled. “From now on, everything changes.”

----------------------------------------------------

She couldn’t decide what was worse—returning to her room with Bella, or staying upstairs with the Dark Lord.

Of course, Bella decided for her.

“Oooh, tell me EVERYTHING,” she squealed giddily, bouncing on their bed like a fourteen year old at a slumber party. “Did he enjoy you? What did you do? Are you going to see him again?”

“Who?” Heather asked from the armchair, turning a page in a rotting first edition ‘Magical Beasts and Where to Find them’.

“Who?” Bella mocked, bounding off the bed to tear the book from her hands and chuck it at the wall, before seizing Heather up and twirling her forcefully. In the middle of the spins she saw the book had fallen to bits on the floor, and she groaned ruefully—partly because she was going to throw up if Bella continued, but mostly because she couldn’t Reparo the damned thing to save her life.

Thankfully for her constitution, Bella tired—at least, of this pastime—and threw her on the bed before scooting up herself, and sitting crosslegged before her.

“No, lovely-locks,” she cooed, wiggling like an over-eager puppy in her excitement. “Tell me all about the Dark Lord.”

“Why would you think I was with the Dark Lord?” she asked irritably, leaning back and hoping the room would stop spinning soon.

“Because you came back wearing the exact same robes I left up there last time!” Bella exclaimed brightly.

Oh. Oh no. She was definitely going to be sick.

The Dark Lord’s amusement snaked through her mind as she gagged inwardly.

“So, my bitty little bitch, how was it? Did you distract him amply?” she asked suggestively, stroking a part of her anatomy by way of illustration. She slapped Bella’s hands away, and the bint giggled.
“No then? Awful prude, silly little Mudblood, but I ought to show you out of that, yes, if the Lord wants to keep you—“

“I think the Lord was pleased with me as I am,” she said finally.

“Really?” Bella looked at her askance. “Because usually, he’s too focused on his mission to unwind. Always talking about this and that, can hardly be bothered to undress, let alone get a stiffy. Now, what I do to encourage that along—“ she nattered, oblivious to Heather’s reddening face.

What followed was a wholly unnecessary explanation on the sexual habits of Dark Lords and their nymphomaniac underlings that Heather would have preferred left to the imagination.

“But if you didn’t try that—what did you do?”

“I don’t kiss and tell,” Heather murmured weakly.

“Coy little cunt,” Bella snapped playfully, before kissing her harshly on the lips. Heather rolled and flung her off the bed, but the bitch—who had taught her that move to begin with—was ready for it, and pulled her off as well. They scratched and kicked and bit each other, tussling across the floor, until Bella had straddled Heather to the floor. There was, for the moment, a rare sanity in the older woman’s regard.

“You realize, brat, we can hardly carry on this way.”

“Works… for… me,” Heather panted, shifting her weight to throw Bella to the side. Bella allowed it, turning her momentum into a spin to land crouched on her feet.

“Oh, it does. But hardly as well as it ought to,” Bella murmured, creeping closer, something uncanny and perverse in her gaze. “Do you know, little Mudblood, why the Dark Lord gifted you to my care?”

“Because someone would have to be crazier than you to borrow your toys without permission?” she snarked.

Bella grinned unpleasantly. “Oh, yes, that there is, bitchy witch. But moreover—it would seem the Dark Lord wants you to have every advantage of survival.”

Heather blanched.

“And Bella can teach you that, yes she can. You’re no warrior, bint, but the Blacks were binding men to fight their battles for them before they even had a name to call their own.”

The madwoman sidled up against her, grabbed her jaw, and just because she could, Heather lunged, left her smile inscribed in teeth along the other’s skin. If anything, Bella’s grin deepened as she prised Heather’s jaw open as easily as a hunter thieving a duck from his dog.

“First lesson,” she whispered, winking. “Never bite.”

And there were hands, in areas she had not expected, and it was not entirely unpleasant, and wholly awful for that.

“Stop,” she snapped, with a ward sign to emphasize. It knocked Bella back a few steps, and better, made her consider.

“Stupid mudblood,” she spat. “You really don’t get it, do you? Take the essence of a man, and you
take him. Bind him to you. It’s control, lovey, the only kind a helpless girl can hope to have!”

Heather crawled back against the bed, heart pounding.

“Feeding me your blood, to control me,” she realized. “It’s the same kind of magic, only reversed, isn’t it?”

“So the mudblood isn’t so stupid after all,” she cackled.

“And sex?”

“Much more fun, lovey, and much more powerful. The more emotions shed with the essence, the stronger the bond. Now then, shall we play?”

“No,” she snapped. “How do I know you aren’t going to use this to control me?”

Bella snickered.

“Fool. You’re only a loan, yes, you are. You belong to the Dark Lord. Even I’m not crazy enough to mess up his toys.”

This said, Bella looked considering.

“So... shall we practice now?”

Heather gave up on concealing her disgust.

“NO.”

“Your loss. Anytime you want to learn real magic though, loveling—“

“I think I’ll manage.”

Chapter End Notes

We're now leading into a plot arc which might be a little dicey. I've always been a little nervous about including erotic content, since it can be difficult to write in such a way that it advances the plot and character development, maintains the mood, and seduces the reader.

Thank you to all my reviewers! I really appreciate it! Have a lovely week!
It was later that evening, while Bella was out doing something or someone, that Heather took the time to read the newspaper she’d filched off the Dark Lord’s desk.

There was a surprising lack of newspapers lying around the Manor. She supposed they were mostly in the rooms, where most of the men breakfasted, since no one could possibly have relaxed enough to read the news in the Dark Lord’s presence. She’d seen some old ones in Magnus’ forge—but he’d caught her eying them, and stuffed them in the fire.

So this then was her first exposure to news in the wizarding world. She flipped through it experimentally. She hated the moving illustrations. They made her dizzy in the way 3-D movies did. The front page glared up at her.

YOU-KNOW-WHO, IMMORTAL?
Rita Skeeter, columnist.

In a confidential interview last Friday, Albus Dumbledore revealed the awful truth: He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named returned after being vanquished by the Girl-Who-Lived, because he has become immortal through use of the Darkest of Arts.

In the unspeakable magic used for his resurrection, the Dark Lord, says Dumbledore, split his soul through committing murder, and stored the fragments in various objects called horcruxes. These items are highly dangerous and often cursed. Readers may remember Hogwarts’ early closure of 1986, after Bill Weasley, the assumed Heir of Slytherin, was rumoured to have attacked the school with an enormous, centuries-old Basilisk. After more than a decade, his name has been cleared: Bill Weasley was possessed by You-Know-Who.

One wonders at Dumbledore’s reluctance to clear Weasley’s name, given the burden of guilt placed on his family following the catastrophe. We can only assume the Headmaster withheld this information to prevent nation-wide panic.

Horcruxes may be any object, but You-Know-Who’s reverence for wizarding tradition suggests they will most likely be valuable heirlooms. The public is advised to beware of any suspicious objects and contact the appropriate authorities to destroy them!

Heather settled back, blanched.

Destroy them.

This, then, was what the Dark Lord had given her back her magic for, why he had decided she needed to train. Perhaps no one knew yet that she was a horcrux, but if anyone knew, all of Britain would be out for her blood.

Her hands tightened around the armrests of the chair, her mouth seized in a rictus of frustration. As if
she needed another reminder that she’d be forever paying for someone else’s choices—she made the sign to burn the damming paper, and stopped the spell before she’d released it.

No.

That would be irrational, she considered. Maybe she had a right to be angry and irrational, but these feelings were irrelevant to what she had to do now.

Determinedly, she skimmed through the paper. Read every bloody article, tried to learn the world she’d rejected seven years ago. There were articles on Muggles and Muggle technology that were amusingly incorrect, and advertisements for technology that had gone obsolete centuries ago, defense tips and suggestions for avoiding raids and lists of the dead, and a long, long list of obits.

But before all the nonsense and the horror, beneath the first article and leading onto the second page, something else.

THE GIRL WHO RETURNED?
Emil Fortwright, editor

The Girl-Who-Lived. Defeater of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, daughter of James and Lily Potter, heiress to the Potter fortune. We all know this. We all revere her, and her family, for their sacrifice on Potter Day.

What we did not know, is where she is now, what she looks like, or even what her parents named her. Recently, an investigative team of journalists following the DMLE this past summer discovered the truth.

The-Girl-Who-Lived is Heather Potter.

Heather Potter, reveal the Muggle teachers at the school she attended, is a charismatic girl, much like her parents, a model student, and a community leader. And no squib. Local Muggles play-acting at wizardry in what is called Wicca report Heather, a regular participant in their circles, could invoke the gods to bless them, often lighting fires or calling forth light wandlessly.

While the child’s guardian, Albus Dumbledore, assures us that she has been schooled privately to ensure her safety and anonymity, members of the public wonder if this is a privilege we can afford to grant our Saviour in our time of need—or if she is really as safe as Dumbledore says.

The DMLE, called to investigate a saturation of dark magic in the Muggle suburb of Little Whinging on July 31st—her birthday—discovered her former residence there. Her foster parents and brother had been brutally murdered, presumably by You-Know-Who. Miss. Potter’s whereabouts were unknown. She was assumed dead; the records suppressed to prevent a nation-wide panic.

This fall, however, an examination of Ollivander’s ledger showed a wand sold to one Miss. Heather Potter—magnolia and dragon heartstring, a combination historically deadly in the hands of great matriarchs, who slaughtered those who dared harm their people. We can only hope the same holds true for our Saviour.

Her muggle graduation photo stared up at her, smiling.

She stared back, and slowly, began to laugh.

The Saviour! If they only knew!

She suddenly felt an immense, unexpected gratitude, and almost hated herself for it. Whatever else
the Dark Lord had done, he had kept her from this—from the expectations of both celebrity and notoriety. From assassination.

Except, of course, he’d killed everyone around her in the process, seemingly for no good reason.

She read through the paper once more, and gathered it up, before slipping down to the dungeons.

It was time to pay Sirius Black a visit.

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Darkness.

He lives in it, literally and figuratively. Literally, because the cells at Azkaban were at best dim in the daytime, when the window let in light alongside the chill of seaspray and Dementor’s breath.

Figuratively, because no one told a prisoner anything.

He’d never say it, no, but Voldemort’s cells were better, no, a luxury, after Azkaban. Dry, with padded bunks, decent though plain food. Bathing water. A place to relieve himself, rather than puddling it by the window like the dog he was, and hoping the endless rains would scour it from the cell. No dementors, unless you counted Bella—but she could have replaced a legion of them with no one the wiser.

He hated her, of course. All the more because she knew as well as he did, exactly how his long exposure to the Dementors had warped him, knew how to accentuate it. Knew that the more he drew upon it, the only power he had left to him, the farther he passed from redemption.

The darkness had a pressure now, where before, it had been indifferent. He felt it thick as cobwebs in his nostrils, on his face, it brushed his skin and under his bare feet like a fine layer of dust. At any moment, he’d dissolve in it. They’d open the door and find only a deepening of the shadows in the corners of the room, before he chased their breath to their chest and ripped his way out their lungs.


Fuck meditation, he’d been trapped too long for patience. He grasped his own arms, fingertips to the damned tattoos his father had cut into him, drew the darkness into his pulse, evaporated.

For a second, if anyone had been there, they’d have seen a dark mist hanging, in the silhouette of a man.

And then, the awful clang and burn. His manacles—built by white wizards to contain dark ones, oh the irony—burnt white and forced him substantial. He growled, tried again, with the same results.

Trapped, trapped, trapped. All his fault. So stupid, he deserved it. Deserved this damn transformation. Maybe Bella was right, that he was only becoming the monster he had always been. No, no, stopstopstop fuck her.

He had though, hadn’t he? Of course he had. Or she had him. It was blurry, like all things in this underground of the mind. He’d awake, chained to the floor, and find himself pinned between her thighs. He’d spat obscenities, bit at her tongue so hard she’d had to regrow it the once—she’d laughed through the blood, a horrible, hiccupping laugh, before she’d left the cell in a naked strut, leaving the door open behind her. As though to taunt him with her freedom.

He clawed through his mind for every clue to legilimency he’d ever read, every scrap on binding he’d ever prised from Regulus—since of course, by that age, his mother would never have told him.
You can’t bind the unwilling, the dead voice of his brother came to him.

He buried his mind in this, in the memory of James, when she held him down and whispered curses on his lips, when she swallowed his essence and he felt her feelings echo through him at that brief amplification of their bond.

All Blacks were bound, on some level. The family magic, ritually increased with every generation, enabled a vague perception of anyone who carried their bloodline, though the accuracy depended on the degree of relation and the strength of the user. As cousins, as betrothed—it disgusted him to remember—they were close. Close enough that he could feel her approach now.

He felt the light in the hall like a chemical burn and solidified himself as much as possible, before the door opened.

He spat, rueing that after upending his privy on the Dark Lord’s robes, the man had told the guards to remove the bucket and ‘take the dog out to relieve himself’ on a fixed schedule. She made a hand gesture he didn’t recognize, and the spit stopped in midair and fell to the floor.

“You’re Sirius Black.”

He kept staring.

“I’m Heather. Heather Potter.”

She waited expectantly.

“I brought you some food,” she told him, pulling a bag from her side. “The house-elves were very helpful. Chicken. A flagon of ale—I heard you liked to drink, once. Something different from standard prisoner fare, I hope.”

She moved to sit beside him, and then, he acted. Twisted as far as his chains would allow, snapped her down beneath him, her head cracking against the floor, tried to get the length that would let him strangle her—and he did, he got his hands on her head and his hips around her, made to pound her head back into the floor—

A rattling hiss tore from her throat as she ducked her head so that his hands slipped off it, her teeth raking at his shoulder. He moved to choke her—and found abruptly that he could no longer move.

She scrambled out from beneath him and scowled at the man in the doorway.

“I was fine.”

Lucius, of course.

“Of course,” he sneered. “I could tell from the way he was strangling you.”

“I’d have warded him off.”

“Not before he’d have broken your neck. Father was right—you really are useless without your trinkets. I wonder if this counts as a lifedebt.”

“It doesn’t. My life wasn’t in danger, and I didn’t ask for your help.”

The man sniffed. “Fine. See if I care anyways.”

He came into the cell, crouched down by Sirius, began to remove his prisoner’s shift. Bella tensed.
“What are you doing.”

“Looking at his tattoos. You’ve seen Bella’s, right?”

Bella looked nauseated.

“Regrettably.”

“So I have them too. There are always variations though. I’m wondering if the differences mean anything. Why are you here?”

She looked uneasy. “He’s supposed to be my godfather right?”

The Lucius look-a-like snickered.

“What?”

“So you thought you’d come down to the cells for a bonding session?” He stripped off Sirius’ tunic, while Sirius seethed under the spell, still not yet resigned to these minor humiliations. The man traced his tattoos, and he felt the answering pulse of a Black—newly rituatlized, and a close relation. Not Lucius. Not Lucius. No…

“Rather stupid of you, really,” the man who looked like Lucius and felt like a Black told Bella. Or not-Bella. Bella would never bother with food, was never one for extravagant ploys to break him down, had always simply come in, taken what she’d wanted, left. “Whatever he was, he’s a captive now. Has been almost two decades. He’s not right in the head,” he muttered, turning Sirius to the side to check his back.

“He was right in the head enough to fight.”

Not-Lucius sniffed. “Cornered animals will fight. This isn’t a man anymore.”

“It could be,” not-Bella said stubbornly, hitting the man’s hand aside as he tried to check Sirius in that place Bella favoured.

“Really?” the man drawled, before cancelling holding Sirius’ face and neck immobile, and grasping his jaw in a firm hand to look him in the eye. “Black, tell me what you are.”

“Go to hell, you fucking Death Eater scum. Stupidfuckingdamndamnhatenyouall…” he trailed off into a litany of curses, before the man turned to not-Bella with an I-told-you-so glance.

“You just cursed him and tried to play with his junk,” accused not-Bella. “What the hell did you expect him to do, give you his C.V.?”

“I have no idea what that means, but you just tried to give a picnic, and it seems your results were considerably worse.”

Not-Bella rolled her eyes and made a gesture, and not-Lucius yelped.

“What was that for?”

“For being supremely unhelpful. Now help me explain this to him.”

“Why should I bother?”

Not-Bella smiled. “Because if you don’t, I’ll tell Bella I want to see a practical demonstration of her
‘special’ skills, using you as the test subject.

Not-Lucius reddened.

“Alright,” he grumbled.

“Fuck, what are you, Death Eater kids? Trying to get your rocks off by fucking a prisoner?” Sirius interjected. “You’re in the wrong place. Go two doors down, that one won’t quit moaning. Off him for me in the interim, he’s disturbing my beauty sleep.”

“No,” Draco said blandly. “I am Draco Malfoy. This,” he gestured, “is Heather Potter.”


“Look,” said Heather, fishing out a newspaper, setting it in front of his face. “What does this say.

He squinted to focus, less to oblige her and more because he hadn’t read anything in seventeen years. He’d almost forgotten. It was like reading a foreign language, it came slowly, but the girl’s picture was there. The picture, and the words.

“Lies,” he muttered, testing the Malfoy’s spell. It was loosening, yes it was. He tensed.

“I’m not lying,” she snapped.

“It’s easy to make newspapers,” he said. “Easy, easy, all an illusion, another one of your illusions, Bella. I hate you, hate you, I’ll kill you, you killed them, you all killed them, die!”

The spell snapped, and he lunged for her, but this time, the girl was ready. She spun aside, swift as a snake, and pounced on him, pinning him down easy as Bella ever had. He struggled, and she hit him open-handedly, once, twice, across the face, the edges of the rings and chains on her hand scoring his cheeks.

“Fuck you,” she hissed, holding him down as he struggled for purchase, worked a fist loose and flailed to hit her back. “I’m Lily’s daughter. I grew up with her sister, Petunia. They say I have her eyes. They say you were their best friend, damn you!” She struck him in the Adam’s apple, so that he choked for a second, before tightening her thighs around him so he couldn’t wriggle free, lodging his wrists between her knees and his leg. “They say you would have done anything for them,” she snapped, punctuating it with another slap to his face. “Fuck you. Why did I bother? Draco’s right, you’re good for nothing more than target practice.”

Sometime, around the mention of Petunia, he had gone limp.

“Petunia.”

“That’s right,” she repeated, harshly. “Petunia.”

“What was she like?”

“Kind,” she said tersely, not relaxing her hold in the least. “Sweet.”

He snorted. “Liar. Liar. You didn’t know her.”

“She was my mother, you fucker. You didn’t know her either, obviously.”

“It’s not true, not true, not true…”
“And again with the inane babbling,” Draco observed. “I trust you can keep yourself alive now. Visit me in barracks later, if you have nothing better to do than this,” he told her, before leaving the cell.

She screamed in frustration, before jumping back and leaving Sirius in a heap by the wall, both panting from exertion. She looked at him, now seemingly catatonic, and shook her head in disgust, turned her back on him.

“Wait.”

She turned back, sneering. “What?” she snarled. “Need to spit at me again? Tell me I’m lying? Smash my head against the floor? No thank you, you demented ass.”

“No. No. Lily. You have Lily’s eyes. But James. You look like James’ mom. Dorea. But it’s not right, not right at all, probably Bella’s bastard—“

She rolled her eyes.

“Either you believe me, or not. I don’t have all day.”

“Maybe I’ll believe you.” The man paused. “If you get me out.”

Heather’s lips pursed. “Uh-huh,” she said dubiously. “I’m kind of stuck here myself, and your recent attempts at homicide don’t exactly inspire me to any jailbreaks. Why should I bother?”

“That’s what they’d have done. They’d have done it. You’ll do it, if you’re their daughter.”

“Fuck,” she muttered, and a thought occurred to her. “Fine,” she agreed, eying him, and from the frisson of shock Sirius felt, he knew the Malfoy spawn hadn’t left, had still heard from outside the cell. “I’ll get you outside the Manor. And if I do, you’ll be my godfather, as you pledged to my parents, right?”

“You can’t be theirs, but sure. Anything.”

She smiled.

“Hide the newspaper,” she ordered him, not wanting to go anywhere near the man until she had her wardrobe sewn through with spells, and exited to find Draco waiting.

“You’re going to defy the Dark Lord to release a mad prisoner? Are you insane?” he whispered, looking over his shoulder.

She waited until they’d exited the prisoner area—it would rather defeat her plans if word got around to Sirius down there, and the captives did whisper their gossip, cell-to-cell.

“No,” she explained placidly. “I’m going to ask his permission.”

The look on Draco’s face was the most entertaining thing she’d seen in months.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to all my reviewers!
And then, it was Christmas.

Heather honestly hadn’t thought about it. Not until Narcissa had taken her aside on the Solstice and covertly asked if she needed her to pick up anything.

She stared back dumbly.

“Pick up what?”

She understood, of course. There was something wrong, that she could understand the warped logic of this house so easily now.

That didn’t mean she agreed with it.

But she wasn’t stupid enough to question it. Anyways, Narcissa didn’t need her to voice her thoughts any more than the Dark Lord did. Woman’s intuition was apparently every bit as powerful as the ability to read someone’s mind.

“I understand your reluctance to give gifts to those who share this house with you, given the circumstances of your acquaintance,” her lips twisted ironically. “However, a woman in your position must always consider the long-term consequences of her actions before any transient dissatisfactions. You will be living in this house for an indefinite period of time. Any means by which you can encourage the regard of your peers—“ Heather curled her lip at the word”—should be used.”

“What then, would you recommend?” she scoffed. “Shall I send every Death Eater in the house a box of chocolates and the Dark Lord a thank-you note for his hospitality?”

“No,” Narcissa said, immediately and seriously. “Never give food to anyone except someone you are close to, and only in person. Poisonings are common enough that the gift of food is a ritual test of both friendship and trust. If someone is willing to eat what you set before them, you are establishing an alliance.

“Of course,” Narcissa mused, “it probably means less for a Parselmouth. I’ll pick up some harmless baubles I expect your friends will like.”

Heather stared at her.

“Oh, Thester, Severus, Magnus, Draco, my husband, Bella—“

She really should protest, shouldn’t she?

“The Dark Lord…”
She clamped her mouth shut, determined not to say a word.

Now, at four in the effing morning, with Bella jumping her in bed, she really wished she had.

She was in a sound sleep, when a body solidly impacted hers in bed. Inured to Bella’s peculiar brand of domestic warfare, she jolted awake in an instant, teeth snapping onto the woman’s shoulder before tearing, her magic—loosed for the first time in months—expanding like a cloud of fire.

The bitch rolled them both out of bed, laughing before she pinned Heather down below her, seeming blithely unaware of the bed burning behind them.

“Presents!” she shrieked, boxing Heather’s ears until she released her shoulder from her teeth. She shook the girl’s shoulders excitedly. “Presents!”

Fuck, and she had thought her brother was bad. She kicked Bella in the crotch. The woman gasped at the pain momentarily, before giggling louder and aiming her own kick at Heather. She dodged it, and Bella, before very carefully signing laguz at the bed.

A moment later, and the whole thing was swimming in lakewater.

Fuck. It was a step up from being on fire, she supposed, but she wasn’t going back to sleep in it anytime soon. Grumpily, she turned to Bella, who was almost vibrating in excitement.

“Presents?” she repeated hopefully.

She gave her the stink-eye, and gave up.

“Sure,” she grumbled, before making a mental note to use laguz on Bella when, or if, she ever caught the bitch sleeping.

Bella squee’d and bounced over to the tiny spruce tree that she’d set up in a corner of their room, decorated with enamelled doxy shells and tiny phosphorescent bits of fairy bone. Now that she had her magic back, Heather would have liked nothing more than to start testing the properties of the damned stuff.

Bella plopped down before the tree, and started to tear in. Heather reluctantly started on her own pile, tempted to burn the whole damned lot.

And there was a lot. Seemingly every Death Eater had thought to send her some trifle. She didn’t know the names of half of them, and the ones she did, she wanted to throw their regards out the window like so much trash.

Jewelry—combs of precious metals, rings and earrings and bracelets—there were scads of it. She imagined that if she could run away to the Muggle World, it would pay for all four years of her tuition twice over. Oddments—a top, a mirror, mummified fingers—she cringed and tossed that one aside—leather-bound notebooks, quills. Without thinking about it, she began to sort them into piles by category, the way she’d always done with her Halloween candy.

One of the boxes contained samples of wandwoods, carving knives, dyes and lacquers. She was almost beside herself with interest until she read that it was from Dolohov—the man who’d raped, and killed, her mother—and she set it aside violently. He had, apparently, noticed the wards set in the wood of Privet Drive, at some point before he’d destroyed them.

A pair of bone needles, yellowed with age, and engraved with bindrunes. Practice your knitting.
Out of all of it though, the one she appreciated most came from Magnus with a curious note:

Girl,

Josie and I thought you might enjoy something other than the standard shit everyone passes around at Christmas. He asked his some of his son’s girlfriends to pick it out for you. Let us know if we’re wrong—if so, I’ve got a silver necklace with your name on it. Hope you like it.

Love,
Mags and Josiah.

P.S. Best be careful handling some of those packages—wouldn’t be the first time someone slipped a curse or charm into the Christmas stockings.

She blanched to think of how casually she’d been tossing around and trying on the jewelry, before opening the box.

Her mouth fell open, and she laughed a little as she explored its contents.


A care package. Whether or not Magnus had picked it out himself, that was what this was. She felt a sudden burst of gratitude to these nameless girls, whoever they were, who had done this for her. Wished she could know them, sit up the night talking over random boys and braiding each other’s hair and doing every damned teenage cliché she was missing out on right now.

She was crying.

Bella, as usual, ruined the moment.

“Ooh! Open mine!”

Heather turned away, took a moment to compose herself, before opening the package offered her. It looked like a sewing box—a small wooden chest with compartments on top, filled with oddments—bone beads, gut string, drilled teeth, braids of hair. Her gut clenched with awful suspicion, confirmed when she felt the tanned skin folded up in the lower box.

She shut it, and set it aside. But she didn’t vomit.


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The day was as dull and tiresome as Christmas always is, when you have to spend it with people you don’t like. There were thank yous for all the useless (and potentially cursed) presents she neither liked nor needed, and thanks to her for all the baubles Narcissa had sent out on her behalf. There was a large lunch and dinner, courtesy of the house-elves, and holding court with the Dark Lord in the drawing room, while the men talked politics, and she and Nagini (both bloated with turkey and
sleep-deprived) curled up together by the fire and cursed everyone there.

The Dark Lord didn’t bother to reprimand them. From the twitching of his lips, he was rather enjoying their creativity.

And finally, there was darkness, and silence, after the celebrants had gone to bed, and Bella had at last tired of trying to drag her under the mistletoe.

She retired to her bedroom—Bella, for once, thoroughly focused on a book of medieval spells she didn’t want to know the purpose for, paid her no heed. She undressed, slipped one of Narcissa’s gifts from its wrappings and over herself, before closing a dark robe over it. Unpinned her hair, painted her lips.

She regarded herself in the mirror, before hissing a curse and turning her back on her own, uncertain eyes.

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A knock on the door. Hesitant at first, and then dammingly decisive.

He’d be lying if he’d said he hadn’t expected it, anticipated it even. With a girl like her, under Narcissa’s direction? It had only been a matter of time.

Still. He did not expect the predictability of this experience to diminish his pleasure in it. Quite the opposite. He had always revelled in knowing the objects of his attention must inevitably bend to his designs, willing, ignorant, or otherwise. For now, she was no different.

He turned over a page in his book, affecting indifference.

“Come in.”

The door opened. His mouth fell open a fraction, he tasted fear-sweat, saw the girl at the corner of his vision and mind, dark-robed, hair a black nimbus about her head. He thought of her in juxtaposition to the saintly Madonnas with their gold aureoles and white robes, and smiled inwardly, so she felt it.

He shut the book slowly, turned to face her.

“What is it, dear?”

He could feel her body like an echo in his own—swallow and tight breaths and slow measured footsteps, until she came to him, and slid—not at his feet, but into a chair.

Oh, yes, that was different. Not unexpected—he’d never put the fear of him into her—but clever girl, she usually copied the behaviours of his men, cautious of his ire.

“I have an idea, my Lord.”

“Oh?”

“Sirius Black. You have kept him for four years. He is a pureblood, and if I understand his history correctly, once a hitwizard, virtually an assassin. And the last heir to one of the darkest families in Europe.”

“All this is correct. Your point?”
No hesitation now. “You have given him to Bella for her to break down and bind to herself, and by extension, your cause, right?” She could feel no denial, she plowed ahead. “And in four years, she has yet to obtain results.”

“You believe you could.”

She smiled perversely, though he could feel she felt none of it. “I can, my Lord. Bellatrix—she only understands how to fight, how to destroy resistance directly. Sirius Black has not and will not yield to any amount of torture or pleasure she acts upon him.” Her eyes met his. “He may, however, be persuaded to cooperate with the opportunity for redemption—or vengeance.”

“And how do you intend to give him either?” the Dark Lord murmured, unimpressed. “As you may recall, he primarily wants vengeance against me.”

Heather sniffed. “He’s from a dark family, isn’t he? Even if he did go through a rebellious phase as a teenager, a few years of loud music and giving his parents the finger isn’t going to erase everything they taught him from infancy. There are plenty of their beliefs he’s probably internalized without thinking about it. Sure, he joined a war effort to kill you—but give him a house-elf, and he’d probably use its face for a football same as any other aristocrat in this house. Problem is, you keep generating more antagonism against you via Bellatrix every time you send her in there.”

“And, as his goddaughter, you would not,” the Dark Lord stated. “You already have free access to his cell. What more do you wish?”

“Relieve Bellatrix of his care, and place him in mine,” she told him. “You already have bonds on him to keep in a single form. Give me my own quarters. Let me take him into them.”

“So you can create yourself a servant, and scheme against me in private?”

“He’s from a dark family, isn’t he? Even if he did go through a rebellious phase as a teenager, a few years of loud music and giving his parents the finger isn’t going to erase everything they taught him from infancy. There are plenty of their beliefs he’s probably internalized without thinking about it. Sure, he joined a war effort to kill you—but give him a house-elf, and he’d probably use its face for a football same as any other aristocrat in this house. Problem is, you keep generating more antagonism against you via Bellatrix every time you send her in there.”

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“So you can create yourself a servant, and scheme against me in private?”

“With all respect, my Lord,” she said bitterly, “nothing in my mind will ever be private again, will it?”

He smiled a little.

“No. It will not.”

“As for creating a servant—my Lord, as your horcrux, I should have some defenses. What better bodyguard than the man who swore to protect me?”

“A man who swore to protect you, then ran off to kill a traitor before seeing to your welfare,” his lip curled.

“As Bella saw to torturing and killing anyone implicated in your death before trying to resurrect you.”

“You need not point out the similarities. There was a reason they were betrothed, after all.” He tapped his long fingers upon the desk. “So. You would take Black for your own. I still see no benefit to me in this, no way he could be induced to take my Mark.”

She licked her lips slowly. “The Mark is just a claim on one soul by another, is it not?”

“Oh,” he said slowly, her intent absorbing his attention. “Oh.” Perhaps, after all, she could surprise him. He hadn’t thought of that. He hadn’t thought she would think of that. Something almost like respect, or almost like desire, slipped from him and into her mind before he could think to repress it.
He’d been certain she’d learn of her connection to the Mark at some point and find some troublesome means to exploit it. Not that she’d negotiate this.

“You would Mark him for us, and he would take it willingly, believing himself to be only yours.”

“Yes.” Her use of Parseltongue, while a rather ham-handed reminder of their connection when he was this close to agreeing, pleased him.

“I’ll consider it,” he told her dismissively, closing his mind to hers, turning back to his book.

She stood up, grasped his jaw in her slender hand, forced him to face her.

“You’ll do no such thing,” she told him, before assaulting him, mind and body. It was laughable and clumsy at best, chimeric images from muggle porn flicks and memories of their faces, falsified desire thinly veiling desperation, and oh, angerangeranger, she hated him to the roots of her bones, until the kiss burned on both their lips, and when they pulled apart, their mouths were blistered.

He stared at her, sardonically, while she trembled in humiliation, tried not to cry.

“Little horcrux,” he said, reaching out to touch her cheek, so she flinched. “There’s no shame in this. Seduction, of any kind, is an art, and you…” he smiled, tracing the bone of her jaw, as she flushed. “You have still so much to learn. Shall I teach you?”

She breathed shallowly. He kissed her now, slowly, his fingers working open the buttons of her robe as he did so. As it fell open, he stood back, seemingly to admire. Sheer translucent spidersilk, clinging, in that pale green he seemed to favour.

“It was laughable and

Lust pooled between their minds, and she ground her teeth against it, real or imagined, it was too overwhelming to question—
“However,” and the sensation stopped at the word, leaving her breathless, “I believe you understand the basics. Namely, never begin anything unless you are prepared to follow through.” A word, a wave of his hand, the Steel was no longer binding her in space. She looked up.

“Go,” he told her simply.

She scrambled out the door, closing her robes as she did so. He returned to his chair, and his book, and stared out the window into the black, considering.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to all my reviewers!
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

Warning: Violence

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was a long, restless sleep she had that night, her satisfaction at the minor victory of gaining her own quarters undermined by her humiliation. Why in the hells had she tried that? On him? She cringed at the memory, rolling over in bed, as though the movement could erase the phantom touch of his fingers across her chest. She was stupid. So, so stupid, and he was awful, she hated him to the roots of her bones…

Her scar burnt at the thought.

So, she thought dully. I can’t even hate him in private anymore. Were they too close for that?

She tossed and turned, until Bella bodily kicked her out of bed. Too tired to fight over it, she dragged herself over to the window, lit a candle with a hurried sowilo, before pulling out the bone needles Severus had given her. She smelt them.

Damn.

It wasn’t that she couldn’t sense magic—it was that she sensed too much magic. Eighteen years in Surrey, potentially the most unmagical place on Earth, straining herself to feel even the tiniest glimmer of power—and now, she’d been thrown into a house that fairly burned with it. It was like walking into the sun after being in after being in a darkroom.

There was the afterecho of pain, where Bella had spilt some Muggle’s blood on the floor, and concretions of energy over various surfaces she preferred not to notice, where the woman had taken her trysts. The faint energy of their residence perfused the air with their exhalations, shed skin, the oils their hands left brushed up against a wall. And by the fire—

A power familiar as her own awakened, undulated up, against her leg, climbed up onto her lap. Curiously, she opened her eyes to stare into the snake’s, and saw herself staring back at her.

Oh, this was better.

The snake’s mind was focused. Simple. So simple. There were the dull, useless old bones lying on the chair of the warm body, and for some reason, she wanted to taste them. Her tongue flickered out her mouth. Tasted of blood, and a woman’s hands, and the shadow of their other mind came to them, that these were like wands, but not.

This made no sense, and she followed that thread of thought back, back to her own eyes and brain, until she stepped out of the snake and back into her own skin.

She panicked. She was choking, blind and numb, and she heaved frantically for breath, until her eyes cleared and her limbs tingled with pins and needles, and she thought, vaguely, that her heart must have stopped, while she’d possessed the snake.
Her mouth fell open, and she looked up for Nagini, for confirmation maybe.

The snake’s nostrils flared.

“Stupid human,” it told her, though she had the distinct impression the creature was less irritated at the possession, and more at her subsequent illness. The snake slid off for the fire, leaving Heather even more shaken as she picked up a skein of wool and began to cast on, hoping the familiar motions would calm her nerves.

She knit long into the night, siphoning her will through the bone and into the weave as she would have done with a wand, until the fabric warmed with magic under her hands. And sometime, between the 10th row and dawn, she fell asleep.

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She was awakened by a sudden inability to breathe, and before she could react, slammed into a wall. Her head cracked against it, she felt a rib break. More as an afterthought than from any actual fear, she screamed, scrambled out of the way of the next blow, before a heel stabbed down on her forearm, before she was kicked in the side again.

Desperately, she signed a curse that froze her opponent for long enough that she could pull herself onto her feet.

Bella.

The woman shook off the curse and backhanded her, and brandishing her wand. A jolt of red fire burnt down her clothes, before the Steel absorbed it. Her chains burnt on her wrists, but for the first time, faced with the woman’s livid wrath, she was grateful for the damned things, for the goblin who had just died on her behalf.

“Stupid, bloody bitch!” screamed the woman, another curse leaping from her wand before jumping to the Goblin Steel. “Stealing what’s mine, can’t be satisfied, ingrate—“

The woman stabbed her collar before Heather could get a good punch in sideways, and in abrupt horror, she realized the woman could still command her bonds. She froze in space, helpless, at the blows the woman descended on her.

“You didn’t know, did you?” the woman sneered, pulling a knife from her pocket. “No, silly little mudblood, you didn’t. You might be his, but he, he was always mine—“

“I’m sorry,” she begged desperately, her face and throat still mobile. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to go after the Dark Lord, he rejected me—“

The woman laughed manically, her knife slashing down to rip away her nightdress, leaving a long narrow cut below it.

“Sorry, she says, the baby Mudblood! Not the Dark Lord, stupid. He’s his own. Sirius,” she snapped, punctuating her words with a jab to the notch between her clavicles. “He’s mine. Always mine.”

“I’m sorry, sorry, you can have him,” she begged shamelessly, as the knife began to move along her collarbone, blood spitting from her mouth with the words. “I didn’t mean—“
“Liar!” she snapped, jabbing the knife abruptly into her side. “And I can’t! Can’t have him! Never! Never, never, never, the Lord said I could, promised him to me, but no, the Dark Lord doesn’t go back on his word, I just can’t have him—why?!” She tore open the girl’s side, and her vision exploded into stars at the pain of it, and the hurt too much for a single mind to hold—

Which was why it overflowed into the nearest receptacle for it.

Somewhere else, in a place that was not the Manor, the Dark Lord stopped in his tracks in sudden agony, his fury an afterthought, but she did not want him right now. Right now, her mind turned to the serpent jolted awake on the hearth at the pain, and, for the second time, she stepped into her.

The body on the floor was limp, the dark woman too stupidly focused on her prey to notice them slipping up behind her.

“Stupid Mudblood,” she muttered, “he’ll be mine, you’ll see, when you leave, he’ll have to give him back—“

They lunged, fangs striking true, the hot blood rushing into their mouth, all lovely-bright, incandescent with power, the woman falling before she could shriek. How pleasant. And to be sure, they spun their long lovely coils about the creature’s body, pulsed once that the ribs creaked. Oh and wonder, they could break them, couldn’t they, crush it down into one long, soft sac of flesh that would collapse down their maw, fill them up for months, they’d sleep, yes, they would, until high summer warmed the rocks—

The other’s mind entered theirs. Oh, he was angry, wasn’t he? But he could do nothing where he was, yes. Fuck him. They would glut themselves on the thing that had hurt them, and nevermind what he thought. A sudden surge of panic crossed the bond, and they felt a certain unease that was quickly stifled by giddiness.

Nevermind him. Stupid man. Who was he to tell them what to do, place them in this situation, and then be angry when this happened. Stupid, stupid man. They tightened themselves, forcing more blood from the wound on its neck, when he burst through the door.

Off her, he commanded.

They ignored him. He didn’t care for her, she didn’t have to care for him. They didn’t agree on this, but there was meat here, they could cooperate.

Nagini…

They turned their eyes to him, and she made sure he saw her in them. She hissed scornfully, constricting her coils more powerfully. He narrowed his eyes, and in that moment, his mind leapt into theirs.

It hurt. Worse than Bella’s assault, worse than humiliation, and she hated him for it, and it hurt more. It was pain beyond enduring—

And the moment her focus wavered, he left the snake. Their vision cleared once more, in the struggle, they’d loosened their grasp, and some damned wizards had pulled the meat out from their grasp and from the room. She gathered herself up, hissing. It was hers, how dare he—

He hissed back, just as angry.

'Heather, leave her.'
Fuck him. She’d kill him too. She reared back and sprung, one of the wizards snapping off a cutting curse that barely clipped her scales but sent her careening into a wall, before the Dark Lord snarled at him to leave. She recovered, turning back to take another stab at him. Her fangs grazed his leg, and she felt a sudden surge of triumph, feeling the venom leak out.

'Leave her NOW before you die.'

Who cared if she died, she considered, moving to trip the man up before he assaulted her mind once more, and she snapped at him again, wanting to wind her length around him, to end it. It didn’t matter if she died now. All that would be left was the snake, see if he could resurrect himself from a single horcrux.

'They'll resurrect me,' he promised, viciously. 'Right after they kill Colonel Fubster, and Aunt Marge, and Jenny Thompson, and every other name I’ve pulled from your mind since you came.'

The threat wasn’t enough to make her freeze in horror, not anymore. But it was enough to make her hesitate, and that was enough for him to jab his mind into hers, needling her with a sudden fury that echoed through both their minds, before another voice snapped a spell.

“Exciszoratum in corpus alienus—“

It fell down on her in a rush, flung her through the void and back into the body she’d abandoned, except that she could find no purchase there. Her mind was black, and quiet as the void she’d passed through, and she began to float out, out into the room—

Oh no you don’t, the other self swore, and she found herself thrown back again into the blind mind of her dying body, nailed down by the pain of revival, a hand on her chest forcing her heart to beat, the other breathing life into her, like a God

Fuck you—

the great serpent, stunned, coiling off into the black ducts to wait for the pain in its head to subside.

She could kill them, she thought, between the pressure on her chest that forced her blood to circulate, the breath that he kissed into her mouth. This, at least, proved that. They weren’t omnipotent, and she wasn’t helpless.

She could kill one or two of them, and the remainder would kill her, or she’d be bound to the Manor by the Steel until the end of days.

And as little as she enjoyed her life right now, neither option appealed to her.

So she dreamed, in and out of wakefulness, as they passed through the halls and into the infirmary, of the Dark Lord’s death. Of a life outside the Wall of Souls, the bloodless squabbles of suburban Muggles, the noise Bella made as Nagini tore out her throat.

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“I can’t believe you were so stupid.”

The voice was coming from the light. She did not deign to open her eyes.

“Risking Bellatrix’s ire to save Sirius Black? Do you realize how dangerous that was?”
She slitted her eyes open far enough to stare ironically at Severus before giving a pointed glance down the hospital bed where she rested. “I think my position is answer enough for that.”

Severus scowled and turned back to the window. ‘It’s not just Bellatrix, you idiotic girl, though she’s bad enough. You don’t realize it, but she protected you more than you know. With her gone, the Death Eaters will be all over you.’

She sneered and rolled away from the light. “Let them try,” she muttered. “I belong to the Dark Lord. They can’t hurt me.”

The man grabbed her shoulder and turned her forcibly to face him, and she winced. The bones were still healing. “They can, and will hurt you. They probably won’t kill you—irritate the wrong person in this house though, and it’s a possibility, fool. Not everyone who visits this house is a servant of the Master.”

She gave him a baleful look. “Thester says the Dark Lord cruciated Bellatrix within an inch of her sanity,” she said banally, “and that was after they stabilized the injuries I dealt the bitch. Tell me if that isn’t an incentive for hands off.”

“It’ll frighten away a few. The ones too stupid to notice what Bella and the Lord put you through in the name of training. The rest will be all too happy to fill in any ‘gaps’ in your education Bella might have missed—and give the Lord that excuse when he asks why you’re lying in a bloody heap.”

“I don’t get why Bella was so pissed off to begin with. She hates Sirius. She ought’ve been glad to be rid of him.”

Severus’ face twisted in a way that made his face look uglier than ever. “They hate each other, but no one has ever been allowed to come between them. You don’t understand what you’re walking into—” Heather rolled her eyes “—even when Black was an Auror, during the Raids no one except him was allowed to fight Bella. Even when there were more pressing targets, casualties to tend to, even when the other side was in retreat, they’d chase each other until either Dumbledore or Voldemort pulled them off. They’re mad dogs, and you, girl, are not their master.”

The girl met his eyes. “I was raised with dogs,” she said with certainty. “Whoever this Sirius Black is, I can bring him to heel.”

The man shook his head and leaned back in his chair. “You don’t know who the man is, and you’re already so certain.”

“And you do?”

“Black and I attended school together. The man lured me into a trap my fifth year and tried to kill me. He’s bad as Bella. Rumour has it they’re half-siblings—given what the Blacks get up to in their spare time, I’m inclined to believe it. Give it up, apologize for Bella, and stay away from that man.”

“Rather late for that, given that I’ve given our Lord my word I’d have him trained. Asides, he can’t be that bad if my parents appointed him as my godfather.”

“Your father did so, and he was almost as bad as Black.”

“He couldn’t have been that bad, if my mother married him.”

The man seemed to be having difficulty forming words. “Lily,” he said slowly, “was so careful to see the good in people that it blinded her to all their shortcomings.”
“Like yours,” she reminded him. “I heard you betrayed them.”

He met her eyes. “I never meant to hurt them. I never would have hurt Lily.”

“Really?” she asked skeptically. “Let’s see.”

And with that, she dove into his eyes as she had the snake’s.

The impact felt like hitting a brick wall. She rebounded back into her own mind with a splitting migraine, felt blood trickling down from her nose. Severus’ eyes, staring back at her, were impassive.

“I was told the Dark Lord wished you to learn Occlumency, not legilimency,” he said slowly, “though for a novice, that is not an unsatisfactory effort. At the latter, at least.”

She held her head forward and pinched her nose.

“I will look forward to your speedy recovery and the beginning of our lessons.” With that, he rose to his feet, slipping a bouquet he’d held in his hands into a conjured vase on her nightstand as he left. She examined it casually, and then again with equal parts suspicion and surprise.

Monkshood. Azalea. And, most curiously, white heather.

A large bumblebee clung stiffly to the stems of the moor flowers. She pulled herself up, and brushed a finger tentatively along its furred back. A sudden whirring of its wings, and she pulled her hand back, shocked, as it buzzed off and towards the window. Thoughtlessly, she clambered out of bed on protesting joints, and unlatched the window. The insect discovered the crack and flew off into the falling snow.

She shut the window, glanced back thoughtfully at the flowers, and smiled.

She’d be damned if any ordinary Death Eater knew Victorian flower language.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to all my reviewers!

So, while I have a vague idea where this story is going, it's a draft, and it's probably going to be edited down to the bones if or when I ever finish it. Bear with me--this is my first attempt at writing something of this size, and I'm still learning how to manage things like pacing and mood.

Have a lovely week!
On her recovery, Thester shooed her out of the Infirmary and back to the quarters she’d shared with Bellatrix. A number of the books were missing from the shelves, and clothes were falling out of the wardrobe.

This, however, was not as immediate a concern as the Death Eater standing in the middle of her rooms, with a very naked and dirty man flat on the floor under his boot.

She slitted her eyes.

“Rabastan.”

“Lady whore,” he spat.

She drew her wand easy as breathing, but he was quicker. His shot shattered against the Goblin Steel, and she thought she heard the echo of a scream as it absorbed the blow. The man keened under his heel as Rab readied to throw a knife—and struggled, unsettling his captor’s balance just enough that the dagger hit off the mark, leaving a thin line of blood along her cheek.

She felt it with her left hand, stared dumbly at him for a fraction of section as Rab tried to regain his balance, readied a second blade.

“Crucio.”

He fell back, writhing under her wand, flinging dark magic from his own haphazardly. The naked man considered this a moment, and then sprang on his fist—careful not to block Heather’s line of sight on the Death Eater—and wrestled the wand from his grasp, backing away on hands and feet. She held it, a minute, two minutes—long enough, she thought, that he ought to be too incapacitated to cause her any grief—and released it.

The moment it loosed, Rab grabbed for his daggers again, and the naked man sprang forward once more.

“Stop it,” she snapped. Surprisingly, the naked man complied, while Rab shuddered to his feet, dagger in his shaking hands, and rushed her. She sidestepped, signed kenaz, but he moved with her and she felt the magic gutter and die in the signing, so that sparks flew along his figure, but he didn’t light up like a torch. He jabbed for her shoulder and would have hit, and then the naked man was on him, pulling him off, biting and tearing.

“What is this—Merlin,” swore Severus, slamming open the door. “What in the nine hells, girl?”

“I have no clue,” she muttered shakily, leaning against the wall. “They were here when I walked in,
and then Rab attacked me for no reason.”

“Well, don’t just stand there! Stop them!”

She gave him a withering glare.

“You can’t manage…” his voice trailed off incredulously, before twitching his wand in a series of motions still too numerous for recollection. “Petrificus Corpus.”

The men froze but for their heads. Snape nodded for Heather to sit down. Cautiously, almost uncertain his spell would hold, she did so.

“Lestrange,” Snape said pleasantly, kneeling beside the man. “Whatever are you doing in Miss. Potter’s rooms? I’d thought you busy with Bellatrix and your brother in the north end of the country.”

“The Dark Lord wanted Black delivered to her quarters. I was the errandboy.”

Snape stared hard at him. Rab stared back.

“I find it difficult to believe,” the man said slowly, “that the Dark Lord would recall you so soon from that errand. Did Bella ask you to fetch her something special, maybe, before you left? A beating heart? The girl’s head?”

Rab was silent.

He reversed the spell, and called Rab’s wand from where it’d rolled under a settee. “Get out,” he said coldly, glaring him out the door, before handing him his wand and slamming the door in his face. A quick glance at Heather, pale against the wall. “Sit down.”

“What about him?” she gestured to the naked man.

Severus sneered. “Black can wait.”

She sat.

“Everyone in the Manor, and more than a few outside it, know you cannot wield a wand to save your life,” he hissed. “I would have thought you’d have fixed that deficiency by now.”

“I cruciated Rabastan,” she said blandly.

“Can you do any spells that don’t involve pointing and shooting? No?” He got up, and began to stalk about the room irately. “That, that is what Muggles do. Point and shoot. No artistry in it, none at all. You might as well be wielding a gun in hand, rather than a wand.”

“Then get me a gun,” she shot back. “At I’ll be able to get more than one shot off.”

“That would not be an issue if you would stop using overpowered spells! Why do you think wizards don’t just use Unforgivables, if they’re so easy?”

She rolled her eyes, and he narrowed his at the discourtesy of it. “Because they take way too much energy and you’ll run out of gas in the middle of a battlefield,” she sing-sang in a nasal voice.

He could have hexed her, if it weren’t for the damned Steel. Hexed her, and then carried her out of here.
“And besides,” she muttered, folding her legs up onto the chair, “it’s not as though I’ll ever be on a battlefield anyways.”

“Why should the Lord train you if not for that purpose?” Severus asked cautiously. The girl snorted.

“Why indeed? I’m his war trophy, a token of his power. He places ‘The Girl Who Lived’ as his consort, and suddenly, the symbol of the resistance is gone, the opposition crumbles.”

“Your existence is still a rumour. If he wanted to show you off, the whole world would know. You’d be immediately targeted for rescue or assassination. And yet, he keeps you quiet, locked up in his Manor.”

“He can’t hold me forever,” she said sullenly, and for the first time, Snape approved.

“Except he can,” he sneered. “The Steel binds you to either the House or the Wall of Souls, and those wards are bound by his soul. You can’t cross them without his being present.”

Unexpectedly, she cackled, fit to cry, and he wondered at Bella’s influence.

“Oh…” she laughed, wiping a tear from her face, before sobering. “I don’t know what they’re bound to, but they’re not bound to his soul.”

Severus hesitated. There was a risk, in speaking of openly of these things in the Manor, where the walls had ears and the floors drank blood. He would not risk himself, this slim chance of guiding her, without cause.

But she needed no guidance, it seemed.

“What else would the Steel be bound to then, if not his soul?”

He thought of the man’s slender fingers caressing the steel caging her hands, the torc snaking round her throat. “Flesh and blood,” he said dismissively, a kind of despair nestling itself in his unspeaking mind.

A curious look stole over the girl’s face, too fleeting for interpretation, but if he’d tried, he would have placed it as equal parts fear and triumph.

“So did you just come here to lecture me on my hopeless situation?” she complained, distracting him from his thoughts.

Lily she was not, he thought irately. She had all of James Potter’s sense of entitlement and something of Narcissa’s aptitude for social games, and none of that freshness and candour that had initially attracted him to her mother.

Maybe if Lily had been less green, less innocuous, she would have understood.

Maybe she would have stepped aside.

And maybe she wouldn’t have been Lily then, but this hard-eyed little bitch demanding his attention.

He curled his lip. “That, and to ensure you were not killed by Rabastan Lestrange. A measure of gratitude would be appropriate, girl.”

She looked at him, and then seemed to unwind, a very little.

“I’m sorry,” she said, unexpectedly. “Thank you. Thank you very much. I appreciate your coming to
my defense—both now, and in the past. You were the one who fought Fenrir for slandering me, at the beginning, weren’t you? And Alecto, just recently. That was very brave, and I have been very rude.”

Mollified a little at the apology, he relaxed by inches in turn. “Yes. Well. You are welcome.”

There was an uncomfortable silence.

“So, was there anything else you needed?” she asked awkwardly.

Severus regarded her evenly, and then considered Black still bound on the floor.

“If I may give you the same advice again, I would tell you to put that dog down. He’s as much a murderer as Bellatrix, and just as unpredictable. Keep him alive, and you’re apt to get a knife in your back. He runs with werewolves.”

Her mouth opened, and she flicked her tongue over her front teeth briefly, eyes widening as though in sudden recognition. “And you’re not human either, are you?”

“That has nothing to do with this conversation.”

But she was not to be undone. “That has everything to do with this, doesn’t it? If you’re invested in fighting Fenrir or Black due to a racial feud, well, I am not fond of werewolves either, but neither do I like being used as another’s pawn.”

“We’re all either pawns or players,” he murmured bitterly. “And before you make assumptions, I only became what I am because of circumstances surrounding the battle with Fenrir that I made on your behalf.”

Ingracious twit.

“And what are you?”

An ugly scowl twisted his features. “Vampire. Of a kind.”

She flicked her tongue outside her mouth once more, in a way he suddenly recognized as having seen in snakes. Cataloguing the scent. Of course.

“Of a kind? Like in Buffy? Do you want to suck my blood?”

“Continue that inane prattle, and the answer will assuredly be yes,” he sniped, getting out the door. “Study for occlumency.”

“What about Sirius?”

He sniffed, glancing over his shoulder. “What about him?”

“He’s still frozen.”

An unpleasant smile stole over his face.

“As you need further practice in wandwork, Miss. Potter, I’d think you to be elated at this opportunity for it. The countercharm is finite incantatem. Good luck.”

“But what if I mess it up?”
The damn dog’s eyes widened comically, and Severus rejoiced inside.

“Then we will all be less one problem, won’t we? Good day, Miss. Potter, good day.”

He exited, wondering how long it’d take for the girl to reverse the spell—after her magic recovered, of course.

That Sirius Black would remain uncomfortably frozen for a good twelve hours in the interim seemed like no small grace.

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Four hours, and many unspeakable side-effects later—she’d clean up the flamingo feathers, she swore--and Sirius Black remained frozen. She jabbed the wand into his side irritably.

“Well, nothing for it,” she muttered, marching across the hall and rat-tat-tat on Magnus’ door. The man opened it with bleary eyes and a scowl that lightened on seeing her.

“Yes, lady-light?”

“I need some help reversing a spell.”

His gaze drifted past her to the feathers floating around the room, and he groaned. “I’m putting on robes first.”

“Actually, if you wouldn’t mind lending me some of your old clothes—“

It was some minutes later that he grumped out of his room and into hers, banishing the feathers and removing some of the fire damage with irritating ease. “What’d you try to do to Lestrange?” he asked mildly. “Tar and feather him?”

“How did you know Lestrange was here?”

“You were all yelling fit to wake the dead. I’m sure the whole house knew Lestrange was here.”

“And you didn’t come by to help?”

“I was otherwise occupied,” he said suavely. “Now, let’s see what we can do with this fine creature.” He twirled his wand theatrically, to Sirius’ glare, and jabbed it between his eyes. “Wake up, Black.” He leapt back as Sirius sprung at him.

“Fuck off, you slimy arse-kissing con—“

Magnus blew him off with a wave of his wand and a wink, and Sirius went crashing into the furniture. “Not any way to speak before the Lady of the House, now, is that?” He tipped an imaginary hat to Heather. “I’ll be seeing you, milady—best keep your guarddog on a short leash.” He shut the door, and Heather, for the first time, found herself face to face with her mad godfather outside a cell.

For a long time, they stared at each other.

He was tall, still emaciated from his years of confinement and from the side effects of his shapeshifting powers, though she knew the Dark Lord had not starved this prisoner. Tattoos and scars inched down the centre of his sternum and over his shoulders—alchemical signs, runes, eastern
scripts she’d never thought to study. Ansuz, sign of Woden, followed by what might have been a reversed algiz, the elk or kalkk, the chalice, and then iar-ia, the serpent. And glaring above all that, a sign that reminded her most of a scorpion, the wide arch of its arms reminiscent of pincers with two horizontal slashes for legs. Amalgamation, the sign of the grey wolf.

The damned wolves again, she thought, folding her arms.

His grey eyes sought out her green through the matted hair around his face.

“Lily?” he managed weakly.

Her lips fell open in as much dismay as incredulity. It was a step up from being thought Bellatrix, she supposed.

“Let’s get you a bath,” she said instead.

The man followed her as though in a stupor to the tub and sat in it obediently, scrubbed as though in a daze. Didn’t even present any argument when she set to shearing off his hair, calling a house-elf as reinforcement when the first louse crawled out from under his ear. They emptied and filled the tub twice more, the water thick as mud the first time, and by the time they were done, the man’s skin was rubbed raw and his hair shaved to the scalp and his scalp rubbed thick with caustic, because of course, she didn’t know any delousing charms. And she stared.

He looked like her. It wasn’t any great shock, she supposed. She looked enough like Bellatrix to be Bellatrix’s daughter. And still, after years of family reunions, with Marge grasping at tenuous relations to whom she bore a supposed similarity, her mother’s blind attempts to match her face to her Grandma Evans’—seeing this face was a kind of homecoming.

“You’re not Lily,” he said slowly. “Not Lily.” His hand grasped hers gently, from where he sat on the bench, covered in towels.

“No,” she said slowly, gently, as she’d never dared speak since she’d come here. “I’m Heather. Lily and James’ daughter. Heather.”

He stared at her, for a heartbeat more, and then seized her in his arms. She tensed to struggle, and then felt his shudders against her, realized what this was, held him back. The damp where his face pressed into her shoulders was not from the washwater.

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And he watched through the mirrors.

The girl caressed the dog and whispered to him. He’d’ve liked to have known what she was saying. Would have, if she had not necessitated Nagini’s removal after her play at possession. He supposed he could look into her memory later, if he still wanted to indulge this curiosity. She held the man the way he’d seen Narcissa hold Draco, when they thought no one was watching.

He sipped his brandy, wondering that he wasn’t bored already of watching this.

What must Black think of his horcrux? She looked like him. All Blacks were a touch incestuous. Did he see her as a second Bellatrix, gentle and attainable where the first had been neither, or a more emotionally accessible version of his mother?

It didn’t matter, really. Irregardless, the man appeared calmer and more tractable for her in this half hour than he had in the presence of any of his men over the past four years.
And through the link, he felt her settling.

Perhaps it was good to give her this toy. Perhaps, she could place him to their advantage as he had been unable. Children conceived under Amortentia could not love; in his younger years, he had never considered this a deficiency. Maturing, he appreciated this as a gap in his perceptions for which he had to compensate, if he wished to accurately predict people’s actions. He could counterfeit love, for a time, but he lacked the basic cognitive make-up for a nuanced approach.

His other self had no such restrictions.

It had initially irritated him, this quality in her. He’d thought to remove it. It could be exploited—had been, by him, many times. And yet, it posed a unique opportunity.

He felt the afterglow of whatever she was feeling—or maybe it was the burn of the liquor in his belly.

Men joined a war for different reasons—for their family, for their ideals, for a livelihood. In some way, a woman could be made to embody each of these principles. Abstraction incarnate, the stone Virgins in the cathedrals of his youth, the painted pin-ups girls kissed and tucked away in soldiers’ pockets, the portrait of the Queen.

In the summer nights before his death, he’d crawled the pubs of London with Bellatrix, watching with pleasure from the bar at how she needled and coaxed rakish young aurors into imperiating spiders before hauling them into the loo, persuaded sympathy from rumpled bureaucrats who’d never been spoken to by such a thing as her. She could debate—and did, though these usually devolved into bar fights and swift exits before the great Lord Voldemort and his servant could end up on bail for disorderly conduct. More often, in a move that would have appalled the Muggle feminists, she left the debates to the men. In those days, more casual soldiers had pursued him as a means to her, than for any reason he’d deem rational.

And now, Bellatrix was broken, none of his followers or their daughters beautiful or cunning enough to assume her place, and he had another, very different instrument in his hands. Heather. She was young and lovely and distressed, and seemed to have that air of imperilled innocence that attracted men like Black. She’d probably never seduce the hardhitting merc types Bella had brought him, but she might coax a Gryffindor into his House. Or, at the very least, act as bait.

So, he spent New Year’s Eve tonight as he had every year since the first horcrux—in the dark and silence, listening at the edges of his mind for the echoes of his own self-love—the only kind of which he was capable—from the broken pieces of his soul.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to all of my reviewers. Until next time!
Sirius Black was Not Quite Right.

The collar constrained his transformations to either that of a man or a dog, preventing a transition to the deadly mist that had once attacked her in the arena. Otherwise, like Heather, he was given the run of the house. Oddly enough, he seemed unwilling to take advantage of this relative freedom—

But then, who was she to judge? As the Lord was quick to remind her, she’d spent the better part of a month hiding in her room, and she’d only endured captivity for a few months in relative comfort. Sirius had been imprisoned for almost two decades and tortured by the very occupants of this house. Little wonder he wanted to spend as little time with them as possible.

When he did leave the room though, it was always at her side, in the shape of the great dog. He’d become glued to her hip. He left only reluctantly during lessons, and then, he growled menacingly at her duelling partners. Even in their room, he seemed reluctant to shift back into the man.

For the first few days, she’d let it go, allowing him to sleep on her bed and eat from her hand, having no idea why it wasn’t as weird for him as it was for her. By the fourth day, she’d had enough. She liked dogs, but he wasn’t a dog, and she wasn’t into any freakish puppy play BDSM nonsense. The collar was bad enough. Her girlfriends would have fits of giggles over that kind of thing once upon a time.

She regarded Sirius where he lay on the rug beside the bed she’d ordered the house-elves to bring up for him, and crossed her arms at her sides. His ears poked up lazily to attention.

“Would you please turn back into a man?”

He closed his eyes and whuffed softly, pretending to ignore her.

“Seriously.”

His tail wagged mischievously, but his eyes remained closed.

“No pun intended. Dumb-ass.”

The tail wagged harder.

“Oh, for crying out loud…” she joined him on the floor, and he rolled over to have his tummy rubbed. “This is humiliating. Don’t you find this humiliating?”

He whined and kicked his hind leg as she found a particularly good spot to scratch, and she smirked.

“Ooooh, no we don’t, do we my prwetty sweet puppy? Ooo’s a big fuzzybum, Sirius? Dawww, we is a niccee puppy, isn’t we—“
“When you put it like that, yes. It’s humiliating.”

“Augh!” she leapt back from the man, face scrunched in disgust, trying to not think about the second where her hands had gone from stroking the soft black fur of the dog to the coarse curls of the man’s chest. “Fuck, throw on some clothing.” She turned away and chucked a comforter at his head.

He made a throaty, raspy noise, which she identified some moments later as laughter.

“Oh, come on, love, you weren’t complaining a minute ago—“

She turned back and rolled her eyes at him while he rummaged for clothing. “You’re a lot more attractive as a dog than as a man.”

He clasped his hand to his chest in a weak mockery of a stricken man. “The lady speaks the truth! Oh, the calamity—“ and then, with a wink, “why do you think I spend so much time as a dog?”

She laughed weakly and took a seat. “Seriously though,” she began, and for once, he didn’t waggle his eyebrows at the word, “I need your help.”

Dressed in loose robes, he moved to settle back on his haunches on the floor—and paused, seeming to think better of it, before sitting stiffly on the settee. “You have it,” he murmured. “What can I do?”

She thought for a moment. What could he do? She didn’t see the Dark Lord giving her an ally like this, if she could really use Sirius against him—but then, she’d surprised the Dark Lord before. If the master’s fury was any indication, Sirius had surprised the Dark Lord before.

She wasn’t giving up.

“I need a way out,” she told him.

“A way out,” he repeated. “Right. I’ll get right on that then. What have you tried?”

“Everything. You saw what happens if we try to walk out the Gate—only marked Death Eaters can move in or out. I have enough of the Lord’s magical signature that I probably could manage it, if it weren’t for the Steel.”

He looked disturbed, but she continued. “I tried Floo. It spat me out in the Master’s bedroom. I suppose you could try it—but frankly, I’m sure he would have put up wards against that. For some reason,” like the fact I’m his horcrux, “I have immunity, but I don’t want to see what he’d do to you if we failed.”

“What about owls?”

“What about them?” she snorted. “Have you seen the birds they keep around here? I don’t know what kind of birds the Order kept, but these aren’t your regular post owls. Half of them are trained to ignore anyone other than their master trying to send messages, the other half will attack you outright. I’m still cut up from the time I tried to message Dumbledore with the Dark Lord’s raven.”

Of course, the Lord had been as amused as he’d been angry to walk in on her slapping madly at his peevy messenger bird.

“What about apparition?”

“Apart from the fact that I don’t know how to apparate? Same problem as the Floo. Only someone with the Mark or the Lord himself is going to get in or out.”
“But you have the same signature as Voldemort!” She flinched and hoped the man was too busy to notice someone using his name in vain.

“Magical signature, sure. If I were to cast the Dark Mark on someone, they could get out. But with the Steel on me, I’m not getting out unless I have his physical signature too, and unless you have some plan for getting his Lordship to stay still while I cut off his hand or take a blood sample, we’re stuck here.”

The man scowled. “There’s no way in the hells I’m taking that asshole’s mark to get out of here.”

It had been worth a try.

“So, option two then. Get some of his blood.”

“Right. I’ll just slap on a tourniquet and ask politely for a donation. The Gate still won’t let you pass without his Mark.”

“Well, forget me then. Get out, and let the Order know I’m still alive. If only we could make contact with them, I’m sure Dumbledore would be able to help—“ he snapped his fingers. “The wolves.”

She looked at him dubiously.

“The wolves have always parlayed with Voldemort, since he usually throws them some condemned prisoners and promises them equal standing if he comes into power, but they’re really on their own side. I was great friends with one once—Remus Lupin. If you can get word to his pack, they might be able to contact Dumbledore for help.”

“Are you listening to yourself? The Dark Lord throws them condemned prisoners. I doubt he’s giving them out as party favours. And Severus says—“

Sirius’ expression turned ugly, and she could see the shadow of the dog below his skin. “Snivellus says?” he sneered. “Snivellus always hated anything that wasn’t pure as Malfoy’s spit. He’d piss himself before he’d talk to a wolf. Anyways, the Dark Lord would have executed tens of prisoners—abandoned hostages, families of the Order, people who had nothing to do with the war except hearing the wrong thing at the wrong time. The wolves negotiated for their release.”

“So they could make werewolves,” Heather surmised flatly. “I wonder how many of them survived the process.” From her reading, Turning was notoriously dangerous, and less than one in ten lived through it.

“More than would have survived the Death Curse. And the ones that survived might deal with Voldemort out of necessity,” Sirius grinned, baring his teeth, “but they’re no friends of his.”

She sat back, considering.

It was worth a try. It wasn’t as though she had any other options. Though she’d be damned if she’d talk to Fenrir Greyback.

“Besides,” Sirius mused, “you’re forgetting a third possibility.”

“What?”

“We’re in the Dark Lord’s fortress, and you have complete impunity. There’s no reason you can’t slaughter all his men in their sleep, or at least try to.”
Her mouth opened in surprise.

Devil? she wondered, are you listening?

“You almost killed Bella.”

“Yes. And he took notice of it.”

“And instead of locking you up, he gives you me as a reward,” he said slowly. “Heather,” he said slowly, putting his hand on hers, “you haven’t decided to be one of his people, have you?”

She felt stunned. “I haven’t decided anything.”

It was the truth. She’d been living here in a kind of stasis, grieving, letting other people make the decisions for her—and could anyone blame her? Did she even have a choice?

There’s always a choice. Except, for her, it wasn’t between good and evil—it was between bad and worse.

“He killed your parents.”

“I think I noticed,” she sniped reflexively.

“Well, good,” Sirius said. “He needs to die, along with every other asshat in this house. We need to kill him. We could start by setting the prisoners free. Try to take the Manor, even if we couldn’t get out of it.”

She could do that, couldn’t she? Except—

“Sirius, that would never work. Half of those prisoners are too weak to run anyways. What are they going to do? Flail their arms? And the Death Eaters—there are too many of them to take. Even if you tried to massacre them in their sleep, that wouldn’t work. Their rooms are booby-trapped, and I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but given how shitty my wandwork is, I’m not going to be a Gringotts Cursebreaker anytime soon.”

“You’re making excuses,” he said incredulously. “You really don’t care, do you?”

“Of course I do—“

“James and Lily would have risked their lives—“

“They did risk their lives though,” she said nastily. “And they’re dead, and I’m here. What’s your point.”

He stared at her resentfully, until the stare melted into the face of a dog that finally turned its back on her to sulk in the corner.

He was right, wasn’t he? She’d grown too comfortable in her captivity, too focused on trying to live day by day. At some point, all of this freakishness had become normal. She’d forgotten her parents. Forgotten what they had done.

But was it really worth her life—such that it was now—to avenge people who were dead, and past any pain?

And what would the Dark Lord do if she tried?
She hit the ground with a blow that drove the breath from her, heaved for air.

“Stand up,” Alecto snapped.

Irately, she turned herself onto her heels and upright. The next spell caught her by surprise.

Again.

“Again!” scowled Alecto. “An Auror isn’t going to care whether you know the countercurse or not. Nott, keep going, she’s still conscious.”

Theodore Nott kept his wand trained on Heather, whose legs were currently doing a good imitation of spaghetti under the influence of a Jellylegs Jinx, but seemed dubious.

Alecto huffed impatiently. Heather took that as her cue and began to draw out a Stupefy—wand back, a beat, half-beat forward, tip, and rest—

She’d barely made it halfway through the pattern before her vision went dark.

She awoke to Nott’s discomfited face, and Alecto’s annoyed one.

“Do you know any proper spells, girl?”

Heather opened her mouth to protest.

“Never mind. To the side. Crabbe, Crowley, you’re next.”

The one-eyed boy and a lanky brunet stepped into the arena. She and Nott joined the rest of the younger Death Eaters in the stands who’d been pulled out of bed at five AM for drills. Personally, Heather began to think the unpleasant personalities of the Death Eaters could be explained by the hours they kept. Anyone who got up before dawn...

She watched enviously as the Death Eaters began to exchange blows, their wands moving through the notation of the spells flawlessly. Three quarter time, side-swipe, right to left, curl and down—the shorthand for a flamewhip.

She hated wands.

Oh, she understood their usefulness, alright, even if no one could explain the particulars of why they worked so well. Magic was like mind, rituals like memory, and spells were a kind of shorthand for rituals that had been used so often, they’d become almost reflexive—as though someone, at some point, had found the pressure points of reality, and learnt to make it twitch as they pleased.

If their wandwork was like memory though, hers was like leaps of intuition—exhausting and infrequent. Her rune-signs, she guessed, keyed into some paths of power the world had almost forgotten. Though she’d made them work, the energy cost compared to a spell was like slogging through an overgrown trail versus walking down the highway. The energy costs of magic could be offset with physical objects that acted as conductors or reservoirs for power, the best materials coming from magical beings themselves.

Of course, the Lord had cautioned her dryly, it was possible to burn out anything—including wands -- if you dumped enough power into it.

The other young Death Eaters gave her a wide berth, and her constant failures in the duelling arena
were ignored by everyone but Alecto. It suited her fine. She’d seen their enthusiasm in dealing with prisoners. They’d seen what she would do if provoked. There was no desire to make friends on either side.

Well. Perhaps that was not entirely true…

She carded her fingers through Sirius’ long fur as he rested his great head atop her knee, panting lightly, pale eyes plaintive, and pressed a kiss to his nose.

“You’re kissing him.”

Heather sniffed and gave Draco an arch look as he climbed up into a seat behind her, Crowley limping behind him. “Yes.”

He looked flabbergasted.

“What, are you jealous, Draco?” she teased, raising her eyebrows suggestively. “Do you want one too?” She puckered her lips and smacked them twice. He flushed. Sirius growled.

“You’ve been spending too much time around my aunt,” he muttered, looking away.

Heather hesitated.

“How’s she doing nowadays?”

“How’ve you seen her, though she’ll probably be at a raid we’re doing next week.”

Heather’s lips narrowed.

She hated the raids. Even if she didn’t read the papers at the breakfast table in the morning, the severity of injuries in the infirmary would have told her the war was getting worse. She spent her spare time making bandages and brewing the simplest of healing potions—the ones even she couldn’t screw up—while Thester tended to the wounded with fine wandwork she wouldn’t dare attempt.

“Can you give her a message from me?”

She had to credit Draco—his expression would have been unreadable, except she’d spent three months with no human face to study but his mother’s, and his expressions were very similar. Also—she was a little shocked, herself.

Sirius’ growl deepened.

“Hush, love,” she murmured, stroking under his jowl while he complained quietly.

“What message?”

“Just that I need to speak with her, sometime.”

He regarded her dubiously. “You’re mad.”

Her smile twisted as Alecto bawled them out for not paying attention, and called Draco down to duel.

“I learnt from the best.”
And then, it happened.

The Marks shone in the landscape of his mind. He thanked all the gods, but mostly himself, that the girl hadn’t been adventurous enough to test them yet.

It could happen, but in the meanwhile, he was counting on her ignorance, coupled with her preference for non-involvement, to maintain a semblance of order.

He thanked the gods also that she was as she was. Disinterested in power. All she wanted was to be left alone. He could not have left the others, the Diary or Locket, corporeal. His younger selves would have destroyed the country out of old resentments he’d since grown wise enough to disregard. Would not have listened to him. Well, she didn’t listen much either, but that was alright. Morality could usually function as well as prudence.

Besides. She could aid his cause regardless of her intentions, as tonight would prove.

He felt the Marks. The last of his men had returned from city, and he shepherded a wayward few—Draco Malfoy, Theodore Nott, Jugson—beyond the blast perimeter.

The first of February was dark and cold, even for a wizard. Below the Tor, Glastonbury was silent, but that lasted for all of an instant.

A pulse through the Mark, and simultaneously, each wizard ground a bit of glass. The city exploded.

He smiled, allowing his men to cheer, and himself a brief moment to gloat, before apparating to the next site. Antonin—his oldest friend, the Russian who had been just as ill-at-ease in the British dorms of the ‘50s as a bastard Halfblood—already had the next cache open, handing out the spellspheres and their keyed glass to the rest of the Death Eaters as they arrived. They slunk into the village, depositing their cargo at key intersections, and swifted away into the night.

Spellspheres, modified crystal balls, so overloaded with spells that it took no little pressure on their keys—bits of glass saved when they were blown—for them to shatter, freeing all the violent magic they contained. Mulciber had gotten the idea from Heather's trick with overloading the runes on her robes. Most of the Muggles below wouldn’t even be awake for it—a pity, he thought idly. Strong emotion—fear, terror, ecstasy—that was what left power on a place. That was what the sleeping stones of Devizes needed. What they would have, for now, was blood.

Magical bombs. Wholesale slaughter. So much more efficient than running in and out of houses, so bloody impersonal. Meaningless, some of his men muttered. Wasteful. Killing a man in his sleep released a bare fraction of the energy that ritual sacrifice could provide. Ritual took time though. Time they did not have, with the Aurors no doubt awakening even now. He wondered how many nodes on the ley they could hit before Dumbledore realized what was happening.

Antonin gave him a snaggle-toothed grin as he returned, a floating woman in tow. He cast the man an indulgent look before closing his eyes. The man had always been an inveterate collector. At least in his maturity, he tended to choose specimens more for their talents than their looks. He wondered if the man had finally found himself a decent harpist.
The signal pulsed again. The town of Devizes went up in flames.

And in the Ministry, the alarms sounded.

In a bungalow in London, a woman lazily listening half to the news, half to her snoring lover, sprang up suddenly at the footage now scrolling across the screen. The man stuttered once in his snoring, before his subconscious apparently decided waking up was too much effort, and his breathing became more regular.

“Bill!” she said, shaking him awake. “Bill!”

“Mmm—wha??” he asked groggily.

“There’s been attacks—listen—“

He straightened up suddenly as she turned up the volume.

—This just in. Terrorists appear to be bombing random villages across England. At present, Glastonbury, Devizes, and Luton have been hit. Local authorities have yet to report in on the extent of the damage and the number of casualties. In the interim, the British Security Service is looking into the matter and attempting to determine if, or which cities may be in danger now. We’re checking in with Director General Lander at this time to see what he has to say about the situation. Director?”

The liquid fluorescence of an otter patronus spilled over the open window and into the room, followed by a luminous bear that simply blundered through the wall.

“Tonks, it’s an emergency. We need you right now. Voldemort’s destroying the cities and disguising it as Muggle bombings, the whole nation’s in an uproar—“ rasped a terse, female voice.

“Bill! Bill, you’re alright—of course you’re alright, the clock says so—the Order’s called a meeting—You-Know-Who’s doing it again, but it’s worse—the Muggles are beside themselves—“

And over this tumult, the telly—

“Should we be evacuating our homes though?” pressed the newscaster.

“A state of panic is what the terrorists are hoping to achieve,” demurred the Director. “Citizens are advised to be on the lookout for any suspicious activity—“

Tonks flipped through the channels, looking for more information.

“While MI5 declines to report, local authorities report entire blocks have been levelled to ground zero—“

“Casualties are in the hundreds at this time—“

“—state of panic, highways are flooded as people leave their homes in the cities and retreat to the countryside—“

“Bloody hell,” swore Bill, changing quickly into his clothes, though his eyes never left the telly. “He’s done it this time.”
Tonks flicked it off, before shucking her pajamas and throwing on her fighting robes, checking her pockets frantically for potions, bandages, blades. Once armed, they winked out of the flat—

—and into Headquarters.

It was mad.

The horse barn they used to stockpile supplies was filled with recruits. Wizards assigned to specific squads hustled to their leaders for debriefing. Witches shamelessly shucked their day robes in the corridors in exchange for tatty dark robes and dragonhide armour. The staff of the Farm—Herbologists, Potioneers, Beastmasters—hustled through the corridors, delivering packs full of potions to the groups, leading a blood-maddened thestral to its rider, dragging out a too adventurous offspring by the ear.

Bill caught her as she tripped over the staff of one of Granger’s shamans, and hauled her up neatly over the steps into the Warroom. Damn these legs, she ought to have practised with them more before a battle. With a certain regret, she slipped back into her own skin. Being six feet tall was only great for intimidation until you tripped on your own robes.

She noticed Molly Weasley’s absence with some relief. The chairs were all filled. She and Bill slipped in and slouched against a wall, Dumbledore nodding as she entered. Bill’s brothers rushed in after them—out of breath, but apparently not so fatigued to notice Bill’s hand on her waist. One of the twins winked at her.

She grimaced with the face of the devil himself—eyes snake-slitted and red, face pale as wax and noseless—and he shrank back despite himself. The other twin noticed his reaction before seeing her face, and chortled appreciatively.

Dumbledore raised a hand, and the room quieted.

“Raids are occurring across England this night. The Muggles are in a state of panic; members of Parliament who are… aware of our situation are thankfully bound and unable to discuss the particulars, but that does limit their ability to successfully mount a defence. We have to protect the innocents that will be slaughtered this night if we cannot stop Voldemort.”

The room shuddered. The table lit up with a map of the United Kingdom.

“At this point, all the attacks have been in the South. We’ve sent four squads ahead already to the north, south, east, and west of the previous sites. What we need to figure out now though—where is the Dark Lord attacking next? Why do we only detect magic after they’ve left the sites.”

“It’s almost like he has it on a timer,” mused Glynnis, shifting her baby to the other breast. “There are spells with delayed effects.”

“Not a bloody lot of ‘em,” growled Mad-eye. “’Sides, the magical signatures said it was almost all incendio and expulso combinations. You can’t use fire spells with time magic.”

“You can, actually,” muttered Granger, ignoring the glare Bill’s youngest brother shot her, “but it would be impractical for anything on this scale.”

“They probably used the incendio to mask the damage done by other spells on a timer,” Ron blurted out. Everyone looked at him like he was an idiot. “What?”

There was a certain schadenfreude in Granger’s smile. “Fire spells can’t obscure other magics. Actually, the only thing that can definitively annul a magical trace is mundane water or salt.”
The words I thought everyone knew that were not spoken—although they were heavily implied.

“Voldemort is as clever as he is evil,” Dumbledore said gently. “We cannot rule out the possibility that he may have found a way to use a timer, but we will need more time to research this than this night permits. Why is he striking here?”

“Why don’t you ask your pet Death Eater?” grumbled Mad-eye.

Dumbledore looked grim. “Severus is indisposed at the moment.”

Mad-eye snorted. “‘Indisposed’ my grizzled arse. He forget what ‘e was and take a walk in the sunshine, or is he busy bleeding virgins dry?”

“Focus on Voldemort,” Dumbledore reprimanded him sharply.

“He’s barmy,” Dedalus muttered. “No muggleborns settled in those areas. No Order supporters. No government officials. It’s like he’s just trying to kill as many people as he can. It’s random.”

“No,” murmured Emmeline, “no one ever kills for no reason at all. There has to be something, something that makes sense only to him.”

They stared at the map.

Kingsley’s lioness tumbled into the room, panting. Tonks stared. She’d never seen a graceless patronus.

“They’ve just hit Bodmin!” he said.

Tonks stared blankly at the map. Bodmin, Devizes, Glastonbury, Luton.

“What does he want?”

“All the Mudbloods dead.”

“To rule Britain.”

“Power.”

“Wait, wait, so I know shit-all about Britain,” one of Granger’s Australians interjected. “But is there anything powerful at those sites?”

“Nothing. There are just Muggles there.”

“Besides the Muggles,” the hunky blond pressed, and Granger’s brows furrowed beneath her messy dreadlocks.

“Nothing. No artifacts, no money, no creatures or potions ingredients—“

“‘The land is the power,’” Granger quoted suddenly, and the hunk nodded in agreement.

“Miss. Granger?” Dumbledore encouraged.

“That’s what the shamans always taught. The land is the power. Australia, certain caves or mountains have significance—they’ve been consecrated by ritual acts for generations. It leaves a well of power the shamans can key into by repeating the ritual. Britain has similar sites—“
“Ley lines,” breathed Dumbledore, and Granger nodded in agreement.

“I don’t know any of the ones for Britain though—surely some of you know—“ the people assembled had the decency to look abashed.

“St. Michael’s Ley,” breathed Dumbledore, tracing a line on the map with his wandtip. “I’d never have considered—but there are old sacrificial sites all along the length of it. If Voldemort is renewing those sacrifices, then the next site has to be along here. By the gods, Miss. Granger, I do believe you’re right. Alastor, Vance, Noseworthy—send your squads out to Bury, Yarmouth, Penzance. Those are the largest sites left for him to hit. Don’t engage—set up a surveillance. Call for reinforcements if you see them.”

“I don’t get what the big deal is though,” Ron muttered to one of his brothers. “If this power gets woken up, can’t we use it just as well as Voldemort?”

“Ron,” Tonks said, and he looked up guiltily, seemingly unaware of how loud he’d been. “You heard of Riddle Manor, right? The Wall of Souls? Impossible to find, impossible to breach, the bloody garden will eat you when you walk in the door, walls drink blood? Sounds familiar, yeah?”

He nodded uncertainly.

“Voldemort and his men consecrated that ground with old, dark magic. They consecrated it, so they’re keyed into it. Theoretically, I guess if one of us had a magic signature close enough to Snake Eyes, we could kill a few Muggles at the gate and maybe slip in without the roses strangling us on the way in, though we’d definitely trip some of his other alarms.

“Now, dude. Imagine what happens if he does that to Britain.”

Ron’s eyes bugged out and his mouth fell open in shock.

“He can’t.”

“You betcha he can. Don’t know much about it myself—Mom refuses to talk about the Black family magic—but I figure, he manages to hem an area in with a few ley lines—say London—and of a sudden, he’s got the hometeam advantage on Central.”

Ron paled considerably. Bill clapped a hand on his back.

“Cheer up, mate. We’ll beat him back to the gates of hell before it comes to that. You’re with me tonight—I expect Tonksy here is leaving for the Aurors now—they’ll want reinforcements once Kingsley hears what’s afoot.”

Ron nodded and waited expectantly for his brother. Bill gave Tonks a look—stupid kid brothers, what do you expect?—before she huffed and decided, the hell with it. She dove forward and gave him a long, breathless kiss that probably left Ron bug-eyed again, not that she gave a damn, and then stumbled back, feeling the stupid grin stretch her face.

“Tallyho, lover,” she said with a jaunty salute, before tripping off to the Apparition Portal.

A wind blew back Draco’s hood and rifled through his short black hair. It had darkened since the ritual. So had his father’s face, every time he saw it.
Lucius wasn’t here though. He’d been paired with another green recruit, Copperfield, and was probably busy right now consecrating the standing stones closer to Penzance. Straight lines were more energy efficient, and the Dark Lord had elected to forgo reconsecrating some more powerful near Devizes and Lubon in the intents of increasing power at the minor menhirs later.

Some sites, however, were too powerful to be ignored.

Dans Maen, the Stone Dance. Muggle legend had it that nineteen maidens, caught dancing on a Sunday, had been turned to stone. It was surprisingly accurate, though he didn’t think displeasing their god had anything to do with it. A wild basilisk had been laying ruin to the local tribes, who asked for the intercession of the druids of the time. They’d asked for a sacrifice to placate the beast. The Muggles had raided a neighbouring tribe during Beltane, after they’d drunk themselves sick during the festivities, tied them to wooden stakes with thin blindfolds, and left them for the basilisk to find. Those that weren’t eaten were petrified, and the basilisk, gluttonous, slept until the spring, emerging on a yearly basis for its offering.

Nearby Boleigh and Lamorna didn’t offer nearly enough Muggles for a blood sacrifice to awaken the old grounds, unfortunately, so they were forced to do things the old-fashioned way. Draco’s muscles ached as he dragged one of the Manor’s captives across the ground to a standing stone. He wished he could just levitate her, but then, the feelings of the caster were as integral as those of the victim to a success. So he dragged her, pulled her upright, ignoring her struggles, and fumbled with the knots of the rough rope. Her blonde hair was falling loose around the gag, and he thought he recognized one of his father’s more disappointing byblows. He finished tying her, and walked away from her muffled screams to grab the next captive.

The Dark Lord, finished securing his own victims, took his place in the middle of the circle, uncorked a vial of something that looked like blood, swallowed it, began to hiss a spell that grated on Draco’s ears. He, and every other Death Eater present, shut their eyes—

He felt the hand before it grabbed him, the future of the steel that would slice his throat. Because of that, it did not. He spun, taking the blade along his forearm and knocking it from his opponent’s grasp, kneed upwards for the balls while his opponent deftly jumped back, his scream of warnings joining that of the other Death Eaters caught unawares. The Dark Lord’s hissing became more frantic, fast-paced, unwilling to stop the ritual halfway through.

Spellfire fell, high and pitched around them. They had to protect the captives, for the few seconds they had left. Draco pulled free his wand and faced off against his opponent.

“Weasley,” he spat.

A thundercrack of Apparition split the clearing, there was blinding flash, and the White Wizard was there.

But he had his own battle to fight.

“Percutio.”

Weasley dove under the lightning bolt. Brute he was, he’d never been a match for Draco’s wandwork, even in school. By sixth year, he’d gotten smart and stopped trying to best Draco with his wandwork, focusing instead on what he was good at—giving him a beating. Draco owed a crook in his nose to Weasley’s left punch, and he intended payback.

Because however effective the man’s muggle brawling tactics had been at school, the Black Magic was better.
He felt, through the tenuous thread of their relations—four generations gone-- the man somersaulting to his feet, the kick and punch that would snap him to the ground, break his wand. He stepped back, flashed his wand.

Cruor combustio.

The Weasley’s eyes widened, and his wand flashed from his holster to erect a hasty shield that shattered on the spell’s impact. He called up a second shield that shone with a metallic translucence and launched it at him, but he’d already dodged around, his back to the menhir. The shield toppled someone over in the dark, someone that wasn’t on his side, and he smiled darkly at the irony for a moment—

Before the Mark blazed in sudden agony.

She hadn’t thought she could enter his mind. But when he was feeling something strongly, when he was focused like this, he pulled her in. It certainly hadn’t been something he’d intended. He was drawing on his power as never before, and she was a part of that power.

Nagini was here also. Others, horcruxes themselves, but barely distinct from the Dark Lord. He pulled them to himself, and when Albus Dumbledore cracked into the clearing, as They hurried to finish the ritual, he saw her in Their eyes.

It did make him hesitate. But not for long.

“Irradio—“

They flung up their arms to protect Their eyes, helpless to do anything but that the blow, continued to chant, it was almost done—“

“--daemonium!”

Pain. The night was burning, bright as daylight, and They were burning down to Their bones. And a blackness, following behind it—no, They couldn’t rest, They’d die, and Dumbledore would be ruthless in killing the rest of Them—

So the Dark Lord forced his burning lips to incant the last syllables of the curse, as Dumbledore beheaded him, and when his head rolled to a stop, it was not he who finished the spell, but a piece of him who’d come along for the ride.

The Dark Lord, still lodged in his body, crawled to his head and stuck it atop his neck. It wouldn’t stay on for long in that state, but then, he didn’t need it to. He looked up, smiling despite the pain, towards where Dumbledore, unhelpfully, was wearing his glasses.

They locked eyes again.

And this time, it was the memory of a basilisk peering out from his eyes.

The old man fell twitching.

He turned his gaze around the circle. The Death Eaters had their eyes closed—but the others didn’t. He looked at one of the Muggle men struggling against a menhir, and the man suddenly choked, his
heart seized in a vice, his body petrifying. If someone was adventurous, they could crack him like geode and find where the blood had crystallized.

One by one, they all turned to stone.

“Don’t look!” rasped a damnably familiar voice.

Weasley took advantage of his lapse in focus to tackle him, twist his arm. His wand rolled away. The pain in the Mark that told him the Lord was dead lessened, and then was gone. He didn’t think what that meant. He didn’t think at all.

He felt.

He felt Weasley’s blood, their blood, from the turbulence of his atria to where it tumbled down into a pulse point and streamed through the scaffolds of his bones. He felt its minutest movement. It knew, they knew, what Weasley would do before he even realized it.

Draco knew, and he moved.

Weasley’s fist pummeled the earth, and Draco twisted aside, the man’s next blow catching him on the shoulder rather than the throat. He twisted at the same time, unbalancing Weasley and throwing him to the side. He scrambled for his wand as Weasley scrambled to throw him back into a hold, and barely got ahold of it before the man grabbed his legs and threw him to the ground. He curled into a ball and rolled aside, dodging the man’s kick, rolling onto his feet—

A beam of red light barely missed him. He stretched himself further, feeling for his enemies in the dark.

And he could feel them. Could feel all of them. Extraordinary. He laughed the dog’s laugh, and wondered if this was what made the Blacks mad. Every witch or wizard with the least bit of old British blood here was cousin to him, and he knew exactly what they would do.

They had betrayed their blood, and now, their blood betrayed them.

“Praestringo!”

The woman who had been aiming for him, a distant cousin, screamed as her eyes froze shut. The moment of inattention gave the damned Weasley another chance to close his distance.

He let him.

He dodged the one-two punch, the lunge, his prescience giving him just enough time to somehow work his wand in these close quarters, to shield himself against those who were counting on Weasley’s distraction to let them steal his sacrifice. Uro, glacio, lapsus.

And now, it was Weasley retreating before him, Weasley, slipping on the sudden ice underfoot, falling to his knees, fumbling for his wand. Weasley’s fire curse never came close to hitting him. He kicked the wand out from Weasley’s hands and froze his legs to the ground, and stabbed his downwards to ice over the man’s treasonous blood, when a spell hit.

It didn’t just hit him. It knocked the wind from his chest and threw him backwards ten feet, until he
hit the same menhir he’d tied his captive to and cracked his head against the rock, and bounced off, falling down on his face.

It would have killed a Muggle. Draco, as he had been before the ritual, would have fallen unconscious from the pain alone.

Draco had lived and died through worse than that.

Draco died, and in that second, something took his body. A second later, he stole it back.

He laid prone there, for a moment, trying to remember where he was, what he had been doing. It was very cold. His head hurt. Someone was screaming.

The whistling of spellfire brought him back to himself, and he threw out his senses again. There was Weasley, and the blinded girl, and a first cousin, some distance away, there was the Lord—

A foot kicked his side, a foot he hadn't seen, and he was suddenly immobilized. A figure stood over him. He didn’t recognize it, not until a sudden flare of spellfire shone on her: messy dreadlocks, an attractive face, with the broken nose all war wizards seemed to get sooner or later, and most tellingly—a thick scar that curved over where her voicebox must be, and, he knew, curled down her chest. The cruelty in her expression was new—it hadn't been there when they’d given her to Dolohov and taken her parents to the Manor.

“Granger,” he croaked.

She smiled viciously as she silenced him, and went forward to cut his captive loose. He screamed silently, the Dark Lord would have his head for ruining this ritual—but of course, Granger could have cared less. Granger didn’t care about tradition, didn’t care that her life was as inconsequentially short as a fly’s. Granger stepped forward and cut the terrified girl’s ropes as the other sacrifices began to howl in pain, and yelled her own warning.

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She kept her back to Voldemort, covering the eyes of the blonde captive and cutting her restraints. She hustled the sacrifice off to Ron, who seemed shell-shocked.

“Get her to safety,” she snapped at him. The screams around them seemed to intensify in volume, and she pushed the girl into his arms. “Hurry.”

He glanced at her and nodded, and began to apparate--

There was a sound of grinding bones, and a strangled cry, and she cursed.

It couldn’t have been a perfect ritual, not without the nineteenth sacrifice, but it was enough. The land was his. She pushed Ron again.


He started to run. She tied her scarf up around her eyes, and whispered a spell.

“Expecto patronum.”

Lutra materialized, darting into the shadows of the menhirs, eager for a new game.
She smiled. Her spirit animal didn’t understand fear—another reason why she’d never quite believed that the winsome little otter was her soul made manifest. There had to be another explanation for its origin, but she didn’t have time to wonder.

She watched through Lutra’s eyes, and saw the Dark Lord.

He was grinning grotesquely, one side of his face slack and falling away from his teeth where the nerves had been paralyzed. His head sat lopsided on his neck, and so much blood was dripping down from where he’d been beheaded that she couldn’t see how he was alive, much less walking.

Everyone was running. She saw Hannah grab a blind Susan Bones by the hand and run away, only to lose her legs to a severing charm. Neville was staring determinedly at the ground while firing haphazard salvos at a gangly Death Eater that might’ve been Nott. Dumbledore and Fawkes strode determinedly on the Dark Lord, while Death Eaters began to explode the petrified bodies around the circle.

Lutra froze. Hermione froze.

Through the otter’s eyes, she saw something. The statue of her father.

He was alive

And she saw something else.

A tall narrow Death Eater—a figure she would never forget—and a devil’s mask. His eyes seemed to seek out hers, and she knew he was smiling when he destroyed the body of John Granger.

She screamed a warcry, and she didn’t care for caution now, she was running for the circle, for the epicenter of their damned power here. Dolohov chuckled and exploded another stone corpse before idly turning to her.

“Miss me, wildcat?”

The thick purple curse that left his wand next was the same that had destroyed her voice. Her wand rippled to negate it, and the energy passed harmlessly around her. He cast indolently, not expecting her to see, and stepped it up.

He still wasn’t fighting her properly. Not like he would an equal.

Not that he’d ever seen her as his equal.

And not that he’d ever seen Lutra.

The otter sprang up from the snow, its proportions made monstrous as her anger. Its jaw was grossly huge in comparison with its head, the serrated teeth hanging out like those of some deep-sea fish, its body long as a snake’s, its claws sharp as talons. It sprang up, and, suddenly corporeal, seized on Dolohov’s shoulders and tore at his head.

The Dark Lord turned, and hissed a curse—and hastily turned his attention back to Fawkes as the phoenix tried to dive low and fly off with his head.

She’d attracted the attention of the other Death Eaters now though. A pair of masked men tagteamed her, advancing and retreating with the synchronicity of wolves. She loosed a guttural warcry and let them have it, doing her best not to draw her power away from the patronus, hoping he’d have enough time to destroy the bastard that had wrecked her life—
“Granger!” a voice snapped urgently, pulling at her arm. She elbowed him in reflex, but he was persistent. “Granger!”

“I’m busy,” she growled, twirling her wand through an awkward combination that used a fraction of the power of a general shield, and could only counter the single curse heading her way. He flung up a protego, and huffed in irritation at the wasted effort. A third Death Eater joined them, and Charlie threw them to the ground as a Death Curse zinged over their heads.

“It’s not worth it,” he told her.

She wasn’t here. Her eyes were in Lutra’s, the spirit animal bleeding light as the rapist slashed ineffectually with a dagger, her fluid body snaking around the exorcism spells he threw at them.

Another Death Curse, another desperate attempt to kill the woman who was shaping up to be another Mad-eye Moody. Charlie growled in frustration.

“We’re leaving,” he told her flatly.

A black light around Dolohov’s wand as he hit upon the right curse, shoved it into the otter’s body, even as Lutra’s jaws were closing triumphantly on his neck—

A blow hit her unconscious, and she knew no more.

In the clearing, the otter dissolved into smoke, leaving Antonin Dolohov bleeding, but alive.

The old man was failing, and they exalted.

All around, the Order and the Aurors were falling back. A Death Curse, unerringly aimed at Dumbledore, was swallowed by the Phoenix. The man plucked the bird from the ground and ran. A cheer rose up from the ranks.

They’d won.

Death Eaters idly exploded the petrified forms of a couple Order members left behind. He surveyed the casualties and pulsed a signal to Alecto. She wasn’t here, but she’d relay the notice to Thester and the other healers to come and stabilize their wounded.

For now, he had to return and heal.

He apparated more easily than ever, and returned to his chambers.

Chapter End Notes

I'm so excited to finally introduce some of the characters from 'the other side', especially Hermione Granger. Her character evolution was rather different in this universe than canon, and I’ve been wanting to explore her for a while now.

Beyond that? I'm probably going to have to add some chapters retroactively, since there
are a lot of plot holes to plug now. Like, where the heck has Snape been all this time? What goes on in the Junior Death Eater Dormitory? What about the lessons Heather is supposedly receiving in the infirmary?

Gah.

In any case, thank you very much to all my reviewers--I'm still plodding along, darlings. Have a lovely week!
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

Warning: Gore, amputation, character deaths, nudity, premeditated murder, warfare.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

She awoke to pain.

She gasped for air. She retched. Breath forced itself into her lungs without her asking for it, taking with it the bile filling her mouth. Someone cursed and tipped her on her side, cancelling whatever spell performed CPR at the same time. Vomit dribbled out her mouth and onto the floor. She hacked violently, and that hurt too.

Her ribs. It felt like an elephant had kneeled on her chest. She moved her hands upwards, felt her chest, the way her sternum sank in on inspiration, her ribs disconnected. She moaned, moved to get up.

“Stay still, Miss. Potter,” snapped a voice she knew very well. Snape.

“Wha’ happened?” she demanded groggily.

“You went unconscious. You stopped breathing and your heart stopped beating for a time. The mutt, thankfully witnessed it and called for help. We had to do CPR. What you are feeling are the aftereffects of that.”

“Owww,” she complained. “Couldn’t you have used a spell?”

“We did. The mutt, having no access to his magic, had to do things the Muggle way to begin with. You may blame him for your current condition.”

And for my survival, she supposed.

“Why did I black out?” she asked, while Severus wiped up the vomit around her mouth and cautioned her to stay on her side.

“I cannot answer that question. Perhaps the Dark Lord will have an answer, when he recovers from the raid.”

The Dark Lord!

The phantom pain of the white wizard’s curse severing her spine. Her head rolling to a stop in the centre of the menhir. The stump of her own neck as her body bowed to pluck her skull off the ground like a hat blown off in the wind.

They were dead. She breathed quicker. She and the Dark Lord. They’d burned together, in that awful fire—

She tried to follow his instructions, but she could hardly focus. She was alive. So the Dark Lord had to be alive too. She reached for him carelessly, felt his and Nagini’s presence, curiously twinned, leap to reach them—

Snape slapped her.

She squawked in alarm, raised an arm to defend herself. He pinned her down with one arm, used the other to open her eye.

“Look at me,” he snapped. His gaze caught hers like a vise. She glared at him, but that was all. Snape, for whatever reason, seemed to be on her side.

“The Dark Lord is alive?”

The man sneered. “You sound surprised.” He rummaged at the bedside table and came up with a vial of foul-smelling, sludgy stuff. “I need you to drink this.”

Obediently, she slurped it down, and winced as she felt the cartilage in her chest begin to reform.

“Skelegrow,” he explained in response to her expression.

“This is horrible.”

“If you’d rather go through the tedious process of being intubated and ventilated for the month it takes your chest to heal, I’m sure someone can find you a Muggle physician. I, for one, have better things to do with my time.”

She glared, and slumped back in bed. Snape left her and began to forcefeed potions to the unwilling victim in the next bed. The retching next door sounded even worse than hers. She ignored the pain of her moving bones to lean over the stretcher and pull open the curtains a crack.

Antonin Dolohov was gagging as Snape tipped his head back and used a curved syringe to force whatever noxious ooze crawled out of his cauldron down the man’s throat. She stared, before Snape’s sixth sense kicked in and his eyes met hers. She shut the drapes hastily, heart pounding.

Dolohov.

She had not allowed herself to remember, in the first months, what the man had done to her mother. It was unspeakable.

She remembered now. She’d thought it would feel as dirty and humiliating as it had when they’d made her watch. Now, all she felt was purpose.

There’s no reason why you can’t slaughter all of his men in their sleep, Sirius’ earlier words came back to her.

She couldn’t free the prisoners unless she could break the Wall of Souls. She didn’t know how to tear through that kind of ritual magic. Didn’t even know if it could be done.

Killing Voldemort? It was impossible. Even if she could destroy his body well enough to keep the man from regenerating fast enough to come after her, he’d rise again eventually. Unless, of course, she killed herself, which just wasn’t an option. She wanted to live, damn it, she deserved to live, deserved to have the mundane white picket fence and 1.5 children every middle-class British girl was entitled to.
She tear him apart if he kept her from it.

She recognized that her fury right now didn’t originate from her, even as she directed it towards her own goals. Somewhere, the Dark Lord was in pain and screaming at damned Albus Dumbledore behind walls spelled soundproof. She didn’t care. She accepted she might never be a singular being again. That she shared headspace with a snake and a terrorist. It didn’t have to restrict her.

She listened to Dolohov’s struggles cease. Maybe Snape had finally knocked him out.

If the Lord had come to see her then, the curve of her lips and hard gleam of her eyes would have alarmed and pleased him. She was smiling the snake’s smile, promising death.

In another part of Britain, another girl was waking up to the smell of blood.

She bolted upright, hand fumbling for her wand before she even realized where she was. When she recognized her location, it didn’t change her response in the least. She swung her legs over the edge of the cot and stood up, ignoring the black dots in her vision caused by the sudden movement.

“Hermione—“

“Not now, Charlie,” she snapped. She strode from the box stall where her cot had been set up, the second eldest Weasley trailing in her wake. She checked her pockets as she went—potions, unguents, a second wand bearing a curious similarity to a drumstick. The part of her psyche that bore Lutra was battered, but still patent. They could fight again tonight.

“Hermione—“

Screaming, sobbing. She turned a corner, stopped so abruptly that Charlie ran into her. She ignored him.

She turned into a stall that had been set aside for the worst of the wounded.

Hannah Abbott was laying on her back, screaming, while Sheffield ran his hands over the stumps of her thighs, trying to coax the leg to grow back. The cut was burnt black. Neville Longbottom held her hand. She was clenching his back, white-knuckled.

Sheffield drew his hands forward, and back, in a slow, wave-like motion that reminded her of her mother’s tai-chi phase—and abruptly yanked his fists to his sides.

Hannah screamed, louder than ever, and fell silent. Unconscious.

Sheffield shook his head sadly in examining his work, and Hermione’s jaw set. She’d seen this procedure done successfully before—seen the muscles ripple and elongate, the thigh bone lengthen and warp, until an embryonic leg showed itself. The patient did nothing but eat and sleep for months until the limb matured, but that was nothing, if you could walk again.

This?

She moved her hand against the plane of the cut to check for residual magics. There were none. She had expected as much.

“Who did this?” she rasped.
“Magnus Mulciber,” Neville responded slowly. “We were fighting him. I was supposed to cover Hannah while she tried to get the captive.”

He seemed to be in a state of shock.

Her face twisted into an ugly expression. “No one is blaming you. Did you at least recover her legs?”

Neville didn’t look at her, but his fists shook helplessly.

Hermione’s lips closed in a thin line. “Fine. We need to recover them.”

“How?” Neville demanded.

“Snape, if he’ll come out from where-ever he’s been hiding. The wolves. We don’t have much time. Mulciber uses those amputation curses for a reason. It takes Bellatrix Lestrange to hex someone through a bit of spilled blood, but any idiot with the least knack for black magic can curse someone through flesh and bone.”

Neville got up slowly. “I’m with you.”

Hermione nodded. “Get Susan and the others—what?” she demanded of Neville’s expression.

“Susan is blind. Malfoy froze her eyes.”

She let out a curse.

“I’ll call the shamans. Did we get any captives—anyone who might have new intel on what Voldemort is planning, or what’s going on over there?”

“Moody’s interrogating Crabbe right now. The girl you got from the ritual circle is resting in the house right now. She’s one of Malfoy’s halfbloods.”

“Doesn’t surprise me,” she muttered darkly. Pureblood society was not so dissimilar from the slave plantations of Confederate America. Muggles and mudbloods were slaves as far as men like Lucius Malfoy were concerned, and halfblood byblows weren’t fit to be acknowledged as the man’s own offspring. “Who’s ready to go now?”

“Hermione,” Charlie started.

“What?” she snapped. She felt his gaze take her in, all of her—the bruised, battered jaw, her dreadlocks crusty with dried blood, the mud she hadn’t had time to wipe from her hands and face. She put her hands on her hips. “Bollocks, Weasley. Hannah is going to die if we don’t get what we need from those damned Death Eaters. You gonna help me, or what?”


“Good,” her jaw butted out. “Good to see at least one man in this place gots balls in his britches.”

“It’s too dangerous. They’ll be in either Malfoy Manor or Riddle House right now. There’s no way you’re going to get past either the blood wards on the one or the Wall of Souls on the other.”

Her lip curled. “If you’re scared, Weasley, stay home. I’ve got work to do.”

“I ain’t scared,” came another voice.

Ron Weasley.
Her eyes narrowed.

“We ain’t got time for idiocy on this mission.”

“I don’t plan to be an idiot. Take me with you, I’ll do whatever you say. But Neville’s a friend, and Hannah too. Please.”

She rolled her eyes. “The more the merrier. But if I say jump, you jump. Got it?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Good. We’re going.”

“Now?”

“No, at Christmastime. Now, Weasley. Get your arse out the door. We’ve got some legs to bring back.”

“And how will you find them? Riddle House is Unplottable.”

A haggard man straightened up from where he’d been leaning up against the wall, and threw back his threadbare hood. Scars crisscrossed his face.

“Remus’s been there. He can’t apparate in, but he knows the location.” Hermione motioned them into the warded Apparition Room, past the green boy and the grizzled Auror guarding it. “Let’s get moving.”

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Heather recovered in a matter of hours. All her injuries were mundane, and hastily set to rights by Snape’s potions and Thester’s spellwork.

The same could not be said for the Death Eaters in the ward. Crabbe’s face had been shattered by a bludgeoning hex. Between his deformed skull and the scars she had left him with, he was more hideous than ever. Magnus’ spine had spilt, weeping clear fluid through the dressings. A thin man she’d marked for his fastidious habits had been shifted unevenly into an animagus form, one arm twisted into an ungainly forelimb, his heart shrunk too small for his body. Thester rushed between them, at her wits’ end in trying to coax their bodies back together. Several times, Amycus had pulled her aside and forced a potion into her hands that glowed subtly as a patronus.

She tried not to wonder where it had come from.

The worst injured, strangely, were also the most functional of the convalescents. Draco had arrived in the middle of the night, shambling like a televised zombie. The back of his head had been crushed in and was crusted with blood. His torso was broken in half at the shoulders, and though it should have been an anatomical impossibility for him to walk—his legs were shattered, the bloody end of a femur jutting out from his thigh—he wobbled through the room.

She’d demanded to know why he wasn’t dead yet. The man laughed.

“You have your magics, and I have mine.” Then he’d shut up and let her work at him.

They’d been all night. It was morning, and some of them were still lying, still as death. Antonin Dolohov hadn’t moved for hours.

She checked his pulse.
Still alive, damn him. Of course. A wizard could take any measure of damage and still survive. She checked the notes Theser had left by the bedside. Dreamless Sleep. Of course. Poppy for pain. Of course, she’d learnt from helping Alecto restock the potions that a slight overdose of asphodel in the potions made them poisonous...

She stepped to the potions cabinet, pausing, as another's thoughts tangled with her own...

...they’d been boys together, shared the same dorm. It had been Dolohov who had given him his first book of Dark Curses—though the Russian boy had needed his genius to work any of them correctly —

her mother screaming from the kitchen as the door splintered and the men came through it. She’d locked herself upstairs. She didn’t normally allow herself to think of it, how cowardly she’d been, but she’d hidden there, under her bed, until Bellatrix and Jugson had dragged her out, scratching and screaming, held her still while Dolohov—

--a bar, and Dolohov dancing with Bella, and he waited, wondering which one would end up pinned to the wall first—

She occluded fiercely, and picked up the potion.

She’d exited the Healing Bay and was making her way to her room, and Sirius, with a kind of giddy relief, when she stumbled abruptly. She saw double as someone else’s vision was superimposed on her own, and the intense feeling that she needed to be elsewhere.

The Dark Lord was summoning her.

She responded back with a wash of irritation, and he cradled her in good humour. The condescending prick.

She stomped upstairs—why did the Dark Lord have his quarters on the fourth floor? Did he not get enough cardio from running around battlefields?—and flung open the door, pausing in abrupt disgust.

She hadn’t thought about what the man would like after decapitation and being burnt alive. Maybe she should have.

The thing lying in a pool that had replaced the floor didn’t look anything like a man. Its skin was the angry red of a neonate, but scabrous and scaly. The skull was hairless and lipless, as though all his features had melted away, and the nostrils were the twin slits of a snake.

“I know you’re fond of snakes,” she began, trying to conceal her discomfort, “but don’t you think this is going overboard a bit?”

“Insolent,” he spat, the sss’s longer than usual, so that she couldn’t be sure whether she was hearing English or Parseltongue. “You want to learn to heal, yesss?”

“Of course,” she responded automatically. And it was true. It was one of the White Arts, a clue to the Dark Lord’s invulnerability, and a skill she could use here besides. As much as she hated the Dark Lord, war was complex, you couldn’t classify people as good or evil based on to which side they owed allegiance. There were plenty of hapless young German boys conscripted into WWII against
their will, and plenty of volunteer Americans setting out to dodge debt (or the mob) by way of patriotism. So while she was pleased to hear Bellatrix was horribly injured at Malfoy Manor, seeing Magnus and Draco in pain had bothered her. A healer could counter that.

“Good. Beside the door, to your left.”

She flared her nostrils, smelling blood, and fished through the darkness, until she felt something smooth and firm and damp.

“There should be two of them.”

She lifted it up—it was surprisingly heavy—and almost dropped it again as it came into the firelight.

Legs. Two of them, cut smoothly along the top.

“Whose are they?” she asked with macabre curiosity. Her guilt at even not feeling guilty had exhausted itself.

“Does it matter?”

“Are they Bellatrix’s?”

His reptilian eyes stared dispassionately at her.

“No, then. What would you have me do?”

“Bring them here. Into the water—no, do not drop them! Come into the pool with me.”

Her face twisted in disgust, but she heeded his instructions. The skirts of her nightshift floated up around her as she sank into the pool, the blood of the floating legs inking the water.

“Reptiles and amphibians have a much greater capacity for regeneration and transformation than mere humans. Lizards can lose their tails and regrow them. Tadpoles metamorphose to toads, and toads sit on ordinary eggs and hatch basilisks. Of course,” his lipless mouth smiled, “what a Parselmouth can do is far beyond the abilities of any mundane animal. Of course, there is a price for it.”

She eyed the legs bleeding into the water. She should feel guilt for this. “A life. Is the donor already dead?”

“Does it matter?”

“If it does matter?”

He settled back without his usual languor, hissing in pain. “I can complete this process with or without teaching a recalcitrant student.”

He was weak, she considered, remembering Dolohov. She thought of drowning him, and remembered what it felt like when he was beheaded and burnt. He laughed.

“Always a predator,” his approval teased her. “Do that, please. I wonder how you would enjoy holding my consciousness until my body revived.”

She felt sick, remembering the disorientation, the loss of self-possession when he’d pulled her in during the fight.
“Good. You remember it. Now, do it again.”

*What?*

He hissed irritably, grabbed her head between his smooth white hands, and locked eyes with her, submerging them both under the bloody water, and into his consciousness—

Did he mean to drown them? But no—she flared her nostrils at the cloud of glittering red expanding through the water. S/he breathed blood, breathed magic, shuddered at the taste of it, expected to hack and cough as the water filled their lungs, didn’t.

S/he began to pull it into themselves. Dimly, s/he knew the limb above was exsanguinating faster, faster, the blood streaming now into their open mouths as they exhaled clean water. It wouldn’t be enough—

S/he felt something shift within them, painful in the girl. Her body was new to this, the paths unwritten. S/he looked forward to hearing her scream—and then she did, her body convulsing, fighting the change, as his moved smoothly through it. She was frozen, it wasn’t enough magic, not nearly enough—her innards corrupted, the single chambered heart seizing as it fought to send blood to limbs that shouldn’t have existed, ribs breaking and folding through an undersized skin—she was fighting for breath, fighting for magic, and, to his gratification—pulled at the sympathetic link between the blood here, and the blood elsewhere.

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Somewhere, Hannah Abbot was jerking and seizing, the healing spells undoing themselves as her magical core collapsed, her face blanching as she began bleeding into nothingness. Sheffield snapped orders to his assistants, they spelled blood into her veins—

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They drank it down greedily, as the legs began to bleed anew—s/he felt with approval as the female’s body began to slide more easily into her second shape, though—

Heather unlatched her mind from his in sudden horror, felt abruptly claustrophobic at the press of water at her sides, the long, sinuous shape tangled up around her own, the length and wrongness of her body, and began to choke on the water, panicking, before the Dark Lord’s mind took hers over again—pity they couldn’t work on her holding this shape for longer than a few seconds—but the vital part was done. It was muscle memory, magical memory, after all. The more times s/he went through this, the more instinctual it would become. For now—s/he breathed in another lungful of blood, and shimmered back into her first form, and surfaced, coughing, as he continued to cycle through his shapes until his skin knit together again—

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Sheffield shook his head and swore. He’d seen this before.

“Stop the transfusion. They’ve made a sympathetic link—they’re draining her magic. It’s too late.”

Justin Finch-Fletchley ignored him, continuing to spell blood into her veins.
“Stop!”

Sheffield grabbed for his wand, and Fletchley made an awkward attempt to punch him, but it was enough to disrupt the boy’s casting. Hannah slumped at the sudden disruption of blood, and went still, and that was too much. The boy moved to punch the healer more solidly, but Sheffield caught him up by his wrists.

“Idiot boy,” Sheffield swore, kneeing him in the balls as he tried to bite him. “It’s for your own good.”

“What about Hannah’s good? You can’t give up on her—you can’t—“

“I can and I will. She’s dead,” Sheffield told him, releasing the boy to fold up on the floor around his bruises and grief. “Like you’d be too. Do you want to give whoever’s taking her magic enough of your blood to make a sympathetic link to you too? How’d you think Neville would feel, coming back from that mission to find another one of his friends dead?”

Fletchley slumped brokenly, and Sheffield prayed to God Neville killed whatever damned bastard had done this to the girl—

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Parselmagic, after all was a dark animagic—and not unlike lycanthropy or vampirism in its price.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed! Please read and review!

I've written a companion piece to this story, 'What Severus was Doing'. You can find it under my 'Works Written'. Any extra material I write to help fill in plot gaps or assist in character development will be placed there.
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

A lot happens very quickly in this chapter. Chalk it up to poor pacing in a newbie author, added to general impatience and finally accepting that I can't wrench this plot in the direction I want it to go *grumpy face*.

Warning: Violence, gore, desecration of corpses, murder, warfare.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

She expected to emerge hacking and spitting from the bloody water he’d just drowned them in. When he pulled her out though, her lungs were dry as ever, her eyes clear, though her hands were shrivelled from sitting so long in the water, and her hair was wet. He stripped her casually of her sodden nightgown and bundled her into a thick, woolly robe, setting her delicately on the pile of cushions by the fire. Nagini coiled at her feet.

When the shock had worn off, she saw he was lovelier than ever—skin softly luminous, like the underbelly of a sloughed snake—and he smiled at the thought, touching the surface of the pool with his finger, stirring it.

“See yourself, girl.”

She glanced over at the surface, become a mirror, and her breath caught.

She was beautiful—beautiful as she had never been. She’d never been exactly overweight, not like Daddy or her brother—but fried food didn’t make you a model either. All the superfluous flesh had been stripped away, her features more angulated. Her mouth fell open, and her teeth flashed sharp and bright.

“What did you do to me?” she asked, wonderingly, her reservations silenced—for now—by the novelty of her appearance.

“What did I do? Oh no,” he murmured stretching languidly before the fire. “You were an equal participant this time. And you know exactly what we did.” He cast a significant glance towards the pool, and she crawled hesitantly to the edge.

Something bobbed on the surface, long and curving in at the edges. She pulled it loose. It was larger than she’d expected, and she brought it to the fire.

Snakeskin. Black, mottled with crimson and white. The Dark Lord’s skin.

She couldn’t smother the excitement she felt, but she could disguise it.

“We transformed. How? I have no animagus training.”

The Dark Lord looked smug.

“Magic has momentum,” he repeated, for the umpteenth time since she’d known him. “No one knows for certain how the first Parselmouths came about. Some say the Eastern sorcerers
transformed so often into serpents, it changed them and their family indelibly. Others, that a serpent animagus slept with a snake and gave birth to an egg, and what hatched from that egg was the first Slytherin. In any case, we are not animagi. We can’t hold our secondary form for any length of time at our age, and transformation requires sacrifice.” He turned his hand. “But the snake symbolizes resurrection for a reason—this reason.”

He looked ready to say something else, but at that time, she felt a very definite tug at the corners of her mind. The Dark Lord jerked at the sensation, his good humour extinguished.

“The Dark Mark,” he hissed. “They’re calling me—Alecto, I think. It had better be important, to disturb me when I specifically asked all difficulties to be taken to Lucius at this time—“

He apparated out of the room—as was his right, as Master of the House—leaving Heather alone.

Alecto.

Alecto was in the infirmary, alongside Thester, who was unmarked, and Dolohov—

It was possible, she reminded herself, heart jackhammering, that the Dark Lord wouldn’t realize what she’d done. An overdose, the wrong mix of medications, it happened, and Dolohov’s injuries were terrible to begin with. Any of the other young recruits helping in the Infirmary could have made a fatal mistake, there was no reason to suspect foul play…

Except, of course, if your mind wasn’t entirely your own.

He couldn’t really do anything to her, could he?

Staring at the patch of snakeskin in her hand, she wondered: Did she really want to find out?

Mind made up, she tumbled down the stairs to her room, pulling open the wardrobe and fetching out clothes. No damned trousers—curse Pureblood fashion—but heavy petticoats, their ease of movement increased by the few bindrunes Bella hadn’t ripped out of her clothes on sight. A shift of dull grey cotton, heavy black canvas robes in the style favoured by Death Eaters. No gloves, and Bella’s tight boots wouldn’t fit over the silver shackles on her feet—she’d have to hide her hand in her pockets, and hope the hem of her robe concealed her footwear.

“What are you about?” demanded Sirius.

“We’re leaving,” she said, low and urgent. The walls had ears—she’d lopped off enough of them to know. She tugged a second Death Eater robe from the closet, eyed it dubiously. “Engorgio,” she spat. The robe pulled itself out of shape half-heartedly. She tossed it at Sirius. It fit him like a fraying potato sack, but it fit, the cowl drooping to cover his face. She didn’t dare risk her lack-lustre transfiguration to make him a mask.

They fled down the stairs. Thankfully, most people were abed this hour, otherwise, she was sure they’d have attracted attention. They fled out the front door, and through the frosty gardens, and before the Wall of Souls, and while she caught her breath, Sirius finally spoke.

“Hey, so I don’t mean to criticize this grand plan of escape, but how exactly do you plan on doing this? Isn’t it keyed to Volde—“

She set her hand over his mouth.

“Does a taboo mean nothing to you?” she hissed. “And yes. It’s keyed to the Dark Lord’s magic, and the Dark Lord’s flesh. Fortunately,” she withdrew the scrap of snakeskin from her pocket, “I
She clenched his fist about the snakeskin, and reached into the rosehedge, the thorns pricking her thirstily.

She remembered how it felt hours earlier, pulling in the magic though flesh and blood, and did it again, in reverse. She drained the Dark Lord’s skin of every ounce of its essence, and fed it through her blood to the thorns, and the hedge blackened and withered, leaving behind bare branches and bones, the spirits quiescent. She flushed the same power through the Goblin Steel and Sirius’ collar, and the damned shackles fell from them.

Was it her, or, did Sirius’ profile waver ever so slightly, like a shadow on the water?

She pulled on Bella’s boots. Sirius hesitated.

“Come on,” she snapped, walking into the Wall. It was less a wall than a thick hedge, she understood now, several meters wide, pitted with holes lined with sharpened femurs, rose vines running like tripwires. The dead jaws chattered and rattled at her, one taking an uneasy snap at her fingers. She picked up on the damned thing and dashed it to the ground, and the rest fell silent.

They were nearly across when a brilliant bolt of crimson flew at her—from in front. With an instinct not wholly her own, she pulled at the hedge—

--and the Wall awoke.

“Fuck!” Granger swore at Ron.

“They’re Death Eaters—“

She pushed him, and he didn’t have the time to be angry. The sharp split of a tibia was embedded in the ground where he’d been, and the dirt was creeping up around it, Dennis Creevy’s distorted face oozing along its length, his voice a bubbling, sick thing, but undeniably his.

“Tell my brother—tell my brother—release me, release me—“

It screamed awfully then, shambling against its will to stake Lupin’s cloak in the ground as he dodged it awkwardly, the ground slick as quicksand now, they sank knee deep in the muck, while the bones kept rising, their slow whining and pleading belying the speed of their unwilling assault.

“Hungry,” the muck gobbled and sucked at their feet, tearing the boots from their legs—

“Retreat,” Granger snapped, dashing a skeleton to pieces, trampling across the bones to firmer ground, Remus’ lupine speed enabling him to do the same.

“It’s got me,” screamed Ron. “My feet—oh, my feet—“

Granger whirled her wand to pull him loose even as the ground grew softer underfoot, looked around frantically for Neville.

Oh, fuck.

The strangling vines had wound him against a split rib cage, and were biting deep into his neck, he
was too blue for breath. She summoned Lutra, and her game little otter sped away, to nip and worry at the vines, when the revenants rose, no longer playacting at life with their bodies of bone and mud, pure spirits that tore at him and consumed him. Lupin’s patronus danced forward to distract them, was worse than useless. She felt her vision darkening at the psychic assault.

And then—

The Death Eater stepped forward, and hissed a word.

It stopped. Lutra raced away from the fight, and merged back into her animus to lick their wounds, the ground solidified, the bones fell and the vines loosened. Ron was still screaming, but that was to be expected.

She kept her wand ready, just in case.

The Death Eater pulled the vines away from Neville’s neck with a care that would have surprised Granger—had she not any idea of the uses a dark wizard might have for live human sacrifices, or how tenderness was as useful as brutality in the breaking of a prisoner. The Death Eater glanced in their direction.

“You’re not Death Eaters,” came the voice from under the cowl, clearly female.

“No. Who are you?” Granger hardly dared to hope.

“Not Death Eaters either. Unless you plan to be new recruits, you’d better get running. The Dark Lord is coming, and he’s in a foul mood.”

“How should we know we can trust her,” demanded Ron, pulling his feet free from the muck. His boots, socks, and trousers from the knee down were missing, his skin red and bleeding. He stifled a scream as he tried to walk forward on them.

“Because if I want to kill you, I only have to turn my back—“ the woman snapped, only to be cut off by the man accompanying her.

“Remus?”

“Sirius?”

The cowled man raced forward and all but bowled over the werewolf in his excitement. Granger stared for a moment in bemusement, before noticing the woman pulling an unconscious Neville’s arm over her shoulder.

“Don’t you have a wand?” she demanded.

“Well, yeah.”

Granger shook her head in disbelief, and drew her own. The woman froze and dodged, dropping Neville, the bones rattling menacingly at their feet. “Locomotor mortis.” She floated Neville’s body to her, tense at the renewed activity of the Wall. “Is there a problem?” she demanded, eying the woman up.

Surprisingly, it was Remus who set his hand on hers, lowering her wand. “Hermione,” he said gently, “it’s okay. She’s the Dark Lord’s prisoner. Like you were with Dolohov. We’ve been trying to get her out for months—“
“Months?” repeated the woman. “I’ve barely seen you, and only when you were kissing the Dark Lord’s feet.”

“Months,” Remus said firmly.

“I’ve never seen a ‘prisoner’ with a wand, unless they’d sold out,” Granger said dubiously, “let alone commanding the Wall.”

“Look. Argue about it later,” the woman said, shuddering, “but he’s coming. He’s coming now.”

“We have to break into the House,” Ron told her. “Our friend’s life depends on it.”

She sneered. “And your lives depend on doing as I say. Now.”

“Listen, you haven’t seen a pair of amputated legs—“

The woman massaged her temples in irritation, and Granger could almost guess what she was thinking. How I long for the days when this wasn’t a normal question!

“I have, and she’s already dead, fool. As you’re going to be. Oh, and don’t try apparating—he’s already raised the wider wards, you’ll splinch yourself. Run in the opposite direction to me—he’ll be more interested in recovering me than he will be you.”

She began wading through the snow into the forest.

“Who is she?” Granger demanded.

A grim look crossed Remus’ scarred face. “Heather Potter.” He cast his Patronus. “Albus, send back-up. James’ daughter got out, but old Snake-face is coming, and we need back-up.”

The silvery dog galloped off through the forest.

“And now?” Granger demanded.

“Get the boys out of here,” Remus told her. “Sirius?”

“Moony? Think we can lead those Death Eaters on a merry chase?”

Remus shook his head. “Neither of you know the woods around here, and no offense, Heather, but it doesn’t look like you know how to use a wand either. We need to get all of us out of here as quickly as possible.”

“No arguing here.”

Were they barely half a kilometre into the forest? It had been so long since Heather had walked any distance, though she had exercised daily in the Arena, pitting her simple wandwork against the younger Death Eaters.

Despite the runes she and Sirius bore, and other man being a werewolf, they struggled through the forest. Riddle House was on a high ground surrounded by boggy forest, and the frozen ground gave way unexpectedly to tree roots and pitfalls. Too, the wolf seemed to be taking them on a rather circuitous route.

“There are traps out here then,” she concluded aloud.
The wolf nodded. “His unmarked allies approach via the forest and road, so he can’t make it impassable, but the safe paths change on a regular basis. Bit like the stairs at Hogwarts.”

“Young boarding school.” She slipped on a root, and he steadied her. She took her arm back quickly. She’d dealt with enough wolves in the Dark Lord’s cellar to be cautious of them, no matter what Sirius said.

“Yes,” the wolf replied shortly.

There wasn’t much to be said. All their energy and focus had to be on moving as quickly as possible.

Except when had Sirius ever been focused?

“You’ll see it soon,” Sirius told her, with determined excitement. “It’s magnificent. You’ve never seen anything like it. It’s a castle, with thousands of floating candles in the Great Hall, and the dormitories are in the tower—“

“I just want to go home,” she told him.

And it was true. She wanted to be home, and safe, enfolded by her father’s comforting bulk, her mother fussing in the background, the drone of her brother’s television coming through the walls at night. She wanted to be warm in her bed, with its old ‘My Little Pony’ sheets from when she was five and the tangle of threads on the bedposts, and Lady coiled by the heat vent.

Unbidden, the image of the Dark Lord, brooding by the fire, Nagini slung over his lap, came to her.

She occluded it fiercely. Fuck Stockholm Syndrome, it’s not like she didn’t realize what he was up to, or why he was doing it. She was his ticket to immortality, and apparently some kind of symbol for the Light as well. She was useful to him, and if he did like her, well, she had no obligation to reciprocate that feeling.

Even if some part of her wanted to.

A great and terrible emptiness arose in her, followed by rage so bitter and absolute she couldn’t breathe. She was in the forest, but she was also standing in the doorway, a thought later, and she was before the Wall that was even now closing itself. She found the Goblin Steel lying abandoned in the snow, and felt fear like she hadn’t since childhood.

She had fallen down in the snow, and Sirius was at her side, brushing her hair back. She clamped her eyes shut, dizzy from the double vision that came from seeing through two minds, and laughed sickly.

“He knows,” she hiccupped, trying to right herself with this body, disentangle her perceptions from the Dark Lord’s. “I killed Dolohov—“ she ignored Sirius’ pleased exclamation, as did the wolf. “He can track me, through my thoughts. He’s coming.” She felt an intense and overwhelming pressure against her mind, a tidal wave occlusion did nothing to hold back.

“Run,” she warned. It was the last thing she could do for them.

She felt the pulse of the Dark Mark, and then, he came.

----------------------------------------------

She was gone.
Severus felt almost giddy with the relief of it, steeled himself against the joy of it. The Dark Lord was furious. Severus had been retreating to his room after a long night of attending to the wounded when the man had descended the stairs like a dark angel, his rage manifest. The torches sputtered and the floors whined, and the girl’s door opened for him before he could touch it. Curiosity overcoming his caution, he moved to watch, Carrow and Malfoy peering over his shoulder. The Dark Lord was aware of them, of course. How couldn’t he be, with the House awakened to his anger?

He stormed about the girl’s chamber—briefly. Whatever he was looking for, it wasn’t here.

“Malciber, Carrow, gather half our able bodied men beyond the wall. Drag her back.” His handsome face sneered. “You have my permission to chastise her—if you can manage such a thing.”

Severus glanced back. Lucius gave a curt nod—regardless of where the man took his pleasures, he supposed he had some small respect for the Black Family’s claim on the girl.

Amycus Carrow smiled nastily.

He swore inwardly.

“Severus—follow me. If you dare.” The man’s crimson eyes glinted maliciously at the challenge, and Severus froze in fear.

The Master apparated.

Carrow and Mulciber were already running down the stairs, and he felt the phantom pain behind his Mark of his brethren being summoned. Too slow, the stairs, the long walk across the long lawn to the Wall. He opened her window, walked back to the doorway for a running start, and launched himself from the lintel.

The vertigo almost made him lose his stomach.

He couldn’t apparate on the grounds, excepting the Arena—the Lord had made sure to make the House proof against the magics of even the most obscure creatures. So he tried to follow the quickest way he could hope to follow, using one of the many powers he’d refused to tap yet, conscious of the cost.

He was spinning towards the ground, he’d hit, he was going to break all his bones and lie there, a skin-sack of crushed organs and dead meat, until they tossed him over their shoulders and threw him to the Wall—

To be or not to be. He, not to be, the crash, not to be.

But not completely nothing, no.

He disintegrated.

Half here, half elsewhere, his body visible as a bloody mist roiling and driving across the ground. He was conscious of a loss, part of himself evaporating away, his essence lingering on the snow and cold trees. He was abruptly forced corporeal by the Wall of Souls, the thorns drinking his essence even as he fought to overshadow them.

He couldn’t apparate around them, couldn’t float through them, but fully corporeal, they knew him, let him pass with a few plaintive scratches, the bog gurgling in discontent.

He reminded himself unhappily that it was time to feed it.
Of course, its appetite grew more ravenous with every soul added, but then, they were at war, and the Dark Lord saw its hunger as no great nuisance. It couldn’t harm him, or those who bore his Mark, after all.

Severus cleared it, and dispersed himself once more.

In some part of himself, more conscious of will and the impress it made on the universe than anything else, he heard the voices, and he turned himself towards them, and willed himself back into being, almost falling over with weakness as he did so. Everything hurt, and he was thirsty—dying of thirst, he realized.

Could he even die of thirst?

He ignored the inane question, but barely. He swayed, looking into the grove.

“Remus, get help,” snarled Black.

“Yes, wolf,” the Dark Lord said pleasantly. “Get help. I would be greatly interested to know which of your dogs would dare rebel against the Dark Lord.”

Remus didn’t respond, and the Dark Lord didn’t shoot at him. He seemed more interested in Heather, and Sirius.

“Why?” he asked her.

Sirius’ edges began to dissolve in the twilight, his eyes gleaming like cuts of blue sky, his teeth the sharp smile of a new moon.

“You need to ask the question, bastard—“

The girl gasped abruptly, perhaps in foresight of the Dark Lord’s next action, turned aside to knock her godfather to the ground.

Not quickly enough.

“Lumos maxima.”

Black screamed, high and piercing, the sound of an injured dog. His hands were scalded where the light had burnt him, his eyes white as a blind man’s.

“Such a simple spell to deal so much damage. I’ll thank you for showing it to me, darling.”

Heather’s lips were white as Black’s eyes.

“I’m not your darling” she said lowly.

“No?” his red eyes flashed, he moved a step closer.

“Stupefy,” she snapped. The Dark Lord deflected it with mocking ease.

“You see,” the Dark Lord continued casually, knocking aside her attacks, “when I first took you, girl, you were a victim. You screamed and railed and whined, like any other of the hundreds of bovine Muggles I’ve slaughtered, and it was quite dull.”

She tore a pin from her hair, and slung it. It ran true, stabbing through his charmed robes, cleaving a bloody line across his arm, and he smiled at it, smiled as she furiously sent a combination of spells
skittering against his defenses that he countered easily.

She snarled, driving the second pin at his eye. He raised a shield that barely changed its momentum, took it in the cheek instead. She raced forward, damn the risk, her eyes on the Dark Lord’s. They dodged each other’s attacks as though they knew one another’s minds.

Of course they did.

“And now,” he panted as she somersaulted to retrieve her pin, threw it past his head, and he didn’t stop her, “now you are a predator.”

“Is that your idea of psychological damage?”

“Are you damaged?”

Nott, who’d come searching, stood just beyond the Dark Lord, clamping his hand to his eye where the pin protruded.

She sneered at him. “Not as much as your lot will be if you don’t sod off!”

There was the rushing sound of a furnace, and Severus felt abject relief.

Albus Dumbledore stood in the clearing to the side, Fawkes on his shoulder. He, the Dark Lord, and the girl formed a triangle.

The Dark Lord froze, Heather taking the advantage to slip a diffindo through his defences. He snarled as it slashed open his stomach, turning.

He didn’t show it in his face. It was all over Heather’s, and in his voice.

Utter and complete fear.

“Run, girl!”

And to Severus’ shock, the white wizard flung a curse.

Not at the Dark Lord, not at the Death Eaters standing a respectful distance back from the girl and their Master, but at the girl herself. Even if he could dissipate once more into the bloody mist, he couldn’t get there in the eyeblink it would take to catch the curse, no one could—

no one but the Dark Lord.

It caught him up off his feet, and burnt through his chest, his arms and legs and head, and there was an awful screaming that seemed to echo deep as his bones and the bones of the hills, low as heartbeats, high and keening as a wind in the door.

Albus Dumbledore didn’t stop. The phoenix launched itself from his shoulder—

and the Grim struck.

It was impossible and stupid as Black himself. The phoenix lashed out with its golden claws, white-hot as smelted steel, beating terribly with its bright wings against the cloud of darkness hurling against it. It formed and dissipated against the onslaught, so the raptor’s hooked beak closed on shadows and its talons combed through the night, and the teeth tore loose mouthful of bright feathers that smoked in the air, and he smelt burning meat from the dog’s scalded jaws.
But for every blow Black landed, the phoenix scored two, the light burning away his shape. He’d have to coalesce soon, or he’d be lucky to come back emaciated as Severus.

He couldn’t care what Black was doing though. His focus was Dumbledore.

And the girl.

He hadn’t paused after the Dark Lord had taken the curse meant for Heather. He’d continued. He wasn’t playing.

He cursed the Dark Lord, for being so confident the girl would never get the Steel off. For not letting her play at her own ward-work as she pleased. He cursed Dumbledore. He cursed the war.

She dodged behind trees, ran for her life. Most of Death Eaters hung back indecisively—they’d seen Jugson take her pin in his eye, and with the Dark Lord gone—for now—they had no great desire to pursue her. But Lucius ran forward. He, at least, had an idea that the girl must be significant for the Dark Lord to sacrifice himself—even if he didn’t know how.

Dumbledore chased her, chased her right off the boundary of the Dark Wood and Apparition Wards—and into a group of Aurors.

“Why?” he heard her scream. “Why are you doing this? I don’t even fucking well know you people—no, keep away—”

There was fire, and the land was rumbling in discontent.

“I’m sorry,” he heard Dumbledore say, in terrifying grief. “I’m so sorry.”

Snape flung himself at the girl.

There was a flash of green light.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading, and have a very Happy Holidays! Please feel free to say hi and review!
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

Warning: Gore, breach of trust during bondage play, premeditated murder, inebriation.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Ron? Neville?”
Hermione blinked.

“Ernie, what in the seven hells are you doing out here? This was supposed to be a covert mission—“
He seemed confused. “We got Remus’ message though. Dumbledore just announced it—there’s a
dark witch on the loose. You-Know-Who’s apprentice. She’s involved in his immortality somehow.
Orders are to capture or kill.”
Hermione’s mouth fell open.

“That’s not what—“
Her mind caught up with her mouth, and she cut herself off. Better not to question orders on the
battlefield, not where second-guessing yourself or your team could get the lot of you killed.

“Focus on capturing her,” Hermione told him. She pushed Neville and Ron at the team medic.
“Miranda, get these two back to the extraction point.”

“Hermione?” Neville complained.
She gave him a flinty look, and he fell silent. She gathered up her muddy robes and set off at a jog
through the woods in the direction she’d come, Ernie and the rest fast on her heels. Stopped suddenly
at an inhuman scream of pain, changed direction—

--and came into a clearing.
Bellatrix Lestrange was racing towards Albus Dumbledore, screaming obscenities with every breath,
but not cursing him. No, she seemed to be parrying his blows, and Dumbledore, for his part, wasn’t
trying to hit her, but a darkened patch of ground in the snow—

--and a roiling darkness spun through the trees to dash itself against the headmaster, screaming in
fury as it slammed against Fawke’s great wings, a sound like a gong resonant with the impact. It
coalesced and slumped to the ground, in the form of a man.

Sirius Black.
His skin was charred red and black, and he stank of cooked meat, and when he spoke, blood ran
from the blistered corners of his lips, but he spoke.

“You tried to kill her!” he accused, shambling forwards.
Dumbledore, for his part, ignored the man, focusing on Bellatrix, on Lucius joining the fray, then
Sirius wouldn’t be ignored. He threw himself at Dumbledore, and Hermione’s troops threw themselves at the Death Eaters. For herself, she ignored all cautions against apparating in melee—where you could easily be hit by friendly fire, appearing unannounced—and appeared at the Headmaster’s side, raising a shield against a curse spat out by Bellatrix as she did so.

“—and she killed Dolohov,” spat the man, his clawed hands tearing at the old man, “took out Nott’s eye, she’s on our side, and you’d just kill her?”

“I had to. Sirius, don’t be ridiculous, stand aside, we can stop or at least delay the Dark Lord’s resurrection if only we can get to where he died and hold it long enough to consecrate it. She would have wanted that, wouldn’t she?”

“Don’t let them near that piece of land!” she ordered frantically, above the sound of spellfire, but she didn’t know they’d heard her. She repeated the command.

“She wanted to live,” snapped Sirius. His face twisted in an ugly way, that made his cheeks crack and bleed anew. “She wanted to live, her parents sacrificed themselves so she could live, and you—“

He moved to rip at the headmaster, and she heard the battle scree of the phoenix in answer, saw Fawkes stooping to tear the Grim off his master, when MacNair and Crowley threw their combined freezing hexes against the phoenix. Its wings stopped glowing, fell dull brown as any bird’s, and a second curse, in that moment, snapped its wings. It hurtled, and Hermione blasted the Death Eater who tried to assail it, before tossing the burnt man from the headmaster.

He fell in a heap, laughing, or sobbing, manically. The Death Eaters had advanced, had crowded out all the badly coordinated aurors from the site of their Lord’s death, and one in particular moved forward beside him. Bellatrix.

The bloodied aurors were in retreat, already damaged from the previous night’s work.

“Headmaster.”

Dumbledore cast a rueful glance at the battlefield.

“Yes, Miss. Granger. I believe it is time we went home.”

The last she saw, before they disapparated, was Bellatrix Lestrange sinking into the snow beside her fallen cousin, her dark robes pooling around them.

Severus was not thinking of it now, but later, he would bless every god he believed in, and a few he didn’t, that the damned girl had ran towards and then over the apparition wards as Dumbledore had chased her. That he’d followed. And then, that Dumbledore’s mercenaries hadn’t caught her up as the white wizard had flushed her from the Dark Lord’s woods.

Later, he would think these things.

For now, he didn’t think at all.

His knees buckled as they apparated into the dark room. That it was dark, to a human’s eyes, and dusty, and smelt of smoke, he knew habitually. These things were inconsequential.
He thirsted.

Every breath was an insult to his lungs, and it hurt to breath. His eyes were dry as paper and itched, and his vision was blurry. His tongue felt like a stone in his mouth.

She eased him to the floor, whispered a faint ‘Lumos’.

“There are lights,” he rasped, the air moving like sandpaper through his dry voicebox, and she raised the wand, confused for a moment, and then started at the sight of the electric switch on the wall. She hopped up, flicked it on, let her wand extinguish, took in the room.

It was ugly as it had been in Severus’ youth, a dingy place with barren wood floorboards that made all the sounds of the ones in Riddle House without the excuse of sentience, yellowed wallpaper from the ‘60s, still a hole in the wall where Tobias Snape had put his fist through the plaster. She took a look at him.

“I’ll get you some water,” she said.

He didn’t say anything. He closed her eyes and let her go, imagined her rattling down the old stairs to the kitchen and selecting a cobwebby glass to pour the tinny water into. She came up, and he felt the tepid water at his lips, and he drank obediently, gagged it back up, retching and heaving.

“What’s wrong with you? You weren’t like this before.” She paused, perhaps scrutinizing him. “Were you? You didn’t glamor yourself for some reason to look healthy when you were sick?”

He ignored her. He wouldn’t ask for what he needed, not from her.

“Tell me,” she snapped.

He turned his face away stubbornly, hoping unconsciousness would come soon.

She slapped him.

“Tell me,” she hissed.

“No.”

Her lips set in a hard line.

“Severus. Right now, the Dark Lord’s men are looking to capture and probably rape me for murdering one of their own and for my role in the Dark Lord’s death. The Dark Lord’s enemies are looking to kill me just because I could resurrect his Lordship. And I have no fucking clue where the hell you’ve taken me, or how to avoid them.” Wetness fell on his skin. She was crying. She was furious.

“So if you dare try to die and leave me alone, I will not make that death peaceful for you,” she whispered. “I will use every last means in my possession to keep you here, even if I have to resort to human sacrifice, whether you will it or not.” Her hand went to his chin, forced him to look at her. Her wand was in her other hand.

“Legilimens.”

He let his defences fall.

It had been her last threat that decided him. She didn’t have the skill to pull off an effective legilimency attack against someone of his skill, let alone a human sacrifice. But if she decided she
did, and then ran out to grab some unsuspecting Muggle, someone might notice.

So, he let her see.

“Oh,” she said briefly, seeing his turning. “Oh.”

She rummaged for her wand.

“Diffindo.”

The smell of blood bloomed in the air, and before he could check himself, he was on her, pinning her beneath him, suckling busily at the bright slash across her palm. Lovely—and starbursts broke across his vision—lovely. Not the warm swill of a Muggle’s burst heart, filling but palatable as porridge, not the sweetness beading across a prisoner’s cut arms, no. It was warmth, and light, and burned like liquor down to his belly. He groaned, felt his unnatural heart juggling at the thrill of it, his body quiver awake—

She drew up her leg and kicked him off her. He snarled abruptly, feeling his canines descend, and she bared her own teeth incredulously.

“That’s all you’re getting for now,” she said, lip curling. “Especially if you end up rutting into me like some kind of nympho every time I donate.”

He relaxed his posture, his mouth falling slack open at her words. “I… I am sorry,” he said, mouth still dry as bones. For all the energy her blood lent him, it didn’t seem to replenish his reserves.

She rolled her eyes. “Relax. I lived with Bella and the Dark Lord. It’s not the first time I’ve been groped. You need more blood, right?”

He nodded. “I am not certain it is safe to go outside the house, however. Dumbledore’s men in the Ministry will be able to detect any magic we perform.”

She snorted. “Who said we were going to use magic?”

He halted. “It would be very difficult to overpower a man without the benefit of magic.”

She shook her head. “Here, I thought you were more sensible than the others. Is there a club, or some other establishment where men get drunk and stupid nearby?”

He blinked. “A few streets over. You’re not going to compromise yourself by luring some damned innocent drunkard out here for my sake.”

“Compromise?” she all but snarled the word. “You know what I am. What I was to Bella, to the Dark Lord. What do I have left to compromise but my own survival?”

He couldn’t answer that.

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She couldn’t go out in Muggle Cokesworth in her torn robes and pass unremarked. Severus dug out a mouldering chest of his mother’s clothes dating from the ‘70s and she picked out a pair of bell bottoms and a bustier he was relatively sure would get her arrested for public indecency. He told her as much.

She looked at him with flat disdain.
“Thanks, Dad,” she lipped. “I’ll dress like a nun next time I seduce someone for you to cannibalize.”

His face twisted and heated. She laughed manically, in that way that made him wonder if her experiences had really unhinged her, and left with a jaunty wave.

She came back hours later, crashing through the front door with a group of inebriated young Muggles. He could smell the alcohol on them from the landing. He heard bottles clinking and raucous laughter as they drank a round.

“Nice flophouse.”

Heather grinned foolishly, slinging her arm about the man’s neck in a loose embrace, kissed him sloppily. “ Didn’t I say? No one’s been here for ages, and the coppers don’t seem to watch this neighbourhood good. C’mon, there’s a bed upstairs.” She tugged his arm, and he followed grinning, giving her arse an impatient swat on the way up. She shrieked giddily, and Severus’ stomach turned. He moved further into the shadows, as she led the man into his room and tossed the stumbling Muggle on the bed. The Muggle whooped as she leapt after him, pinning him. They play-wrestled a moment, until he had her in a headlock.

“Matte, matte!” she cried out. “C’mon, sweet stuff, you want to do this vanilla, or you gonna let me tie you up and have my wicked way with you?”

He chuckled and squirmed as her hand began to play him, and acquiesced. She rolled him, tied him to the bedposts, gagged him.

And then stood back, the smile vanished from her face. Regarded the man dispassionately as she would a hog trussed up for the slaughter, her finger stroking his cheek distractedly. His gorge rose.


“You’re drunk,” he realized.

She hiccupped a laugh. “That’s what a girl does in a pub, sweetheart. You got your drink, you can’t blame me getting mine.”

“It’s not safe right now. You’re not alright.”

She laughed hysterically. “It’s never safe. Fuck that. Let’s get this over with.”

The man gurgled through the gag, apparently realizing this wasn’t what he’d signed up for. Severus…

He’d drank from prisoners before. He’d never actually killed someone, not after the horror of his initiation. Never needed to, never counted it worth the cost of using his powers, until now.

Heather was sitting in the chair, watching him.

“Do it.”

He ripped open the boy’s jugular, and drank.

When he was done, and both he and the bed were bloody, he found her still staring at him.

She followed him downstairs, where he stunned the other couple mid-coitus, and drank them dry, watched in her drunken stupor as he banished the bodies. He might have harvested them for Potions ingredients, if she had not been present. It was nothing she would not have seen before, under
Bella’s tutelage, but that knowledge was sickening in itself.

He shut her out of the bathroom when she tried to follow him in, and he showered. He showed her her bedroom, his mother’s old room, tried to tuck her in. She didn’t stay, she followed him to his bed, tried to strip.

“No,” he told her firmly.

She looked at him with barren eyes.

“I need it.”

“No, you don’t. Go to bed.”

When she didn’t move, he very firmly took her by the arm, brought her to her room, locked the door. He waited a moment, hoping to hear her moving to the bed. Instead, he heard hiccoughing sobs, interspersed with a high and rushing keen, like a wind in the door. Parseltongue, he realized, but as he had never heard it. Snakes do not mourn the dead.

But women do.

Chapter End Notes

Happy New Year! Please read and review!
Hermione apparated back to the farm.

Shacklebolt had blown the horn for retreat. There was just too many of them. Never mind that the dark wizards were just as bloodied and battered as their opponents from the previous week. Never mind that it was outside the House Wards. It was close enough to their centre of power for them to defend.

She stalked into the Farm, feeling like complete shit.

A fail. Susan blind, Hannah dead—

She passed by a box stall where a crowd of her peers were cheering and lifting their mugs.

“You-Know-Who’s dead!” proclaimed Podmore, throwing back a shot of firewhiskey. “Three cheers to Dumbledore!”

“Hip-hip—Hurray!”

“Hip-hip—Hurray!

“Hip-hip—“

She slammed the door open so hard it swung 180˚ into the next stall over with a resounding crash, and Mundungus Fletcher dropped his glass.

“What the fuck are you celebrating?” she snarled, ignoring the pain that came with speaking so loudly. “He’s coming back, you idiots. Coming back, and we don’t fucking well know when or how, but when he does, he’ll have control over an entire axis of Britain thanks to that thrice accursed Ley.”

“He will,” came the grave voice from behind her. She uncrossed her arms and turned, mortified anyone had been able to get the jump on her, then, seeing who it was, untensed. Dumbledore.

“Still,” he continued gently, slipping past her to the table to take up a glass, “that is no reason not to enjoy what time we have, while we have it. We should enjoy what scant reason we have to celebrate.”

Hermione’s fists clenched furiously.

Yes, of course she knew. Troop morale. That’s what the Headmaster was always reminding her of, when she forgot that the accuracy of what was said was less important than its effects. What good
was it, telling them the odds, if it just clouded their minds, made them desert, and leave their friends and country with worse chances than before?

Still. She wanted to scream it.

Instead, she took a seat to the side, accepted the offered tumbler, drank.

“Some battle,” murmured an onlooker. “So, who was that woman squabbling with Voldemort anyways?”

Hermione tensed, but the Headmaster caught her eye, gave her an almost imperceptible shake of the head.

He didn’t do the same to Ron Weasley, unfortunately.

“That was Heather Potter,” he announced—stupidly proud to finally know something, she thought, and too dumb to consider whether or not he should mention it. “We ran into her right after she escaped from the Riddle House. I couldn’t believe it—she magicked open the Wall of Souls, easy as you please.”

“HEATHER POTTER?”


“But if the Chosen One has returned—and You-Know-Who is dead—we might have a chance—“

“Where is she now?”

“But why did Professor Dumbledore attack her? She was fighting You-Know-Who! I thought we were supposed to be recovering a dark witch, not Heather Potter—“

Hermione wouldn’t mind knowing the answer to that question herself. She caught the look exchanged between Dumbledore and Moody.

“Our intelligence,” Dumbledore said heavily, “has indicated that Voldemort has spent the last few months training an apprentice at his House. We were informed she was a dark witch whose power rivalled or exceeded his own, and his immortality in some way relied on her.”

“Heather Potter is a dark witch?”

“Well,” Ron Weasley began slowly, “she did command the Wall of Souls. I thought you had to have dark magic to do that.”

“You-Know-Who didn’t seem too keen on killing her either.”

“Then why were they duelling in the first place?”

“Maybe they were training. She didn’t seem that competent.”

“She was competent enough to put a needle through the eye of a Death Eater. Whatever side she’s on, it’s not theirs!”

Hermione could feel Dumbledore weighing the opinions of his men. Once, she might have believed Dumbledore’s suggestion, that he hadn’t realized he was aiming at the Potter girl, that he meant to kill whatever dark witch Lord Voldemort was training. Not now. The Headmaster had listened to ‘sightings’ of the Potter girl since her disappearance with particular disinterest. That told her the man
had known exactly where she was.

And Dumbledore did not aim to kill unless he felt it was extremely necessary. So, how did a girl, who looked to be on their side, merit death in the first place?

And if she did, why hadn’t Dumbledore recruited the rest of them for help?

The answer was obvious as the conversation went back and forth. Heather Potter was an innocent victim. Heather Potter was a casualty of the war, her whole family massacred by Death Eaters. Heather Potter was the hope for all wizardkind. Heather Potter was You-Know-Who’s sex slave. Heather Potter was the reincarnation of Godric Gryffindor. Heather Potter was a minor goddess, come to deliver her people from the scourge of war by sacrificing herself to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

Dumbledore couldn’t kill her, she realized, incredulous. Or, rather, she needed to die, for some reason he wasn’t saying, but no one—or, at least, only his old cronies, she amended, looking at Moody—was going to accept that.

Or, if more people did consent that killing her was necessary? She looked at her bickering colleagues. There would be as many who would stand against it, fight to defend her. It would tear the Order apart. If the public got wind that Dumbledore killed their Chosen One, he’d be demonized. Never mind that Voldemort was the most powerful dark wizard since Morgana—even if they got rid of him, there were still scores of other dark wizards in Britain, and they’d all be too happy to exploit any fragmentation in the Order.

No, she decided uneasily. Heather Potter—whatever the fuck she was—had to live.

How she was going to live, as the target of the two most powerful wizards alive, was anyone’s guess.

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She awoke to a dry mouth and a pounding in her skull, and the smell of dust and death.

“Fuck.”

She closed her eyes and let her head sink back onto the saggy pillow.

She couldn’t go back to sleep.

She stared at the waterstained ceiling.

A knock at the door, an indeterminate time later, made her jolt upright in bed, her leg scything out in defence. She was up before she could decide whether she wanted to be or not.

“Heather?”

Oh, fuck no. She’d propositioned the ugly bastard last night, hadn’t she? And he’d rejected her. She couldn’t decide whether she was more grateful, or more humiliated.

“Heather?”

He might actually be a decent man, she thought, and then laughed manically. Decent. He’d killed three people last night, with her help, but he hadn’t taken advantage. That was decency.

“Open the door.” He sounded exasperated now.
Well, he had saved her life. She opened the door.

“"The lock’s on the outside," she pointed out.

“I did not wish to intrude if you were in a state of undress.”

“Naked. Just say it, Snape. Besides,” her lips twisted. “It’s nothing you haven’t seen already.”

She flopped back down on the bed, while he sat stiffly in a wobbly wooden chair by the bed. He wouldn’t look at her.

“So,” she asked, picking at the embroidery on the bell bottoms she hadn’t bothered to take off before bed. “What’s next? Huddle up here and wait for the hubbub to die down? How long do you think it’ll take for the Death Eaters to take up other hobbies, now that the Dark Lord is dead?”

Snape looked tired. “He’s not going to stay dead.”

“Yeah, I know. But it took him a few years to resurrect last time, right? Maybe he’ll stay dead long enough for me to go back to school, get my bachelor’s degree, get my career on track—“

Snape laughed awfully. She did too. She was being ridiculous, after all. Snape, on the other hand, didn’t seem to realize she knew that.

“If you are delusional enough to believe either side in this conflict will allow you the time or space to pursue your personal, Muggle goals, then I am afraid your time with the Dark Lord has addled your wits more than I’d expected. The Dark Lord—“

“—I wasn’t being serious!” she protested.

He didn’t look like he believed her. “Let me lay it out for you. The Dark Lord,” he stressed, “only took several years to resurrect last time because the white wizards were able to secure the remains of his physical body, scatter them to the four winds, and consecrate the place of his death. He had to create a new body from scratch. This time?” he paused. “There is no way the white wizards, with their forces so badly decreased from the fights earlier this week, will have secured the ground, not when it lies so close to the House. The Death Eaters will take heavy losses for it, but they’ll raise him by next Moondark. He’ll have more important priorities than searching for you, but make no mistake—he will still seek to acquire you, and he will be relentless.

“The Order, on the other hand—“

“They tried to kill me,” she said blankly. “Why was that? I haven’t done anything.”

He’d thought about it, and there was one thing that made overwhelming sense.

“You are a horcrux. You understand, Heather, when the Dark Lord decided to be immortal…” his explanation trailed into silence at knowledge in her eyes. “You knew about this.”

“He told me. I didn’t think he told anyone else though.”

“He did not. Would not. Albus Dumbledore discovered the horcruxes for himself. He never told me you were one.” He stroked the scruff growing on his chin. “He must have known, or suspected though. Why else leave a witchling with Muggles, if not to prevent her from coming into her full power? I’m surprised he didn’t kill you outright and claim it was an accident—except, no, if his ethics did not compel him otherwise, there were witnesses, when you were found. The media uproar afterwards, if ‘The Girl Who Lived’ had been found dead, would have been terrible. Better to keep
you out of the public eye, let our world forget you had ever been, and then deal with you quietly if the need arose.”

She stared into space.

“So all his men are gunning for me.”

“Probably not all of them. It sounded as though he had convinced the men with him that you were a high level dark witch. Given the chaos of the past week, I doubt there has been time for anyone to question his orders. A little time, and they will ask for details. Photos, names.” He scrutinized her. “It does not help that you look like Black’s love child.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, tell me about it. So they’ll learn I’m Heather Potter. Then what?”

He regarded her speculatively. “They’ll ask him why he’s trying to kill the Girl Who Lived. He can’t keep pursuing you, at least not openly, or invite criticism.”

“That’s helpful, but really stupid. So the Girl Who Lived is a sodding horcrux. You’d think they’d be after me with pitchforks regardless.”

Severus pinched his nose in irritation. “That would be the sensible response. You forget, public sentiment is rarely sensible, and often the opposite. In spite of efforts to credit ordinary folk with ending the first war—efforts that in retrospect, were probably encouraged by Dumbledore to decrease the public’s obsession with you—the Wizarding World still regards you as its Messiah. The date of the Dark Lord’s first fall is Heather Potter Day. They’ve set up a shrine at your parents’ house in Godric Hollow. I’ve been there. There are probably more notes strewn about the porch than you’d find secreted in the Weeping Wall. They make pilgrimages there. They pray to you.”

Her mouth dropped.

“Jesus Christ,” she muttered.

“Exactly,” Snape said with some satisfaction.

They prayed to her. There was something significant in this, but she didn’t have time to consider what it might be now.

“If you were, say, to go public with your story—contact the media, give interviews, let them know about your experiences in the Dark Lord’s House—the public would rally to your side.”

“Or crucify me. What’s to prevent Dumbledore from making them believe I was a willing participant? I tortured people, Snape. Under his orders, but fuck if anyone will care. There might be witnesses.”

“I doubt it, but who cares if there were?” His voice became mocking, theatrical. “I can imagine the bylines now: ‘A delicate young woman, struggling to keep her virtue while surviving the attentions of the darkest wizard in history.’ You’ll be inspiring bodice-rippers for generations.”

She made a face. “That’s not what it was like at all.”

“Does it matter?”

She stared out. “You know. I don’t know whether it should or not. All that shit they tell you in school, about being true to yourself—“
“Muggle schools,” Snape muttered,

“—and I don’t even know who I am.”

Snape massaged his temples. “May the gods preserve me from teenage existentialists.” He faced her irately. “I had this discussion with your mother over that exact same phrase, and I daresay this will be as tiresome the second time around as the first. ‘Being true to yourself’ is a rather stupid phrase to think of if you’re trying to find direction in life. What’s it supposed to mean? To act on and preserve your ethics and beliefs in stasis from the moment you first heard that phrase? Who you are, what you want—that is fluid. That is in a constant state of evolution. And, assuming our knowledge increases with time—and I should hope yours has—it makes no sense to limit our actions to those of a prior self who was more ignorant.”

“What the fuck? Speak English, for gods’ sake.”

Snape huffed. “Forget what I just said. Clearly, you take after your father when it comes to theoretical nuance.”

“Is it just me, or do your words get bigger the more pissed off you get?”

“Your troglodyte of a sire had a similar penchant for resorting to mockery—“

“You know, they call that overcompensation.”

He glared balefully at her.

She laughed.

He shook his head in incredulity.

“Wasting time on worrying about your actions isn’t going to help you,” he said evenly. “For now, you have to decide, and quickly, and act. They’ll be occupied with the site for now, Bellatrix and Narcissa know what town I grew up in, and it’s only a matter of time—“

She froze, mid-laugh.

“They won’t tell anyone, not right away, not with the men as riled as they are. Narcissa is protective of you, and Bellatrix—” Severus grimaced. “She will want to keep you, and your punishment, all to herself.”

“Oh.” It wasn’t as terrifying as it should have been. She’d been Bella’s roommate for months. “And then what? Lock me back up in Malfoy Manor until the Dark Lord rises?”

“Likely.”

“So that’d be back to square one. Not good. Any other ideas?”

“You really only have two choices. Keep running—or go back to the Wizarding World.”

She goggled. “Didn’t we just establish that I have kind of crazy obsessive fanclub waiting for me back there? And, oh yeah—assassins, gratis of your Head Do-Gooder. Not to mention the Dark Lord will be trying to catch me up at every turn.”

“That crazy obsessive fan-club of yours, loathe as I am to admit, will have its uses. Establish that the Dark Lord was attempting to ravish you, and every idiot romantic in the nation will be taking up arms to defend your honor. You’re rich. We can hire guards with no connection to British politics—
the Americas have decent mercenaries. Even Dumbledore might be persuaded to suspend his action against you for awhile, given that just by living in our world, you’ll be bait for the Dark Lord and his people.”

“I’d rather run.”

“Stupid. I had thought better of you.”

“Snape…”

She tried to find words for what she was feeling.

“Look. I haven’t been in a house—a real house, not one that wants to suck my blood—in almost a year. I want that. I want electricity, and lightbulbs, and, and internet! I want a cellphone. I’m bloody sick of magic. What’s it good for anyways? Blowing people up? Killing? Aunt Petunia was right—my mother got mixed up in it, and she came to a bad end—“

“Your mother,” Severus said hotly, “was heroic, she died to save you—“

“She died because she got in a madman’s way, that’s what! I don’t want power, I don’t want responsibility, I don’t want anyone’s hero. I want to be normal.”

“And I did not wish to be the babysitter for a selfish brat, but see where we ended up,” Severus retorted.

She glared at him.

He glared back.

“Fine!” she snapped. “We’ll go back to the sodding freakish Wizarding World! Why the hell not? Maybe we can live in your precious Hogwarts, so at least one of us can resume their normal life—“

“Not Hogwarts,” Snape cut off tersely. “Not while Dumbledore is still Headmaster.”

“Where then?”

Snape furrowed his brow, paused a moment. “London,” he said finally. “Close enough to the Ministry of Magic that for every Auror Dumbledore can convince to try to take you out, there’ll be another sworn to the Dark Lord to do the opposite, and another dozen just trying to uphold the law. The bank is there. You’ve attained your majority—you’ll be able to access all your vaults. There’s more than enough pocket change there for you to buy a house.”

“A normal house,” she said flatly.

“It has to be in a wizarding community,” Snape argued. “If there is an attack—and there will be, by the time the Muggles realize something is amiss, you’ll be either dead or back in the Riddle House, answering to his Lordship for your misdeeds. Oh—to say nothing of the civilian casualties,” he dropped idly.

Of course, Heather reflected, considering the civilian bodies stacked neatly by the door like trash ready to go out to the curb, that wasn’t really a concern for Snape.

“Houses in Wizarding London go up for sale rarely enough that we’ll be lucky to find anything, let alone something with… Muggle contrivances. Stop dithering and dress yourself. It is past time we were leaving.”
She trudged upstairs, waited until she was in her room, shut the door, and hugged herself, smiling.

London. London, with its universities, its museums, its history, its thousand generations portrayed down the breadth of a city street. London! Hang the damn wizards, there was no way she shouldn’t get a chance to take a course or two at a real university, even if she had to get a security detail to do it.

She scrimmaged through the musty boxes of clothes, feeling hope for the first time in a long while.

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Bobby Walters and his two sons snowshoed over the crest of the hill. He paused for a moment, expecting them to do the same, and breathed out deeply appreciating the way his breath clouded in the icy air.

It was a cold, clear night, the moon half-full and silver on the snow, casting long shadows in the pine wood. A good night. He picked up his ski poles and whooped, listening to the echoes of his voice, and his sons’, in turn, in the deserted forest—

--not so deserted, he realized suddenly.

There was a clearing up ahead, the one he used to take Daisy and the boys to, back before he’d gotten tenure at the university and they’d moved away from Little Hangleton. And in that clearing were figures dressed in dark robes, standing in a loose circle. One of them was gesturing in their direction—they’d heard them yelling.

Bobby expelled another breath.

“Damn, Dad,” swore Paul, the older of his sons by twenty minutes. “What do you think? Neo-Pagans?”

He didn’t think so. There was something disquieting about those dark figures below, standing still and somber and altogether at odds with the raucous frivolity of those Neo-Pagan hippies.

“Nope,” he answered definitely. “It’s too cold out. Those tree-hugging yuppies only get out of doors when it’s above 16’ C. They’ll be holding their séances in the saunas til May at least.” He paused. “Still, I can’t say like the looks of those folks. Might be some weird cult. Best steer clear.”

“I don’t think we can,” said Walter, the younger by twenty minutes, and more perceptive by at least 20 IQ points.

“Well, why not?”

A hand clasped on Bobby’s shoulder. He didn’t startle, his sons were always clapping him on the back.

But this wasn’t their hand.

It was small—a woman’s hand—with a steel grip and sharp nails, and when he turned to see who it was, he started.

She was gorgeous—more gorgeous even than Daisy ever was, before the cancer had ruined her looks. She was of a height with him, with long, tousled black curls and black eyes and red lips. He heard the boys’ indrawn breaths. Never mind that one was getting married and the other had a steady girlfriend, you couldn’t help appreciating a woman this lovely.
Even if he couldn’t feel a parallel between this, and the time Odysseus’ men landed on Circe’s Island.

“Well,” she said sweetly, “what brings you out here at this hour of night?”

“Just going for a walk,” Bobby told her defensively. “Sorry if we interrupted your shindig down there—not our intention. We’ll be off in a jiffy, that we will.”

“Oh,” she smiled, and then giggled a little. “No interruption, none at all. We would love for you to join us.”

“No, really, that’s quite alright miss—we’ve been out far too late as it is, we’ll be on our way, but thank you for the invitation.”

She laughed harder. Was she a bit touched?

“No, really,” she said, drawing a small wooden stick, like a wand, from her pocket. “I insist.”

Without really understanding why, he found himself walking down to the clearing. He tried to stand still, to stop moving—

“Wait up, Dad—”

The boys were huffing after him, he realized in horror—tripping over their snowshoes to get down to the clearing. The woman—she was moving through three feet of snow like it was a summer stroll, and how—

He had to stop—

“Bella, darling, I told you there was something there,” laughed a tall and ugly man.

The woman kissed him sloppily, he half expected to see a smear of red lipstick on the man’s cheek, but there was none—the unnatural red of her mouth wasn’t cosmetic. “Roddy, good man, you did get me what I wanted.” Her voice dropped, low and sultry as a Leeds streetwalker. “I’ll reward you for it later,” she whispered huskily, her hand cupping her groin momentarily, before she turned back to Bobby and his sons. ‘Roddy’ groaned, falling forward as she removed her hand. Bobby didn’t need to look back to know Paul would be red from tip to top at that lewd display.

“Now, this way darling—no need to say anything—“

His sons trailed skeptically at his side. He tried to work his mouth, to warn them what was going on, but he couldn’t speak either, could do nothing, except follow the woman—

No.

The woman’s eyes met his forcefully, she smiled madly.

Yes.

He stepped closer, closer, to where a man rested on the snow—not so much the man, but the shadow of a man, a black suspension hanging above the snow. Paul was gaping openly, Conrad looking at it inquisitively, as though trying to figure out how it functioned…

No, he thought determinedly. No, no, no, not my sons. Whatever the hell this was, it wasn’t natural. “NOT MY SONS!”

She paused suddenly, smiled brighter than ever.
“A pity you’re a Muggle,” she said, lifting a shocked Paul with a wave of her wand, “but oh well.”

He came at her fists flying, just as she dropped his son into the black cloud. She sidestepped his attack—though he did give her a glancing blow to the cheek—and he tripped on the mist. He heard Conrad screaming. He looked up to Paul dissolving, as though in acid, the black mist eating through his flesh, fought to get to his feet, to help them—

He couldn’t get up. He looked down at his feet, and his stomach roiled.

They weren’t there. Everything, below the knee, gone. The mist had eaten them.

“Not my sons,” he pleaded weakly, watching as she floated a struggling Conrad over the darkness, that was now roiling up from where it had lain.

“No one ever wants it to be their sons,” the woman complained, flopping down on the snow opposite him, using her wand to bounce Conrad up and down above the mist—like a fisherman jiggling a lure, he thought. “Except, well, it has to be someone,” she explained kindly. “And I’d rather it wasn’t my cousin, so since none of you seem to be capable of asserting your position, well —“

She jiggered the wand once more, and the mist roiled up to consume his second son.

“Three’s the magic number!” she declared cheerfully. “Now, would you be a dear—oh, wait, no, it looks like he’s full. Well, we could do with consecrating this ground anyways—“

Through his shock, he saw the mist roiling, upwards and upwards, into the sky, propelled northwest by a wind that wasn’t.

“Safe travels, Sirius,” the woman waved, watching until he was out of range. “Now,” she murmured, twirling her wand like a girl with a baton, “what to do with you, lovey?”

With no small gratitude for it, he blacked out.

Chapter End Notes

Hope those of you in the northern climes are enjoying this lovely (read: horrible) winter weather, and please review!
The screen door to Spinner’s End screech shut behind her. She hustled to catch up with Severus as he passed through the gate marking the threshold of the property, the duffel bag with the broken zipper slipping precariously from her shoulder and threatening to empty all his mother’s robes into the spring mud. As a further handicap, she was carrying a rucksack stuffed with any other clothing she could find.

“So, where’s your car?” she asked, following him around the corner and trying to guess at which of those parked might be his. She eyed a Volkswagen Beetle skeptically.

Snape gave a disdainful sniff.

“We are going by car, right? Not that teleportation thing?”

“Since the Dark Lord activated St. Michael’s Ley, Apparition has been unpredictable, at best, if the Wizarding Wireless is to be believed.”

She shook her head. “He would have made a failsafe to ensure his Death Eaters would be able to use it. Disrupting transportation wouldn’t benefit him unless it gave him some kind of advantage.”

“He did make a failsafe,” Severus’ face twisted irately. “Every Death Eater who participated in the ritual sacrifices was keyed into the Ley.”

“So…” she stopped. “Oh.”

They continued walking in silence along the muddy street for a time.

“Did you really think I killed at every possible opportunity?”

She glanced at him. “I’m not really sure what to think anymore,” she said slowly.

He stopped at the curb and drew his wand, pointing it out into the street. He did this for five minutes.

“Why are you doing that?”

“Watch and learn,” he told her, not even bothering to glance her way.

“You know, I could probably use the Ley. If it recognizes his magic, it’ll recognize mine—“

“Have you ever apparated before?”

“Well, no, but—“

“Unless you’ve also reassembled your own entrails while they were scattered all over a square mile, I
don’t recommend it.” He cocked his head, as though hearing something far off. “Stand back.”

“Why?—“

A sudden chorus of honks and Severus dragged her back as a bright purple bus leapt the curb and ploughed into the lawn, coming to an abrupt stop just short of a tree. A pimply young man wearing a rather bedraggled bellhop’s uniform with tassels on the shoulders, bowed them into the bus.

“Stan Shunpike at yer service, miz, welcome to the Knight bus! Now—“

“We’ve been here before,” Snape rasped, his hood low on his face. He thrust a pile of silver at the man. “The private berth, upstairs.”

“Can’t ‘ave, sorry sir, some folk else is occupying it, but we got right comfy public berths—“

“Fine!” Snape growled, dragging Heather after him, towards the back of the bus, and she sat back on the bed.

“Why couldn’t we just take the train?”

“This is faster. Probably safer too, no one will pause to send a Hitwizard out amongst Muggles that can be obliviated, but amongst our own—that’s another thing entirely.”

Safer? She scoffed inwardly, seeing the askance looks many of the other passengers gave them. “Everyone seems to recognize you.”

There were booths at the back, almost like a train compartment, fortunately, the bus was largely empty. Severus guided her into one.

“They should. I taught most of them.”

“So, absolutely none of them are going to wonder what you’re doing with a girl my age?”

Snape’s lips curled unpleasantly. “I have made it abundantly clear to anyone who knows me that my private life is private.”

She snorted. Right. So they all assume we’re sleeping together.

“Not necessarily,” Severus responded. “I have taken on apprentices from time to time.”

“Shit, do you have to do that?”

He shrugged. “It becomes more difficult to block the thoughts of someone from whom I’ve fed.”

“And… again. Not giving me an overwhelming desire to donate again.”

He didn’t respond to that.

The bus lurched unpleasantly, but after the events of the past few days, that was a minor discomfort. Snape pulled out an academic journal of some kind and began reading. After she stared at him for some minutes, mostly bored, he dug a second out of his satchel and thrust it at her.

‘A Compendium on Modern Potions’. Ugh. The thing was dry as bones, but she read it anyway. It wasn’t as though she had anything better to do.

She read on for about an hour or so, long enough for Snape to grow irritated at her constant disruptions as she asked him “Why the differences between cultivated and wild aconite would matter
for potions anyways,” or “How would a wizarding vegan make these potions?” , when the breath was abruptly knocked from her lungs. Her vision went black. The scree of metal on cement, impossibly loud. They were sideways. There was asphalt outside her window, and then there was no window, there was glass, and she shut her eyes and turned aside and shielded her head. They bounced, and her vision went black once more, and then Snape had her in his arms.

“Come,” he murmured grimly, pulling her up.

She was shivering. She was bleeding.

The bus was turned on its side.

“Shield your eyes,” Snape warned. Someone was weeping. He blew out the back of the bus with a hasty Reducto, and made to pull her through the gap.

“No,” she resisted.

“Someone is here, and they likely want you raped and me dead.”

“Someone is here,” she retorted, “and they’re injured.” She ducked out of his arms as he snarled a curse, and climbed up into the aisle. Not all everyone had been so lucky as her and Snape. It was overwhelming, to think that wizards, long-lived and practically immortal as some of them were, could be killed in a simple car crash. A blond man grimly checked the pulse of the woman next to him, and then moved onto the next.

“What can I do,” she demanded of him.

He blinked, but did not hesitate. “Check to see who’s alive,” he told her, moving aside. “I need to see about the people on the second floor. Don’t leave until I get down. There might be Death Eaters —“

“My friend already blew a hole in the back of the bus. If there’s Death Eaters, they already know there’s survivors.”

“Schweisse,” he muttered. “No use for it then.”

She hoisted an old man, a young mother up into the aisle, then one of her children. Shunpike and one of the other young men carried an unconscious girl up. The other survivor, a toddler, refused to let go of her, and she climbed awkwardly up through the gap with him clinging to her neck. The bus shook, and she glanced through the gap to see Snape standing off against two men, deflecting their curses. They weren’t aiming for Snape. They were aiming for the bus.

“Damn.”

“Miss?” enquired the old man.

She shook her head. “Listen. We need to get out, but they’re firing on us. I’ll go first—“ she disentangled the wailing child from around her neck and handed him to the mother. “Get out as quickly as possible. Run for cover, you hear me? Cast shield spells if you can.”

She jumped through the gap to the ground, her robes tearing on the uneven edges of the metal as she did so. A curse flew from the side and triggered one of the hastily made spellknots she’d tied that morning, igniting her robes. She swore and drew her wand. She didn’t have reserves to deal with this right now!

And apparently neither did Snape. They sent him sprawling, before he stumbled up, fangs bared, but
did nothing else. Of course. Daylight. Most of his ‘special’ powers would be unavailable to him—

But hers weren’t, she realized abruptly. She felt for the Dark Mark and twisted. One of Severus’ attackers dropped his wand to clutch at his arm, and that was all the opening he needed. He slashed open his neck with a simple Diffindo.

The other two were still standing, but looked more warily at them. Damn. Was the Dark Lord backed up on branding his followers, or what? She barely deflected a second curse before a third crashed into her shoulder and sent her sprawling, her knit shawl burning up as it absorbed the impact, and then the man from earlier was beside her, the other survivors beside him—plus another terrified looking woman and two teenagers. He helped her to her feet and threw off her burning shawl, dosing her burning dress with a hasty Aguamenti, before turning to help Shunpike and the old man whip curses at their assailant. Snape was closing in on his own opponent. She smiled grimly. Once Snape was close enough, it would be all over—

--a flicker of movement caught her eye, and she acted before she thought, shoving one of the teenagers out of the way as another man leapt off the roof and onto her. The survivors scattered. She sprawled under him and caught a blow of his dagger to her forearm. She grappled desperately against him, holding his one arm away from her, biting the other as he came in for a chokehold.

A peculiar expression crossed his face, but she didn’t have time to think about it before someone blew him off her with a Stupefy. She turned, and the Aurors were there, a couple of people with cameras following in their wake. The assailant facing off against the blond man and Shunpike was disarmed and disabled. A couple of red-robed Aurors tied him up. Snape’s opponent was dead. A third man, in darker red robes ignored all of this. He came up to the terrified looking woman and clasped her tight in his arms, before doing the same to the two teenagers. Then, he turned to the blond man.

“Schermer, I can’t thank you enough.”

“Thank the lady,” the blond man said shortly. “I believe your older son owes her a life-debt. She’s responsible for getting everyone else out as well.”

The man in the dark red robes turned to her. “Then Britain owes you a debt as much as I do.” He held out his hand. She grasped it. Her hands were covered in blood. “I am Minister of Magic Rufus Scrimgeour, and I could use a girl like you in my corps. What is your name, miss?” Somewhere in the background, the aurors cried out in alarm as her earlier assailant fell back in his chains, dead. He’d killed himself, poison, rather be taken in. Never mind that. She straightened, all of Narcissa’s lessons returning to mind, conscious of the eyes on her, the snapping of the shutters as the reporters began taking photos.

“My name is Lady Potter,” she enunciated clearly. “And it’s my pleasure to meet you, Minister.”

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THE CHOSEN ONE RETURNS!

Yesterday, Lady Heather Potter, the Chosen One, narrowly foiled an attack by 4 German mercenaries on Minister Scrimgeour’s family, who were riding the Knight Bus near Charing Cross Road when it happened. The attack devastated both the Knight Bus and the nearby area, resulting in 11 casualties (6 wizard, 5 Muggle) from the crash alone. Lady Potter rescued the survivors from the bus with the help of the Scrimgeours’ bodyguard, killing two and subduing the remainder before the Aurors showed up. She is pictured below holding one of the infants she saved from the crash. While Lady Potter declined to answer any questions, she appears to have been injured recently. Sources
suggest she has been fighting dark wizards independently under the tutelage of renowned Potions Master and Spell Theorist Severus Snape.

Although one of the captured Germans took poison to avoid interrogation, questioning of the remaining mercenary confirmed him to be in the employ of You-Know-Who. The mercenaries are part of the purist sect on the Continent, Hexenzeit, which continues to send immigrants to bolster You-Know-Who’s ranks.

Moody cast down the newspaper on the desk.

“Well, that does it, Albus. There’s no way you’re going to put her down quietly now.”

Albus steepled his fingers.

“We could tell the public.”

Moody snorted. “Tell the public—what? That Voldemort’s immortal? There’d be chaos. Horcruxes? The aurors would be called every time a broomstick malfunctioned! ‘Oh, Auror Moody, meh ‘kettle’s’ plum-cursed, it is! Leaks every time I use it! Must be a horcrux!’” he mocked. “To say nothing of telling everyone that she’s a horcrux. Was bad, when they heard about the boy saviour, but this—” he tapped his finger on the moving picture of her. “There she is. Right after a battle, with a child in her arms, and blood all on her hands and face. Bodice gaping. Looks like the personifications of Liberty in those old paintings from the Revolution. World’s gone mad. I’ve seen this clipping pinned in the lockers of every male auror in the corps, and most of the women’s. People have started painting her in everything from pinup cards to religious posters, and they’re selling like hotcakes. Hells, the missus wouldn’t stop badgering me to see if I hadn’t talk to the girl yet. Left mostly so’s I could get a moment’s silence.”

Albus picked up the photo, studied it. “Some people might listen.”

“Aye,” Moody agreed, lighting a cigar and leaning back in the chair before the desk. “Mostly the loonies. She’d make mincemeat of them.”

“So we send someone she won’t make mincemeat of.”

She raced through the halls, laughing giddily as she pulled open the curtains, her bemused bodyguard following in her wake with determined stoicism.

After the crash, Scrimgeour had offered them Ministry-owned quarters – which Snape had abruptly declined on her behalf. There were too many spies for either side in the Ministry, he explained, and he’d rather not have all of them know her location. Instead, he’d asked for a lawyer and a considerable guard of men the Minister trusted personally to escort them to Gringotts. Evaluation of her assets had revealed a sizeable property on the Thames in the middle of London, willed to her by a childless aunt on her father’s side. It was a three-storey house with ten rooms and bannister perfect for sliding down and wide, wide gardens, and white swans that iridesced in moonlight, and the coziest little stable with a little Welsh pony and a cart.

In short, it was the kind of house you’d expect from a fairytale.

Not the kind of house that ate people up and spat out their bones.
It was not without its defences though, or Snape would never have allowed her to stay there. Where death had warded Riddle Manor, life warded Potter Cottage. A circle of willows hid the house both visually and magically, and two sides of a diverted stream ran around the house to the Thames. Water deterred vampires. She’d had to open up the Floo just to get Snape into the house. Wolfsbane grew thickly about the stream, and silver dust shone from the pavings.

She’d had her own difficulty entering the house. The wards had to let her in—she was the Mistress of this place—but they’d bent reluctantly.

“It senses your magic,” Snape explained irately. “The Potters were white wizards.”

“I could be a white witch,” she told him.

He said nothing to that.

Snape interviewed the applicants to the bodyguard position in Diagon Alley and used both Veritaserum and Legilimency on them. A binding confidentiality contract was required of successful applicants, with rather… mortal penalties. Illegal or not, anyone would complained was rejected out of hand.

She’d sent a bodyguard out to buy her proper razors and shampoo and soaps, and all the things the Wizarding World really shouldn’t have been using 18th century technology for. She shaved her head of all the spell-grown hair, since her own, naturally grown, would hold spell knots better. She shaved her legs. She put on a goddamn T-shirt with a cat cartoon and ripped blue jeans, and giggled at the thought of what the Dark Lord – may he rot in hell—would have said about it.

“Where do you think you’re going in that nonsense?”

She flashed him a grin. “Muggle London. Miranda and I,” she looked her arm through her bodyguard’s, and the woman abruptly looked uncomfortable, “are going to take a look at the University, maybe stop in at the pubs, do a little extra shopping—“

“Not in that… attire, you aren’t. The Lady Potter, unfortunately, has a certain standard to maintain —“

“The Lady Potter is the fucking Messiah and can maintain whatever standard she wants,” she told him, grinning manically and flinging herself down on a couch. “‘Sides, I doubts all the Lord Whatsits are going to be hanging out in the aisles of the ASDA.”

“The ASDA,” he repeated, lips thinning. “And why is it necessary for you to visit a discount grocery a mere week after your last near-death experience?”

“I haven’t had crisps for a year.”

“I thought you asked Rupert to bring them back for you when you sent him out for bathing supplies.”

“I asked for Prawn Cocktail Walkers. He got confused and brought me back an actual cocktail full of live prawns.”

Snape looked incredulously at the bodyguard eating across from him, who studied his porridge with rapt enthusiasm—and thought better of saying anything.

“ Irregardless. You have other, more pressing obligations than providing Dumbledore’s lackeys with target practice. These came for you,” he said, holding up a sheaf of parchments. “I’ve already checked them for curses.”
She took them gingerly. “Fanmail?”

His lip curled. “Already burnt. Half of them were laced with contact aphorodiacs.”

“Eww.” She flipped through the letters. “Hogwarts, Wizengamot, some Irish school, the Wyrd Institute for Higher Witchcraft—“ she chucked them on the table. “Nothing I’m interested in. C’mon Miranda—“

“I already read the Wizengamot letter. You’re being summoned to defend your seat.”

“I don’t care.”

“It goes to Albus Dumbledore if you refuse—“

She stopped so abruptly that Miranda almost ran into her back. “What the hell—“

“Your parents were fond of him.”

“Yeah, and my biological father was an idiot. I’ll reassign it.”

“Not unless you first take it up,” Snape pursed his lips. “And the requirement for doing so, unfortunately, is at least five standard OWLs.”

“So I’ll scrape an Acceptable on a few. Get it over with. You can have my seat.”

“You will scrape an Acceptable on what, exactly? The curriculum you were taught differs a great deal from the British standard, I assure you,” he mocked.

“Muggle Studies,” she said defiantly. “Besides, you’ll beat whatever else you think I need into my head in our spare time. I’m not taking the exam today. I’m going shopping.”

“You’re going insane.”

“Been there, done that, got the marks to prove it.” She swung off the settee, grabbed Miranda by the arm, and blew a kiss to Snape that ended in her flipping him the bird. “Bye-bye, lovey, see you in a few.”

“You absolute idiot—“

She slammed the door behind them, laughing giddily. Miranda regarded her with no small alarm. “Are you quite alright, milady?”

Heather wiped tears from her eyes. “Never better. C’mon, let’s get going before tall, dark and sullen decides to drag me back.” She skipped down the lane, Miranda following in her wake at a more sedate pace.

“Are you quite sure he isn’t right. Your safety—“

“He probably is,” she laughed, “but I’ll hang before I admit it.”

Miranda looked disturbed at this notion.

They sidled through the willows and the anti-Muggle wards, and walked out into Potters’ Field. Some kind of festival was being held. The crowds of Muggles sitting out by the bandstands did a
doubletake at Miranda’s robes. Heather smiled widely.

“I think we need to find you a new wardrobe,” she told her happily.

“I believe my own is quite sufficient—“

“Not if you’re calling this much attention to yourself,” Heather insisted. And with that, and much protesting on the part of her poor, bewildered bodyguard, Heather had the best day she’d had all year. She bullied Miranda into the clothing shops and snickered as the poor dear tried to figure out a brassiere – the woman was pureblood, if of a rather more down-to-earth and down-on-her-luck variety than the Malfoys, and had only ever worn corsets. She bought them both knickers and bras in every insensible variety imaginable. She bought them T-shirts with Muggle bands and cannabis slogans and suggestive fine print across the bust. Skinny jeans and slacks and it was a good thing Miranda had a bottomless bag with a feather-weight charm, or they’d have needed a dozen men to tote the stuff back home. They were settling back for pedicures and foot massages when the proximity alarm Miranda had set on the door went off.

She ducked off the chair faster than she could have thought and drew her wand from her purse, Miranda casting an invisible shield with a wand tailored to look like a Muggle pencil. The woman she’d rescued from the Wall of Souls lifted her hands cautiously to show she was unarmed, before turning to one of the shop assistants.

“You accept walk-ins, yes? No, I’ll just settle down by my friends over there—they weren’t expecting me—“

Not expecting?

Truthfully, whatever she told Snape, she’d figured they’d run into some wizard while they were out of the house. She’d just hoped it would take longer. She settled back into her chair and eyed Hermione warily as she settled into hers, the Muggle beginning to sand away at the calluses on Hermione’s tattooed soles.

“So,” the Muggleborn rasped. “You’re Heather Potter.”

She nodded.

“What do you think of our… business so far?” Hermione asked discreetly.

“I hate it,” she said frankly. “It was like living with fucking Hitler and the Stormtroopers for the past year. Also, the fact that everyone seems to want a piece of me? Kind of disturbing.”

Hermione considered this, stretching back more as the aesthetician began to knead her fingers around the heel of her foot.

“I get that,” she said. “I was with Dolohov for two years.”

A shiver ran up her back as she reconsidered Hermione’s scars.

“I take it this wasn’t a casual relationship.”

“No,” she answered simply.

Further silence. The smell of the acetone began to make her feel light-headed.

“Dolohov died of an accidental overdose of aconite a few days ago.”
The other woman looked at her sharply, terrible joy curving her lips into a raptor’s smile.

“How tragic.”

“Unbearable,” Heather agreed. “Particularly given how close he and my mother were before she passed away.”

More silence.

“Did Voldemort ever—did you two ever share a bed?”

“That’s none of your business,” Heather said tartly, with an irritation that surprised even her. Whatever she and the Dark Lord were to each other, it wasn’t something she needed to define for anyone else. “Why are you here? It’s the old man, isn’t it?” Heather decided.

“Dumbledore sends his regrets for the way your last meeting ended—”

Heather snorted. “If you mean he regrets my attempted murder, he could show it best by ensuring there is not a repeat performance.”

Hermione cast an alarmed look at the Muggle aesthetician, but either the old girl was deaf, or her command of English wasn’t sharp enough to understand what they said—or, maybe she’d heard it all already, and had ceased to be disturbed. “Between us, I’m not sure you can count on that. He believes the Dark Lord corrupted you, and you are somehow essential to his immortality.” Another pause. “But he also thinks that perhaps, you could help us – take care, of him. He’s willing to stop targeting you if you’ll help bring down Voldemort.”

“Right. And as soon as Voldemort’s scattered to the four winds, he’ll declare open season on Heather Potter again. No thanks,” she picked up a magazine and pretended to leaf through it, while preparing a warding behind the propped up cover. She didn’t need to glance up to feel the other girl’s eyes on her, judging her.

“And you really don’t care what’s happening to thousands of people, every day, because of the Death Eaters and Voldemort? Events you could prevent?”

“I couldn’t prevent them.”

“Why not?” Hermione demanded insistently.

Heather put her magazine down, not caring if Hermione could read the shape her hand held now. She didn’t know how to articulate what she felt. Rhetoric was easy, you cut and pruned all the inconvenient truths away to create a truncated form of reality that fit your preferences. Trying to understand something, in its entirety – you couldn’t do that out loud, while someone was trying to make you believe one particular something. So she didn’t.

“It’s not my problem,” she told her flatly. It was complete and utter bullshit, and Hermione said as much.

“How,” the woman started, “is it not your—“ she checked herself, turned away, breathed slow for a moment, and Heather caught a glimpse of the tattooed spirals on her shoulders luminescing. The glow died as Hermione recovered her composure.

“I thought I could leave it all behind too,” she said bitterly, relaxing back into her chair as the Korean pedicurist began to paint her toenails. “After Dolohov, I mean. I was fourteen, when he took me, and
I was stuck in his hellhole on the Continent for two years. It was an old Soviet bunker, on lands that had been fought over for years. I wasn’t the only one he kept, but I was his favourite, because I’d talk back to him.

“Until one day, I said too much, to the wrong guest,” she curled her lips wryly, lifting a hand to her scar. “Or the right one, because not a month later, Dumbledore came for me.”

“I’m glad for you,” Heather told her, and told herself she meant it.

“But I was sick of the wizarding world then. I took my parents out to Australia, and I meant to live like a Muggle. I couldn’t. I couldn’t stop using my magic. Couldn’t stop thinking about all the friends I’d left behind, everyone they’d—hurt. Everyone they were going to hurt, if I didn’t do something about it. And even down there, the Dark has eyes. I woke up one morning to find a mercenary trying to smash his way through the door. Another Order member on holiday was killed. If a nobody like me can’t outrun it—how does Heather Potter have a chance?”

“I suppose I’ll have to find that out, won’t I?” she mused.

Hermione gaped at her.

She smiled slowly, and resisted the urge to deliberately antagonize the girl. Bella would have had a field day with this one. Between her idealism and her passion—

She stopped that train of thought abruptly.

She’d been present at too many interrogations to not recognize where this was coming from.

“In the meantime, guess I’ll see you around?”

Hermione gawped.

“If Dumbledore’s got you on my case, I mean, or you can spare some time from child soldiering.”

Hermione’s jaw closed slowly. “I’m legal age.”

Heather scoffed. “Yeah. Not when you got dragged into this stupid mess. Take some time off for yourself. Go clubbing. Get drunk. Ten to one neither side will fire on us if we’re too close for them to aim accurately.” She considered. “They’ll probably send some of the Dark Lord’s dumbass Nazi Youth squad in after me sooner or later, but my cousin’s not entirely stupid. I could probably get him to join us for a few rounds before he goes back to being a pureblooded swot.”

Hermione shook her head. “You’re—you’re so—”

“Selfish? Reckless? Willfully blind?” Heather held up her manicured nails to admire them for a moment. Hot pink. The Dark Lord didn’t even have a dress code, and the Death Eaters still didn’t exert enough imagination to wear anything but black. She supposed it was easier to wash the blood out. She got up and went to the counter to pay, nabbing a platinum blond wig as she did so.

“I’ll pick up her tab as well,” she jabbed a finger at Hermione. “And this.” She set a hundred pound note on the counter and the wig on her head, and didn’t wait to see if the teller complained. Hermione followed her out.

“Umm,” Miranda nodded.

“Yeah, I see her. Hey, ‘Mione, you’re real cute and all, but I usually wait until I know a girl better
before I take her home.”

She flushed.

Well. Bella’s habit of being deliberately shocking was good for something after all?

“So bugger off, okay?”

They turned and continued walking. Miranda nudged her again.

She turned. “ ‘Mione, really—“

A light went off in her face, and she cast before she could think. Blood spattered her face.

“Colin!” Hermione was running to the boy, and he was a damned boy, fourteen at most, his shirt was sliced clean in half and his ribs were showing through the gaping wound across his chest—hells. If she hadn’t been still magically exhausted, if she’d cast at full power—

And now, Mione was looking at her like she was him. She slid down beside Mione, cracked her fingers, pulling for magic. It responded sluggishly. She drew her wand.

“No. Not unless you have any skill with healing magic. Episkey.” Hermione muttered, the wound sealing shut, at least on the surface, but you could see the blood pooling, purple below the skin. “He needs to go to St. Mungo’s. Now.”

“What can I do?”

Hermione glanced up at her, the bleeding teenager in her arms. “I don’t know. What can you do?”

She apparated a moment later. Heather was left alone, staring at the bloody outline on the pavement, her hands wet.

“Milady?”

She should be shaking. Instead, she got up—wiping her palms on her new designer jeans as she did so.

“Miranda. Take me home.”

“Yes, milady.”

And they went home to Potters’ Field, back through the willows that bent sluggishly to admit her and the cobbled walkway and the fairies gleaming in the gloaming. And Severus.

He neither asked nor condemned. He made her take a hot bath, and at the end of it, there was a fluffy bathrobe and slippers set out, and cocoa on the veranda. They sat there, and waited for the other to say something, until they fell asleep.

He awoke earlier than her, of course. Even the early light of day itched now, but then, Drake had warned him it would be worse as he grew older.

He covered her up with a blanket and went inside.

He hated it here.
For one thing, he was on virtual house arrest. Unless he wanted to waste significant energy misting through the wards – energy he’d have to recoup in bodies – or use the Floo, he was stuck here. Truthfully, they shouldn’t even have the Floo network hooked up. It had been hacked before, and even with all the safeguards he could put up, it was still a risk. In a pinch, he could probably leave, but again, he’d be drained trying to reenter— if the House would even let him back in.

And there was the other thing.

The Cottage didn’t like him.

It didn’t express it as openly as Riddle Manor would have, but then, few houses would. Heather, for all she’d seen in that place, didn’t really know what the Manor was capable of, because it loved her. And because it loved her, it took care not to offend her.

But when she was abed, and the Dark Lord didn’t care to chastise it, men down stairs that were suddenly uneven heights and very stupid youths who’d insulted the Manor tripped on raised lintels and scraped themselves bloody on floors that had been smooth moments earlier. White wizards fell through the floorboards.

The Cottage would do no such thing. The cottage was a civilized aristocrat. The walls glowered down on him instead, and the windows of his room widened, and the curtains never stayed shut. He’d gotten splinters from the banisters.

It didn’t like Heather either, and that was worrying. An unwilling house might have to follow your orders to the letter, but it would do no more. Which was why he wasn’t surprised when the Floo lit up and a head appeared.

“Hello? Hello— Severus. Good. Is the Lady Potter awake yet?”

“Minister Scrimgeour. She is still asleep. I can awake her if the matter is pressing?”

Scrimgeour’s mouth compressed. “Better let the girl sleep while she can. She told you about yesterday?”

Severus inclined his head. “It’s a bad business. She’s not the first war-witch I’ve seen react badly to being surprised— Moody nearly killed a couple of us in training when we pulled a prank on him. Still. There isn’t the same focus on our Aurors as there is on a high-profile civilian like your Lady. I managed to keep it out of the Prophet, but the Quibbler’s running a piece. Skeeter wrote it for them. Ugly bit of work. Suggests she’s the Dark Lord’s mistress.”

Severus hissed. “Get me a lawyer. She’ll sue for slander.”

“We’re in the middle of a war here. You’d be hard-pressed to track the Quibbler down – the DMLE’s been trying to shut it down for leaking confidential information. We’ve lost informants and had to pull out spies because of that damn paper.”

“Rita Skeeter isn’t difficult to find though,” he bared his teeth. “Get me that lawyer.”

He didn’t stop her when she left that morning, even though they both knew she was being stupid, leaving the house right after she’d spattered that boy’s blood across the pavement.
In truth? She didn’t think he had any more energy to argue with her. And he knew she didn’t have it in her to spend any more time holed up in one place, however pleasant that place might be.

So she took Miranda and Rupert with her, waved off the Aurors Scrimgeour had so generously sent to intercept her at the Tower Bridge, and relied on her bodyguards to apparate them through a path that would confound anyone trying to follow their spelltracks.

So far, neither of her bodyguards had been stereotypically close-lipped, but she knew a little about them from Snape when she’d reviewed their applications with Snape.

Rupert was former Hogwarts, from the House Snape used to head. His mother was from a Noble and Most Ancient House, his father Japanese. He’d gone back home to Shikoku to fight in some provincial war with necromancers.

“Like a samurai?” she’d asked immediately.

Snape looked unimpressed.

“Well, hey. The rest of the Wizarding World is medieval. Why not Japan?”

He’d pinched his nose, and bade her ‘keep her cultural assumptions to herself’.

Miranda, on the other hand, was English as they came. Snape had flatly refused to give reasons for his insistence on hiring her, which was curious. Apparently he knew her when she’d taught Defense, briefly, during his school days. She was a white wizard, but she had some kind of conflict with Dumbledore.

Which could only be reassuring.

They apparated into Thetford Forest Park, which was the closest either of her guards had ever been to where Heather needed to be. From there, she managed to hitch them a ride in a Jeep full of pilots on their way back from vacation to the air force base. The boys let them off at the end of a long dirt drive, and almost immediately, she heard the sound of dogs barking and a woman bawling about trespassers from inside the house. She laughed and ran down the drive, an assortment of bulldogs barreling out from the open door a moment later. They dove into her legs and started wiggling convulsively as they realized who it was. She flopped down in the drive and picked one grey-whiskered, bandy-legged brute up and started itching him up his jowls while he lolled in her lap.

“Yes, that’s a goooood Ripper, he is a good boy, yes, yes, SUCH a sweet dog! He is!—“

A red-faced woman came huffing and puffing out of the house, a hunting rifle in her arms. She dropped the gun.

“Heather?”

Heather set down Ripper as the woman approached, slowly. “Auntie Marge…?”

Honestly, she wasn’t sure what to think. If her aunt would blame her for her family’s death.

Her aunt approached her unsteadily, and embraced her. Hard.

And yeah, there might have been crying and feels, but it only distracted them for a moment before they heard the distinct sound of a woman yowling. They parted, and Marge started laughing, that great belly-shaking laugh no one had but Dad and Aunt Marge. Heather wiped the water from her eyes to see Miranda climbed halfway up the tree, a dog hanging off her pantleg, while Rupert
seemed to be locked in a staring contest with several others.

“No need to be frightened, darn dogs are more scared of you than you are of them,” she chortled. “Only attack if you’re nervous, ’cause it spooks them. Git down, you—“

“Rippy,” Heather scolded. The creature currently clinging to Miranda’s pantleg slacked its jaws and came to the ground. Heather picked him up. “Good boy. You leave Mirandy alone. She’s a friend,” she emphasized. “You can come down now, Miranda. The dogs aren’t going to go postal on you with Auntie Marge here.”

Well. Probably not.

“Those aren’t dogs.” It was the most words Miranda had ever said at once in the week Heather’d known her.

“Nope, they aren’t. Not regular dogs, ennyhow,” Marge agreed. “These here are one-hundred percent pure bulldog, bred for show. Never find a better companion animal anywhere. I’ll have you feed ‘em inside—they’ll love you then. You there—stop staring at ‘em, it scares them.”

Rupert’s expressions were subtle, but she was sure he was gaping. Nevertheless, he followed her in. Miranda stayed in the sanctuary of the tree.

Heather wondered if she had cynophobia. Wouldn’t that be fun when Sirius—
--her mind shuttered at the thought.

Was Sirius even alive?

“Sit. Have some tea. You and your man—“

“Rupert,” her bodyguard provided.

“Rupert. That’s a proper English name. You aren’t from around here though, are you?” Marge said suddenly.

“Auntie—“ Heather said with some exasperation.

“I’m afraid my father was foreign, but my mother was pure English and raised me here,” Rupert lied smoothly, smiling.

“Well,” Marge sniffed. “I suppose we can’t all be so fortunate as to descend from real British stock, can we?”

“Auntie!”

“There, there, the boy isn’t denying it. Now,” she said, setting the kettle to boil and sitting her expansive body into an equally expansive armchair. “Where have you been? Vernon and Petunia, and Dudley—they wouldn’t let me see the bodies even. It was a closed casket funeral.” The strangeness of her dead niece showing up on her doorstep seemed to have caught up with her. “They said—said Pet’ was raped before she was killed. They all said you were dead—what happened?” her face suddenly looked accusative. “Was it something to do with that gang your parents were involved in?”

“No,” Heather protested, and then paused. None of them would have died if it hadn’t been for her, but she couldn’t stand Aunt Marge’s rejection, on top of everything else. But lying to her aunt—if
the Death Eaters did come after her, didn’t she need to know what she was up against? “Yes…” she revised, and then, finally, “yes. It was. I’m so sorry, I didn’t know it was going to happen, I didn’t know anything, I would have died for them if I could have, I tried to, but they held me down and made me watch—”

She was crying again, dammit. Angrily, she swiped the water from her eyes.

Marge was silent.

“Who the fuck did this,” she asked flatly, feeling for the rifle next to her. “Did they hurt you too?”

Heather drew in a breath. “Yes. They did.”

How much to tell her?

“And they’re not a gang. They’re terrorists. My parents actually worked undercover in a division of the government that dealt with them,” she decided. It was a fair description of Auror work, anyways, and would explain why no one could have told Aunt Marge what they really did. “They caused enough damage to the opposition that they were hunted down. When the group recently became active again, they decided to take revenge by hunting me down. Dad tried to fight them off, but he couldn’t.”

“And the past year?”

“They took me. I only got rescued recently.”

Aunt Marge set down her teacup with a clatter. “A YEAR!” she stormed. “A whole bloody effing year?”

“Auntie—”

“That’s how long they take to get my niece out of the hands of a bunch of perverted lunatics—”

“Auntie—”

“Do they have them in custody? They’d better give them the death penalty—”

“No, they don’t, but—“

“I’ll talk to my MP about this, I will—“

“Aunt Marge!”

Her aunt quieted abruptly.

Hang it all to hell. Whether Marge would like her or not after this, lies weren’t going to work on her.

And as for the wizards – whoever made that Statute of Secrecy could shove it up their arse. It wasn’t protecting the people who most needed protection. She drew her wand from her purse. Rupert started.

“Milady—”

She fixed him with a tart look, and he stood down.

“What are you about—“
She pointed the wand at a truly ugly figurine Colonel Fubster had bought Aunt Marge years ago, one that had resisted everyone’s attempts to shatter it ‘by accident’.

“Rucina.”

It ground to dust in the space between two breaths.

Marge stared.

“What kind of gun is that?”

“Not a gun, Auntie,” Heather told her. “A wand.” She passed it over to her aunt, who examined it with equal parts interest and trepidation, before she lifted it and pointed it at a salt and pepper shaker. “You can’t use it,” she said, almost apologetically. “At least, I don’t think so. They say you have to be a witch.”

Marge dropped the wand. It clattered its way indignantly back to Heather’s hand. “A witch! You were into all that superstition for awhile—” she shook her head, and went to the lintel, to sift the dust of the old figurine through her hands. She turned back.

“A witch?”

“Yes. It’s bad. There’s hundreds of them. Mostly they avoid regular people now, but there’s some very, very bad ones that have been hunting and killing people for years. Missing persons? Freak accidents? It’s their fault.” Marge breathed deeply, felt for a chair.

“And you—“

“They took me. They took me, and they killed everyone I knew, and they – they hurt me,” she faltered.

“And no one can do anything?”

“I guess the government’s trying, but they can’t tell everyone. There would be a mass panic. Lynchings. Regular people couldn’t catch these things – they can get in your head. Shapeshift.” Marge began hyperventilating.

“Auntie—“ Heather moved to her, but she held up a hand.

“No,” she said. “No. Why did you tell me this?”

“Because,” Heather said steadily. “They might come for you. I need to set up wards. I need you to be on the lookout, for anything—unusual. I need you to be safe—“ her voice broke. “You’re all I’ve got left.”

Marge had taken it about as well as could be expected, Heather supposed. She hadn’t had another heart attack, hadn’t demanded Heather leave at once, and hadn’t phoned up her local MP to blast him over his latest mismanagement.

That she and Colonel Fubster had worked their way through half their winerack while Heather and her bodyguards set up the wards was pretty much the best possible outcome.
Professor Garcia-Reyes’ class was notable in two aspects: first, it was one of the few classes at the university where the professor neither cared nor pretended to care if you passed. Second, this complete disinterest in teaching, when combined with the monotony of his voice, ensured even the most avid students caught up on their sleep during class – if they attended at all.

It was during one such lecture on genetic drift – a simple concept if you read the textbook, and a terribly dull, complex one if you actually put out the effort to listen to the prof—that the double doors of the amphitheatre slammed open, startling some students halfway out of their seats.

A couple of girls in the back shrieked giddily, less out of fear than at the anticipation of something interesting actually happening for once. Four men, all dressed in long yellow and black robes, smashed into the room, looking about.

Professor Garcia-Reyes set down his chalk irritably and adjusted his spectacles.

“What is this about?”

“Where’s Lady Potter?”

The Professor stared. “Theatre studies is down the hall. You’re interrupting lecture time.” He turned dismissively to the board, only for the man in the lead to grab him by the shoulder.

“We were told by the Registrar’s Office she would be here.”

“If she is, I wouldn’t know about it,” he said irritably. “Please do not touch me.”

The man looked him over, and drew his wand. “Imper—“

A small clay disk flew over the first two rows and between the wand and the Professor, pulling a line two feet wide of blue light in its wake, before shattering against the board.

“What is the meaning of—“

Hermione, sensing the way the wind was blowing, excused herself as she squeezed past the seated students in their aisle. Heather, having had enough of decorum after a f**kload of etiquette lessons earlier that day, hopped the row of seats ahead of her. Thankfully, she’d already packed up her rucksack. “My apologies, professor. Larping group. Gentlemen, let’s take it outside, shall we? No one else needs to hear about this.”

“Of course,” the leader said, moving to take her by the arm – but Rupert was one step ahead of him and nonchalantly elbowed him aside. The foyer, thank the gods, was mostly deserted.

“What in the Nine Hells are you doing here?” Heather snapped.
The leader blinked. This did not look like Lady Potter. Granted, he’d heard of her eccentricities, but even the oddest ladies of Noble Houses Did Not dress up like common muggles in trousers and caps with their hair in pigtails. But he was nothing if not composed.

“My lord Sedgwick desires you to accompany me back to his estate, in order to discuss the trespass you have recently made on his lands and the injuries your Muggle retainers have dealt upon his men.”

“Trespass?” she asked, for once drawing a blank.

“You set up wards in his territory,” he clarified.

Recognition abruptly dawned in her face. “I set up wards on a private property near Thetford. He does not own that private property.”

“Nevertheless, it is recognized as his territory—“

“By whom?” she snapped. “Lodge a complaint with the Ministry of Magic if there’s a problem. Don’t come barging into my life with this nonsense.” She paused. “Unless, of course, the Ministry of Magic doesn’t recognize it as a problem?”

“Lord Sedgwick recognizes it as a problem, and therefore it is one. You will accompany me back to the Manor—“

He laid his right hand on her sweater sleeve. The sleeve abruptly unravelled and the yarn bound his fingers fast together. He made the mistake of bringing that hand to his waist as he reached for his wand with his left, and the yarn tangled itself about his belt as well. His companion moved to grab her—

-- and suddenly Rupert was in motion. The man who’d reached for her screamed suddenly as he caught him in an armlock and twisted, and there was a horrible grinding noise as the shoulder dislocated. She made a sign and the leader’s wand snapped suddenly. A third caught her by the back though, and she felt the beginning of an apparition, before he fell backwards. She rolled off him and saw Hermione. The fourth was about to make his getaway when Hermione snapped off a curse and he fell stiff as a plank to the floor.

Rupert talked. It sounded as though his voice was coming from a great distance away.

“… Shoddy. Should have expected it. Why I didn’t think of checking if Marge’s house was in anyone’s territory before we called attention to it…”

She practised her breathing, not trusting herself to speak just yet. Screw it. “Territory?” she asked uneasily, opening her rucksack. Her laptop was still intact. She breathed a sigh of relief before remembering she was rich enough to buy as many as she liked.

“It’s primitive,” Hermione spat. “The Houses – they’re like feuding tribes. They all have territories. They muck about with Muggle affairs. Of course it’s not recognized by the Ministry – we’ve been fighting to abolish that system since the 1400s – but some of these monsters predate the Magna Carta, and do you think a law formed in this millennium can put them to heel?” She conjured extra ropes and bound the last of the assailants. “So long as they’re not slaughtering Muggles outright, they let those backroad lords do as pleases them.”

“And this Sedgewick is one of those ‘lords’.”

“It would seem so,” Rupert nudged one of the bound men with his toe. “My Lady, we should bring these men into our custody before the Ministry arrives.”
“Can’t the Ministry handle it?” The last thing she wanted to deal with was captives. Talk about unwelcome houseguests.

“Can they? Yes. Should they?” He evaluated her. “They approached you outside of Ministry jurisdiction and attempted to abduct you, and very nearly succeeded. Should you wish to deter others from similar attempts, allowing the Ministry to ‘handle’ the situation will not be effective.” She thought longingly of the days when she took the competence of law enforcement for granted.

“Send a letter to the Ministry anyways. We’ll hold them until the Aurors can deal with them, and then see if the Ministry doesn’t have an arbiter or something for this.” Rupert frowned heavily, but said nothing, and Heather braced herself. If the man wasn’t saying anything now, it meant he was waiting to co-opt Severus for a joint effort to dissuade her. “Where will we keep them though?”

“The Order will—” Hermione started, and Heather shook her head.

“No. They attacked me, they’re mine. Which property is best suited to hold them, R?”

“Potter Manor, of course.”

She frowned. “In the guest bedrooms?”

Hermione snorted. “In the dungeons,” Rupert said with perfect seriousness.

“Does Potter Manor even have those?”

“My Lady. Every House has a dungeon.”

Every House might have a dungeon, but she doubted any were so reluctant to disclose its location as Potter Manor. Over the next day, they checked and triple-checked the basement for a sub-basement, rummaged through the root cellar, turned over every rock in the garden to check for trapdoors and very nearly drained the pond before Severus called them up to the dusty Solarium.

“This is a dungeon,” she said dubiously, looking at the sun shining through the dusty panes of glass.

“The Potters were strong believers in white magic. There are a number of truth spells that rely on natural illumination to ‘bring things to light’, as it were.”

“Uh huh. And if that failed, I suppose they could threaten any dark creatures with a fatal suntan?”

Snape looked uncomfortable. “Indeed, that could be effective in some cases…”


He needed no second urging. She followed him down the stairs, and he stopped her on the landing.

“One thing to consider before you speak to our guests.” He pulled a stiff parchment closed with the Ministry seal from his robes. She broke the seal between her fingers and skimmed the uneven handwriting.

Lady Heather Potter,

As per the Limitations on State Interference, defined in the Treaty of Sheffield, 1400 (Articles 1.2 and 3.56), the Ministry does not interfere with disputes between private parties. If it would please you to see the original documents outlining these rules, the Ministry invites you to visit The Hall of Records (Level 5 of the Ministry, London, U.K.).
“Fuck,” she swore. “How the hell can anyone read this shit?” She looked up. Severus wasn’t trying to read over her shoulder and didn’t look in the least surprised at her reaction. “Some fucking flunky sent me back a fucking form-letter.” She smashed her fist against the wall.

Severus regarded her calmly. “Count yourself lucky that you received a reply in a timely fashion. Normally messages to the Ministry stack up in a slush pile on a desk for a couple years until some intern accidentally tips them into the shredder. As a Lady, they’re giving you the courtesy of a quick response.”

“And doing nothing.”

“The Dark Lord’s assaults on the Ministry do not allow them to do otherwise. They’ll not spare the resources to assist one House that has already refused to participate in this war, only to incur retaliation from another. Mark me. The Dark Lord is only considered the most dangerous man in our world only because he is the most active one.” He grasped her shoulder. “There are many, many terrible things in our world, Heather. *Draco dormiens nunquam titillandus*.”

She stared back into his serious black eyes.

“Give that advice to Sedgwick when we see him.”

She turned and stormed down the stairway to the kitchen, where they’d secured their ‘guests’, prepared to vent her rage by cursing those racists with every trick Bella had taught her, only to stop dead in the doorway. The scene before her was so at odds with her mood that she didn’t know how to respond. She gaped.

“Why are we stopping?”

Speechless, she stepped aside so he could see.

“Misters Sedgywix and Thimbledown should be eating, yes they should!”

“Bad guest! Bad! Bad guest dribbles on Lady Mistress’ rugs, bad…”

“Eat! Eat! Eat!” chanted the house-elf triplets. Two of them had climbed up on a burly man’s shoulders, while one was teething on his ear. Hermione, having become a frequent guest at the Manor in spite of her ties to the Order, made the mistake of laughing and chewing at the same time, and ended up snorting milk out her nose.

It was a fact of Riddle Manor that house-elves were to be neither heard nor seen, largely because any that broke this rule were never heard from or seen again – except, perhaps, with their heads on a wall. However oppressive and barbaric Heather might have once found this practice, seeing the pandemonium in the kitchen gave her an instant sympathy for the Death Eaters, as well as a migraine. The house-elves here, left to their own devices during the senior Potters’ lives and even more so upon their deaths, were quite enthusiastic to serve their new Mistress, and often did so in ways that defied expectations.

For example: She hadn’t expected old Moggie to be sitting on the bound prisoner’s lap, stuffing gingerbread in the man’s mouth while he choked around it. Flippit helpfully threw a glass of milk in the man’s face. He sputtered.

Mustn’t laugh.
“Have you had enough yet?” she asked the leader archly, holding up a hand to forestall further force-feeding. “There’s more gingerbread where that came from.”

He chewed furiously and gagged. “Lor’ Sedgewick will ‘ear of ‘is—“

“I should hope so. The famed Potter hospitality must be spoken of. Moggie, be a dear and fetch more gingerbread—“

“No, no—“ he spat. Heather wrinkled her nose in disgust. “Anything but that.”

“Why?” she asked archly, exchanging a glance with Severus over their heads. The man plainly would have preferred to rip the information out of their heads and have done, but she needed to learn, and for that, he would have patience. “Don’t you know it’s an insult to refuse seconds?” Moggie stood by eagerly, while the triplets eagerly piled up another tray of fresh gingerbread on her plate. She idly helped herself to one.

“The gardens need cleaning,” she admonished the house-elves. “Please plant some roses around the perimeter of the property.” There. That would keep the little nuisances busy for a good while, and it wasn’t as though they could get into trouble tidying up the yard. Moggie deposited the gingerbread in her hands and kissed her wrinkled old face to Heather’s hand, and trooped outside. She faced her ‘guests’.

“Allow me to explain your position. I am certain Lord Sedgwick in no way desired to insult me by attacking my family and will graciously accept responsibility for their welfare as guardian of the lands in which they’ve established themselves. For this reason, I currently await his gratitude for having helped secure the safety of those under our mutual protection by having erected wards.”

Their leader laughed. “You think old Earl Sedgwick is going to just thank you for having trespassed? The Dark Lord’s slut? Mark me, bitch, he’ll raze your family’s house to the ground and harvest their corpses. He’ll have your Master come and collect you. He’s already sent complaints to the Dark Lord.”

Hermione snarled and drew her wand, but stopped short.

Heather laughed.

It surprised her as much as it did everyone else.

“You’re remarkably stupid,” she said, conversationally. “You must feel safe here, to give such egregious insult to me in my own home.”

He snorted and ignored her.

“Hermione, please leave the room,” she asked her friend gently.

“I would like to stay and watch.”

“I would hate to show you something you’d be compelled to report back to your Master.”

Hermione made a face. It wasn’t quite a smile nor quite a grimace.

“Dumbledore is a powerful Lord and a good man, which is exactly why he couldn’t understand this, and why I won’t be telling him.”

And neither of them were men, nor had they been invulnerable, which was exactly why they were
friends. Heather turned back to the man. “Look me in the eye, please.”

He rolled his eyes and did so, with the air of humoring her. Before he could move, she grasped his chin in one hand and a dinner knife in the other. He recoiled.

“How still,” she murmured, gentle as a mother. “I’d rather not accidentally cut out your eye.”

A quick flourish of the blade, and it was done. Rivulets of blood dripped down his face.

“How very muggle,” he sneered weakly.

“How very uneducated of you,” she responded. Her hands closed on his temples. “Avata.”

His mind opened unto hers, and oh, wasn’t this interesting. The white wizards connected to the Resistance – Order Members and Aurors, Ministry Officials and minor dignitaries, treated her with cautious respect bordering on fear. The Death Eaters saw her as a kind of junior colleague. But to this man, and apparently everyone he knew, she was a whore.

In his mind, she was barely better than a squib, a white witch so weak Dumbledore had discarded her to the Muggles, rather than risk the properties of his greatest supporters falling to someone so lacking in the power to defend them. The Dark Lord had taken her and given her to his Death Eaters by way of pissing on the grave of James Potter, and the treacherous little slut had gone along with it. Finally, Voldemort had discarded her and some minor Death Eater must have helped her reacquire her ancestral properties, but it wasn’t as though the Sedgwicks were in any risk of retaliation from a Death Eater for attacking the muggle pets of a squib mistress. Earl Sedgwick could sell the Muggles back to the Potter girl for the privilege of bedding her as he pleased, and maybe get a look at the Potter Grimoires at the same time.

Except, and his eyes were wide with realization (at last), a squib could not have opened his mind in this way.

“Exactly,” she confirmed maliciously.

She turned and paced about the kitchen. “I’d thought to deal gently with you,” she said, talking as much to herself as to him. “The muggles who taught me were civilized, you understand? Maybe because it’s because they recognize a kind of mutual vulnerability. They wouldn’t abduct and rape someone because they wouldn’t enjoy the same thing happening to them.” Sedgwick was sweating now.

“Except you purebloods have been immune to the tragedies you visit on your victims for centuries now, haven’t you? Because you’re oh so very careful to only exploit the weak and to respect the powerful. Because it’s not human nature to respect people because they deserve it—we respect people, habitually, because we have to. And the moment when there are no consequences for doing otherwise – well.

“So one of your people will go to the Earl Sedgewick and explain to him that I am in no way weak or a white witch. I was the Dark Lord’s hostage. I believe we have a difference of opinion in what that means.” She drew Sedgewick’s head up again, with hands soft as a lover’s. “Let me clarify for you.”

She’d have preferred, almost, to cruciate him. But while Aunt Marge was under siege, she daren’t risk injuring one of the Earl’s men.

So instead, she dredged up the memory of when she’d been forced to torture the werewolf under
Voldemort’s supervision, and hammered it into the forefront of his mind to play on loop. His breathing quickened and he stared at her in glassy-eyed fear.

“It will stop in about a few minutes or so. But every time to try to take a woman without her consent, every time you attack the defenseless, this will be all you see.” Let him try to fight with her visions clouding his sight. He’d not last a minute against a muggle with a shotgun. She’d have liked to send him back to his father in that state, but a son would have higher value as a hostage than a random servitor. She sized up the men, picked the weakest one, and kicked his chair to the counter. He banged his head and cursed.

“You,” she nodded her head to Rupert, who loosed the man from the chair while still keeping his hands tied. She nabbed a few pieces of parchment. Severus stole them out of her hands. She frowned at his doing so, but he was right. Her dribbly calligraphy wouldn’t at all send the right message to the kind of idiot purebloods who saw precise penmanship and other signs of a magical upbringing as hallmarks of power. As if that were the only way to achieve it. She wondered if the Dark Lord, half-blooded himself, wasn’t just as disgusted with pureblood egos as she was. If he didn’t brand them like animals out of spite as much as possession.

“You will bring these letters to Earl Sedgwick, and to his wife.” Severus had needed no direction on the first letter, but he looked up askance to her for the second. She thought of what she’d seen in Sedgwick’s mind and dictated. “Tell Mary Greystoke-Sedgwick that I am willing and capable of enabling her to conceive a child.” Sedgwick’s lackluster heir goggled. “Tell her that, if her husband truly desires an heir that can inherit the Greystoke fortunes, he must release all the women in his household that desire it and never touch them again, and pay for their upkeep for the next five years or until such time as they can support themselves. And he must protect my family as well as his own.”

She drew her wand from her pocket, and approached him. “And to be sure you will do this—” she cut his bonds and grabbed his left arm, and set the burning tip of the ebony wand to it. “Morsmordre.”

He screamed. Hermione, who’d observed quietly to this point, breathed in sharply. Heather felt her magic eating into his, imagined it entwining with his in the way the parasitic filaments of a fungus grow on a plant. His screams diminished to heaving breaths, and she could feel his mark at the edge of her consciousness.

Unwillingly taken, the Mark usually only lasted a couple of days – she’d sunk enough power into this spell that she expected it would stay for about a week. A long enough time for him to report to his masters, or enable her to run him down if he ran. Rupert escorted him to the door.

“Take them down to the basement,” she waved a hand, getting up. “But the dungeons are upstairs,” protested one of the houseguards.

“I’m reclaiming the dungeons as an indoor garden and tanning salon.” She thought for a moment. “And possibly pool and deck. Miranda, do you know any contractors who could tell me if it’s possible to put a pool on my roof?”

“I’ll look into it, my lady,” she agreed. Of course she did. In spite of Miranda’s seeming reluctance out of principle to enjoy anything, Heather suspected the washed-up old Auror was secretly enjoying the privileges associated with being the personal guard/companion of the Potter heiress. At least, it wasn’t Heather taperecording all the episodes of ‘Downton Abbey’ on the television they’d juryrigged to run in the rec room, and someone named ‘CrplM’ was rocking the top record for MarioCarts on the household gamebox.
“Anything else?”

She grimaced and threw herself down on the comfortable, Muggle chair she’d bought not a day after trying to sit in the awful hardwood settees in the Manor’s parlor. The portraits hadn’t yet forgiven her for repurposing the space as a rec room and installing a foosball table and treadmill. She poured herself a whiskey from the decanter at the table beside her.

“Glacio,” Severus murmured, tapping the side of her glass with his wand. The glass frosted over.

“Cheers,” she said thankfully. You could do miraculous things with runes, but who’d waste that kind of energy on cooling their alcohol? She downed her drink and resolved to learn that Chilling Charm ASAP.

“The kind of pureblood Sedgwick is would sooner hesitate to strangle a peacock than kill a Muggle. Even if he decides I’m a match for his power, he could just kill her out of spite. I want to evacuate Marge.”

“And how do you propose to do that?”

She frowned. “That’s the thing. I want to evacuate her, but I’m not sure that’s the best course of action. If it was just the fact we’d have to knock her out before I’d convince her to abandon her home, I’d be all for it, but that’s not it. If we take Marge away, we’re acknowledging Sedgwick as a threat. And with the message I’ve just sent to him, he could frame a rescue mission as suggestive of a lack of confidence in his honor or whatever. The only thing we can do is wait it out.”

“Not the only thing,” Severus murmured, an idea occurring to him. “If you’re so concerned about her safety, I could think of a few people who could only be helped by the chance to spill some blood.”

“And I could think of some other people who would be willing to help break a dark lord’s hold on the land,” Hermione offered meaningfully. Heather carefully ignored her. A few months wasn’t long enough to forgive him for trying to kill her. A few months wasn’t long enough to forgive this world anything it had done.

“I’d thought of launching an assault, but we don’t know what kind of resources he has, and it’s on his land. Attacking a wizard in their own home is suicide.”

“In their home, yes. That land though? He doesn’t live there. It doesn’t belong to him. It doesn’t belong to anyone. Except—”

He stopped.

“What?” she demanded.

He remained stubbornly silent. She thought furiously.

“The land. There’s ley lines there, aren’t there?”

“There’s a ley line passing through, between the actual manor around Castle Hill and Devil’s Ditch in Garboldisham,” Hermione pointed out.

Her mouth opened in a silent ‘O’. “His Manor probably sits on the node itself, and would probably still be impenetrable… but if I could key into the leys...”

“If you could key into the leys, you’d probably alert the Dark Lord and half the Death Eaters to your location, and I’d give it an hour before they retrieved you. You’re not going on this.”
“And why not?” she demanded.

Severus got up and poured himself a whiskey.

“Besides the high likelihood of recapture?” Severus fixed her coolly. “It’s dangerous. The Muggles have a number of legends around that area, and legends usually conceal truths of one kind or another.”

“It can’t be worse than Riddle Manor,” she said flatly.

Severus was quiet. Again, she fumed silently, he wasn’t telling her everything. She stared at him. He stared back.

“Tell me, or next time I get drunk, I’m doing it in your quarters.”

His breath hissed out between his teeth. “The Dark Lord might be the most powerful dark wizard alive, but he was kind to you as he knew how to be. Your life, at least, is never in danger from him, and you knew it. Now?” his lips twisted at the irony. “These people wouldn’t waste the time to hurt you. They’d kill you and be done with it. And you, milady, couldn’t stop them.”

She opened her mouth to retort, paused to consider.

He was probably right. Mostly right.

“I’ve brought down men before. I’m at least as able as Hermione.”

Hermione looked at the floor.

“Okay, I deplete my magical reserves right away, but if I’ve time to prepare artifacts – “

“There isn’t time to prepare artifacts. Not ones that will cover every possible contingency.” He laid his hand on her arm. “Ward the House. Lay down every trap you can. I promise you, we’ll need them. But as for fighting in the field—“

“I’ll avoid fighting as much as possible, but I’m coming. Marge trusts me, and she’s like as not to blow your heads off.”

Severus huffed and massaged his temples, and by that, Heather understood she’d won.

“Tomorrow night then.”

Severus raised his glass to hers. “Tomorrow night.”

They drank deep. She remembered something.

“Oh, and Severus? Where would one go to find a magical snake in London?”

In the end, it turns out she needn’t have asked.

That night, she slept uneasily, dreaming of smoke and ash and pain. She breathed a stuttering breath, breathed out dust. She opened her eyes, gritty with cinders, her flesh wrinkled and coarse as the scars of a burn victim. She was ugly and her lungs stung with the effort of ventilation and she could barely move, but she was alive.

A woman came to her and swathed her like a child and slept beside her bed. Others came to change her dressings. She was helpless and bedridden and bored, and abhorred it. She suckled at Nagini’s
fangs and cut her legs on the edge. She ate the organs of her enemies. There were sacrifices. Slowly, she shed her skin and emerged, pale and bald as a baby.

In all her helplessness, there had been this one escape, this other mind. It was closed to him during his other self’s waking hours, but while she dreamed, he dreamed with her. Their minds and identities blurred and merged. She had less disgust and resentment for him now than resignation. Heather was one of those rare people who are incapable of self-hatred. The Dark Lord was as close to her as herself, therefore she could not hate him. She accepted his incursions on her dreamscape as a matter of course.

And in the morning, at the edge of the Potter wards, sat a raven with a package for Heather Potter. Nestled inside it was a single bright and shining egg.

And Severus, Hermione, and Rupert were gone.
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

Warning: Some swearing, discussion of rape, and wizards are racist, misogynistic douchebags.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The night before

She slept with the window open. Not because it was warm for October, though it was, and not because she liked to hear the hushed sway of the elm branches against her window or the singing of unlikely nightjars, though she did. She slept with the window open as a gesture of defiance against the things that go bump in the night, a dead man, her own memory.

Come and take me, if you dare.

Tonight though, she didn’t sleep. And what a waste. Her bed was thick and comfortable and piled high with duvets, her pillows plumped with goosedown, and she was wearing a new nightshirt – a comfortably Muggle shirt, free of any of the itching frills on a witch’s nightgown. A cat was sleeping on the shelf below the window, and moonlight slid through the curtains onto her bed.

It was the most peaceful place she’d slept in since she’d left home, that last time.

So Hermione Granger didn’t trust peace. It was always interrupted.

Ironically, if she’d relaxed and gone straight to bed, she could have foregone the ‘interruption’. As it was, she was waiting for it, impatient for it, and unsurprised when she heard the scrape of steps on the pavement stones.

She swung herself out of bed silently and peered out the window. Two figures dressed in black moved away from the House. She recognized the Professor’s voluminous cloak, the same as he wore back from Death Eater raids. The dark figure beside him must be a houseguard. Maybe they couldn’t sleep either.

But no. They didn’t meander about the garden like begrudging insomniacs. Their stride and their silence bespoke purpose. If it had just been the Professor, she’d have passed it off for another mysterious necessity – a Death Eater meeting, a hunt, a contact with a back-alley informant. The guards never went unless he expected trouble he couldn’t handle himself though. Which meant…

She hoisted herself through the window and jumped to the nearest branch likely to hold her weight, and climbed to the ground, before slipping up behind the figures.

“Miss. Granger. You’re awake.” Snape’s eyes flickered to the windows.

They were dark. Whatever the Dark Lord’s attentions had made of Heather Potter, she still slept through the night.

“You’re going to get Aunt Marge,” she told them. “I’m coming.”
Snape knew better than to argue. “Fine.”

She followed.

“Why did you leave Heather behind?”

“The same reasons I gave her earlier.”

“And you really expect trouble?”

His eyes glinted with cool amusement in the dark of his hood. “Whatever other obligations he may have, a pureblood will always make time for his toys, or those who have slighted him.” As I’m sure you know, went unsaid.

They passed through the wards. Snape hissed as they did so. Even with Heather’s blood in his veins and her consent, the House still hated him.

The trees parted, and Rupert apparated them to Marge Dursley’s House. It took Hermione a moment to recover from the disorientation of apparating, and regain her bearings. When she did, she took a step backwards.

There, leaning against the fence as though waiting for them, was a monstrosity.

It was – not a black mist. A cloud of congealed blood, dispersed into the shape of a man. Its surface writhed and flowed, and it stank, the rotting meat smell of old sanitary napkins. It moved with the sick sound of tearing flesh.

Snape moved past her, unalarmed. She grabbed his arm to hold him back, he shook her off.

“You can’t think to fight this thing!” She fumbled for her wand. The thing’s chuckle was the gurgle of a cut throat.

“Hear that, Snivellus? Still need the ladies to fight your battles for you, even after all this time.”

“Even after all this time, you show no signs of maturity.” Snape turned to her. “Put your wand away, girl. Miss. Granger,” he paused, “meet the current Lord Black, godfather to your friend Lady Potter. Black, this is Hermione Granger.”

The mess of blood buckled down, and it took her a moment to realize it was bowing. “Enchanté, Miss. Granger. I would kiss your hand –“

“Except she, and everyone present, would prefer you kept your lips to yourself.” Severus regarded Black speculatively, as though to ask whether the thing even had lips. “Are they home?”

“They took her aunt,” it gurgled. “There were a half dozen of Sedgewick’s halfblood brats and arsmen out here, trying to get at the man as well.”

“But the wards held, meaning that cursed stupid Muggle walked out on her own,” Severus grumbled. “Did you leave any of Sedgewick’s men alive?”

“Yessss.”

“Well then?”

A pair of red lights gleamed out of the bloody mess, and moved slowly towards each other, until Hermione realized it was a pair of eyes staring Snape down.
“I get to eat him afterwards.”

Snape sneered. “We will likely be fighting before this night is out. The blood is mine.”

“As if you don’t drink enough from my goddaughter—“

Snape didn’t deign to respond to that. They followed Black around back, to a cornfield where a man sprawled. His mouth was open, but no sound came out. It took Hermione a moment to realize that was because he’d screamed himself hoarse, and she couldn’t see his feet or hands because they weren’t there.

“Sloppy work,” Severus murmured, in his teaching voice. “You get more information by building a bond with the subject of interrogation and encouraging them to cooperate. At the very least, if you must torture, Black, you should do nothing irreparable to the subject until you have the information you seek. A man with nothing to lose cannot be bargained with.”

“I’d have tied him up, but, well…” it gestured fluidly to a rope that had dissolved in several places.

“I still have the taste of plastic in my mouth,” it grumbled.

“Figuratively speaking, of course,” Severus muttered, for no one could guess whether there was no mouth or many on Black. He hunkered down beside the man, and pulled his head up by the chin.

“Unfortunately, there is no time to do this gently. Legimens.”

It lasted a long moment, and then Snape jerked back, shuddering. Hermione felt bile rise in her throat as the man fell back, convulsing.

“Did you get what you needed?”

Snape nodded in some satisfaction, tilting the struggling man’s head to the side. “Grime’s Graves.”

She made a quick little slash with her wand, and the man fell limp. Snape looked cheated.

“He doesn’t need to be alive while you eat him,” she defended, before fleeing around the house.

Rupert found her before the gate to the drive, toeing her boot in the mud left from the Muggle watering system. He didn’t surprise her, of course. It would be the end of this war and another generation before any wizard could be startled again.

“I’m going to speak with Charles,” he told her, cutting his palm and pressing it to the gate. It creaked open. She dashed inside after him, and nearly got her coat stuck as it slammed shut behind him.

“Heather’s uncle.”

“The same. He should recognize me.” A chorus of yipping came from the house as Rupert approached and knocked twice on the door. For a long time, there was no answer. When there was, the door was opened only a crack. Over Rupert’s shoulder, she could see a pair of watery eyes set in a weathered face. The smell of alcohol saturated the air.

“Oh, so yer back.” He made to open the door, paused. “How’s I to know it’s really you?”

“Heather hid Ripper in her backpack and smuggled him home when she was 8, and even though Marge denies it up and down, she has so many dogs, it took her a week to realize he was gone. Meanwhile, Heather’s mother was allergic to dogs. She was sneezing all week and had no idea why.
Marge only realized last time we were here that Heather magicked her mother not to notice.”

The door opened. “Come in,” Charles Fubster hiccuped. He wiped at his eyes. “Yer here to get Marge.”

“Yes.”

“I’m going wit’ yeh.”

“You’re not—“ Rupert grasped her shoulder suddenly to silence her.

“How did they take her?”

“Dressed up like Heather. Couldn’t tell,” he hiccuped, “it weren’t her. We let the first few in, and they got her. Dragged her off. Marge, she fought like a hellcat,” he said, pride burning in his glance. “She stunned two of ‘em with just her fists! Took up boxing back when her nephew was at it. I unloaded I don’t know how many clips of lead into ‘em, and they kept coming. They took her to the north end of the house ‘fore they vanished. Tried to keep ‘em from dragging her off, but Marge—”

Rupert nodded in sympathy. “She shot you once they got her past the boundary of the wards. Probably saved your life.”

Hermione glanced down and saw suddenly that there was a bloodied bandage wrapped around his knee, and a belt above that. “We’ll need to get you to a hospital, quickly.”

“You can’t just wave your magic wands—“ Charles hiccuped.

“No,” Rupert said briefly. “No, I’m sorry. Magic doesn’t work that way.”

The old man coughed. “Makes me feel better to hear that. I’d been mad, thinking you lot might’ve cured my first wife of cancer.”

“I wish,” Rupert told him. The guard stared at his hands briefly. “It’s the wizard’s own magic that guides the healing, usually. Fixing something as delicate as a joint – well. It doesn’t seem fair, that something as crude and useless as killing is so easy and something as significant as saving a life can be so impossible.”

He paused. “Somulus.”

The old man slumped gently over in his chair and began to snore, while Hermione gaped. Rupert levitated the old man out of his seat and out the door.

“What are we doing? Isn’t this breaking the Statute of Secrecy—”

Severus reappeared from around the house. There was blood near his mouth, Hermione noted uncomfortably.

“When this war is over, I doubt there will be any Statute to speak of,” he said grimly. “Rupert?”

“The lady will be displeased if he incurs further injury from this event. The Grim and Severus can hardly walk into a hospital this evening, and of the two of us, my skills are the most redundant, seeing as I have little to no skill with white magic.” Rupert lifted the old man gently over his shoulder, rather than with his wand. “I’ll take him to the Muggle hospital and contract a private Healer to shadow his treatment there. Miss. Granger will have to accompany you from here.” He rummaged through his endless sack and handed her a broom and a map. “Gods watch, miss,” he said
with a halfbow, before he popped off.

Snape swung aside his own broom. “I detest broomsticks,” he said mildly, before pushing off.

"That’s because you’ve had one shoved up yer arse since—"

Snape hissed and shot sparks into the dark mist roiling behind them as they climbed. “Back off, Black, you’re almost on the end of my broom.”

"You wish," he rumbled, but the Grim moved back all the same.

“Miss. Granger, you lead, I’ll watch for threats. What do you know about Grimes’ Graves or Thetford?”

She glanced at the map and adjusted course, scanning the horizon as well as her memory. “Not much, sir. I haven’t gone since primary.”

“And? You wouldn’t have me believe Miss. Granger learnt nothing in primary?”

“The plain is pocked with depressions from Stone Age flint mining. The diggings have filled in over the years, but when I went, they’d excavated shafts, and they went down deep. At least ten metres, I’d say. Its unsettling appearance likely is why the Anglo-Saxons later named the site Grime’s Graves, since the medieval conquerors associated the god Grime, or Odin, with the devil.”

She felt his muscles tense from where he held her about the waist.

“Professor—Severus, there aren’t any old gods in Britain any more, are there? The oldest wizards still living in the United Kingdom are in their fifth century, the rest were killed in the wars.”

He didn’t answer. It was a short flight to Grimes’ Graves from Marge’s House near Thetford, and the humped fields were already visible in the moonlight.

“Severus?”

“Surely you’re intelligent enough to answer your own question, Hermione,” he snapped suddenly. “A nigh-immortal creature with the capacity to kill us all would of course strap himself into a suit and advertise his existence and whereabouts, in case anyone would like to collect his backtaxes for the last few millenia.”

The broom hitched and shuddered, and abruptly stopped in midair for a moment. Hermione shrieked. They freefell 10 feet before the broom righted itself. The dropped map fell into the roiling mist that was Sirius, and promptly dissolved.

"Ick. If it isn’t bad enough I have bugs flying in my mouth the whole way, have you ever tried eating paper? Disgusting stuff, and I’m sure the ink is toxic—"

“No more than your personality,” snarked Snape, his hands clinging about Hermione’s waist. “That’s the wards. Miss. Granger – Hermione?” He shook her gently.

It seemed to take an eternity for her to catch her breath again.

Like many wizarding wards, they had multiple purposes. And the foremost purpose for these, it would seem, was to hide space.

The dimpled fields were now miles away, and stretching long before them was a devil’s barren, white as chalk and pocked with black pits, deeper than you could see by the moonlight, dark as
space. She had the sudden terrible urge to drop something down and listen for the clink.

A darkness loured above some pits, curling up like chimney smoke. The darkness had eyes.

“I remembered something,” she said shakily.

He didn’t say anything, but she could imagine his eyebrow raising.

“The Anglo-Saxon word for Odin wasn’t Grime. It was Grim.”

The darkness heard, and it came.

Heather stared at the egg.

It was big as two man’s fists—as a heart, if Bella’s anatomy lessons had taught her anything—glossily metallic, and had that alarming sense of familiarity she associated with the Dark Lord and Nagini. She’d laid it in a basket, at the foot of her bed, and cautioned the elves not to disturb it. She trusted the Dark Lord this much: he wouldn’t send her anything dangerous, at least, not something dangerous to her. Which was to say she trusted him to have no concern for the safety of anyone other than his horcrux, and if a basilisk or cockatrice hatched and killed half the Cottage’s staff, well, he could hardly be blamed.

It was six in the morning.

At seven, she took a bath, combed her hair, and luxuriated in Muggle toiletries. Medieval as blood purists were, you could hardly expect them to run down to the ASDA and pick up a bundle of Cushelle.

At eight-thirty – for no proper bath lasted less than an hour at least – she wound her hair up in a towel and wound herself up in a thick, fluffy bathrobe, went to the swing on the backporch and curled up against the morning chill in a comforter.

It was about ten o’clock that growing bored, when a raven came, bearing a letter marked with the Greystoke seal.

She didn’t touch it. Wondering why everyone was lying abed so late, she went to rouse them.

The chambers were empty.

And it was about that time that Rupert came ‘round the corner, pale and grim to explain that Albus Dumbledore was waiting to see her.

“What does he want?”

“Supposedly, to offer aid,” Rupert told her noncommittally. He’d already filled her in on the events of the night before. She was furious that they’d left without her, and even more angry at their reasoning. If they’d had any doubt that she could control the leylines, they ought to have told her. Yet here she was, being left out of combat, while they protected her like the innocent she might have been.

“Why?” she demanded.

“For Hermione,” he told her. She snorted. The old man had been content enough to let Dolohov keep her for five years. Sensing her line of thought, Rupert responded, “The Australians are pressuring him. He and the Ministry also dislike the Sedgewicks, though they’ve been happy to let them be.”
‘That’s not all though.’

‘No,’ Rupert told her. ‘He probably also has wanted an opportunity to meet you for some time, and this was the first excuse he could manage while saving face.’

That, she could believe.

‘Check this for curses,’ she nodded at the Greystoke letter. Running his wand in an intricate series of movements she couldn’t hope to replicate without a few years of training (plus or minus a Timeturner), he checked it and removed a few minor charms to make her positively disposed towards the contents. She glanced over it.

‘She claims to be victimized by her husband and is pleading for my aid to overthrow him.’

Rupert snorted. Heather glanced sideways at him.

‘You don’t think there’s any chance she’s telling the truth?’

‘It’s highly improbable. Sedgewick’s previous fiancée died in unlikely circumstances, and then he found himself in debt to the Greystokes. Mary Greystoke’s Head of House—her mother, mind—demanded the marriage in repayment.’

‘So she assumes I’m naïve as well.’

Rupert was silent.

‘Very well. Perhaps the role I should play. It might set Dumbledore at ease anyways.’

She went to her room, Rupert following, and began rummaging through the garments she’d begun to embroider. A few lethal accessories later, and he looked her over with curiosity.

‘You look like a virgin sacrifice.’

‘That’s sort of the point,’ she told him, smoothing the hem of her long white robes. They had pale silver serpents twining the edges, and buried within the mazy pattern, bindrunes for deflection and repulsion, youth and beauty. There was no time to braid bindings into her hair, but she’d taken to wearing a few spellknots in it at all times. One day, she swore, she’d just dreadlock some heavy spells into her hair and leave it like that, but for now it was too noticeable. The Dark Lord commanded absolute secrecy of his followers, but she couldn’t be certain someone might have mentioned her brand of magic. The silver charms she wore, the carved ivory buttons of her vest—these would do.

She couldn’t tell what Rupert thought beyond what he’d expressed, and she couldn’t care. She walked out to the edge of the wards, and sitting just a foot outside them, on a lawnchair he’d conjured for himself, sipping a lemonade, was Dumbledore.

‘Ah, Miss. Potter,’ he said suddenly. ‘Do sit down,’ he gestured to a second chair he’d called into being, across from a patio table complete with umbrella, drink cooler, and snacks.

‘My apologies, but my household staff take my security rather seriously,’ she smiled thinly. Rupert snapped his fingers and had a word with the elves. A moment later, they’d set out a comfortable armchair for her, along with the nightstand from her bed and a bag of crisps. Gods, she loved house-elves.

‘One can’t be too careful these days,’ Dumbledore acknowledged. ‘I’m grieved at the situation we find ourselves in. Hermione is one of the best and brightest of my students, and while Severus and I
have had our differences, it’s terrible to think of them at Sedgewick’s mercy.”

She sipped at her apple cider. “So what are you going to do about it?”

He blinked. Was he so unused to taking action for his own cause?

“I’m sending the Australians to break in and get Hermione. We’ll try to rescue Severus at the same time. I was going to offer you sanctuary at Hogwarts until then – the wards at Potter Manor are very good, but with the Dark Lord still alive, and the Sedgewicks now against you, I feel that a safer location might be in your best interests.”

Maybe she’d played up her youth too much, if he really thought she was this ignorant.

“The Australians would get Hermione regardless, and she’d probably insist on Severus. That’s not something you’re doing. That’s something that’s going to happen, with or without your input,” she told him.

He didn’t look taken aback. So he’d known it was a front. Damn. If her wardrobe change hadn’t worked on Dumbledore, it might not work on her second target… but then, her next target didn’t share Dumbledore’s preferences, or those of any decent person, for that matter. Her childish wardrobe might distract him for an entirely different reason.

“Secondly, do you expect me to ignore the fact you tried to kill me the last time we met, and have since played a role in my public defamation?”

He was quiet, played with his glass, did not meet her eyes.

“I don’t have legilimency, you know. You can look me in the eye.”

“I doubt you have occlumency either,” he said carefully, his eyes meeting hers in a quick, blue flash. “I want you to be comfortable.”

She laughed, short and bitter, and he actually flinched. She started at that. That wasn’t the response of a callous general who used people for his own ends. Had she miscalculated, or was this also part of his act?

“Miss. Potter,” he laid out his hands, still not meeting her eyes. “I believe I should be honest with you. As honest as I am able.”

_That would be nice._

“Voldemort is an evil, beyond any dark lords this island has ever known. Not because he practises the dark arts, or because of his quest for immortality, or because of the murders and abuses his followers indulge in. I’ve seen dark lords come and pass who did these things. But never on his scale, and with his aim for conquest. The dark lords of this country—they’ve rooted themselves in their hollows and staked their claim in blood on those borders, but they’ve never stepped an inch outside their ancestral lands. Him? He learnt the worst of your muggle warlords. He’d build an Empire, and subject us all to his rule.”

“So as long as these dark lords kill and rape and torture in their own homes, it’s okay?” she snapped. “You say the murders never happened on this scale before—but they have. They’re happening right now. Maybe not at the hands of one Dark Lord, but at the hands of thousands. And you’re content to let them go on slaughtering and exploiting everyone weaker than them, just so long as they don’t destabilize the status quo while they’re at it?” She curled her lip. “The worst warlords, Dumbledore, aren’t the ones who start a war, but the ones who make those wars possible in the first place. Lord
Voldemort is incidental.”

It was as though this view of things had never occurred to Dumbledore. Which was likely the case given how narrow-minded and traditional wizards were.

“You make him sound like some kind of revolutionary.”

“Isn’t he?” She stared at him, not caring if he could see the earnestness in her eyes, and behind that, the grim cause of her honesty. ‘One of the things I learnt at Muggle college is that generational turnover is a key to progress. Old people grow impotent and die, young people discover new ideas and put them in practice. The Wizarding World hasn’t changed for millennia because you won’t let it change—because it’s personally inconvenient to you, or because you won’t handle the disruption it causes. Meanwhile, you’ve let injustice build on injustice and created a world where you can do anything if you’ve got enough magic—and you’re so surprised that my Lord exploited that?”

She flushed at the slip—my Lord—but Dumbledore had caught the reflection of her captivity in one glance and understood. Though, she recognized, that didn’t mean he wouldn’t use it against her.

“Lord Voldemort,” she continued, “was raised a Muggle. He has the same drive as them, a desire to see change within his lifetime. He just hasn’t realized on some level what every wizarding child grows up knowing—how long a lifetime can be,” she finished.

“Lady Potter, if you would ever consider an appointment as the History of Magic or Muggle Studies Professor, I would happily accept your application.”

She smiled tightly and waited for what he would say next.

“How Voldemort came about though, is not so important as the fact that he is here, now. And I will not see the safe refuges in this isle as bloody as the darkholds. After he is dead, perhaps we can confront the other dark lords, decide how to deal with the Muggles, help the Muggleborns integrate more easily into our society.

“But,” he opened his hands, “he cannot die. You know what a horcrux is.”

It wasn’t really a question. “Yes.”

“And that you are his. He cannot die while you live.”

A trace of annoyance flashed through her. She wasn’t his. They were made from the same clay. That was all. At the very least, she was no more (or less) his horcrux than he was hers.

“And every year he lives, thousands will die. I can’t ask you to give yourself up for their sake, but you’re shown that you care for these people here. Would you please consider it?”

She laughed. Virgin sacrifice was a bit too spot-on for her dress this evening.

“You say can’t ask me to give myself up, and then you do. More, you didn’t ask first—you tried to kill me, earlier. The Dark Lord took that curse and saved my life.”

Was it possible to owe a lifedebt to yourself? Surely not.

“You slander me to the media. What were you hoping for? A lynch mob? That some trigger-happy Auror would slip up and shoot me?” She stared at him. “The school knew where I lived growing up. You knew. Why didn’t you just kill me yourself, then, if you knew what I was?”
“I couldn’t be sure,” he confessed. “Beyond that, many in our world looked to you as a sign of hope in what was a very dark time, and news of your death would have destroyed them.”

“Would have destroyed you, you mean,” she translated dispassionately. “Well, I’m not planning to die. Not against this Sedgewick, and not later. If you’re honest about preventing people from dying – in the general sense, I mean, and not just at the hands of Lord Voldemort – I’d appreciate your help. Can I count on you to help me out? Without any backstabbing for the greater good?”

“You have no idea what you’re up against,” he told her. “I’ve been fighting for centuries, to destroy the evils that I could, and contain those I could not. Voldemort, he can be destroyed. What lies at Grimes Graves I have fought against, and lost against, time upon time. It—it can only be contained.”

She snorted. “What is It?”

He looked at her gravely over his half-moon spectacles. “A god.”

It was a testament to how well she was getting used to the Wizarding World that none of this surprised her anymore.

“Oh. Okay,” she swallowed. “A god.”

“The God Grim. He’s a manifestation of Odin.”

“Fucking ODIN is packed up away at Thetford and none of you could, I dunno, be bothered to make this public knowledge? Maybe like, put up road signs: ‘This Way: Evil Death God, Do Not Trespass’?”

“Odin was actually many wizards of the same lineage--some of whom are related to the Blacks--but yes. He’s at Thetford. And the knowledge that the Sedgewicks live there, and the feel of dark magic permeating the area, would ordinarily be warning enough.”

Unless, of course, you’d spent your first nine months in the Wizarding World locked in one of the Darkest places in Britain and didn’t really notice black magic as a result. She narrowed her eyes. “Never mind. Are you helping?”

“I won’t risk my life or ask anyone else to do the same against Grim,” his eyes were haunted and his face set. “I’ve lost too many people over the centuries going up against him. I’ll not weaken my forces on a fatal mission there and leave the isle for Voldemort.”

“But what if Voldemort were also going up against Grim?”

“He wouldn’t.”

“Not even to save his horcrux?” He stared at her, incredulity dawning in his eyes. “You said it yourself. It’s a suicide mission. But I have a chance at completing it—we have a chance—if you’re willing to help me. You could avenge all those soldiers who died years ago, give their deaths meaning.”

“Or feed him another generation of souls.” At her questioning look, he grimaced. “He’s literally a Grim, like Sirius, only more ancient. All Grims derive from his bloodline—hence the origin of the word. They derive their power from death.”

She blinked. “So Earl Sedgewick is a Grim a thousand times more massive and ancient than Sirius.”

“Earl Sedgewick is just the hand that feeds him, his many-times great grandchild, and granted, a
fairly powerful wizard in himself—but no more dangerous than Severus. Grims, thankfully, are rare.”

“How can they be killed?”

“They're vulnerable to bright light. The Graves have always been a dark place, physically and magically. Any light brought in would have to be magical.”

“Why not Muggle?”

He shrugged. “You could try it. I doubt any mundane powers would work.”

And there, again. That wizardly arrogance.

“How do they keep it dark, then?”

“It’s cemented into the wards of the place. There’s enough blood there that the wards can’t really be broken. Not without the consent of the Head of House or his heir, in any case. And even then, daylight will only drive the Grim underground.”

The Heir. The same weasely boy she had chained up in the basement. She wasn’t entirely sure of the laws that governed places as old as Grimes Graves, but she thought she knew of one or two ways to subvert them—neither of which Dumbledore would approve.

“If I could gain the consent of the heir and kill the Head of House, bringing down the wards, could you kill the Grim then?”

He stared at her flatly, his eyes gone dead.

“You have the Heir.”

She nodded.

“I suppose what you will do to him is for the greater good.”

She shrugged. “Could you? Could you swear it to me, swear to me that until I bring down the wards and see the survivors safely home, you will not, directly or indirectly, seek to harm or kill me? That you will do everything in your power to aid me in liberating Hermione, Severus, Sirius, and my aunt, up to and including fighting the Grim?”

A pause.

“I cannot guarantee the participation of the entire Order—I need to speak with them and ensure they understand what they will be facing if you succeed.” Another pause. “But yes. I will make an unbreakable vow to you. But before you swear to bring down the wards, I need to ensure you understand another thing as well.

“What you are planning to do to the Sedgewick Heir will change you. You aren’t entirely dark. Not yet. Everything you have done so far, you have done under coercion. If you decide of your own will to torture him into subservience, to force him to do something he doesn’t want—”

She goggled at him. "What is wrong with you wizards? Torture..." She shook her head. “Trust me, Mr. Dumbledore,” she said unhappily. “He’ll be doing exactly what he wants.”

The Vow made and sealed by Rupert, she returned to the Manor, stomach turning with what she
intended.

There were too many variables to what she was planning. Were her people even still alive? Would they still be alive, once she had what she needed from the Sedgewick Heir? Could she use the Heir’s power to force the wards to obey her? If she could, would she even be able to find them in time, before Sedgewick’s men captured her or the Grim came upon them?

Next to those concerns, everything else diminished. Her days were spent combing through the Potter library, looking for whatever sparse references she could find to blood magic, the Sedgewicks, the Grim, Odin in all his manifestations. When she exhausted these, she sent Rupert and one of the houseguards to the Ministry to find whatever information they could obtain legally—and then, to buy or steal whatever else might be available. Rupert never said a word to her, but she awoke one morning to find crumbling drafts of the Sedgewick castle on her desk and the Prophet’s headline warning everyone of the latest break-ins at the Ministry.

She adjusted the accounts to give him a raise.

A week in, and desperate for more information on old magic than the Potter library could—or would—provide, they tried to find Sirius’ house in London. He’d always been reluctant to take her there—“Because it’s a dump,” as he explained—and given that description, she’d never pushed. Now she wished she had. She’d have given anything to get her hands on a book on the relationship between wards and inheritance. Sirius’ house didn’t give a shit. They looked for it by midnights and walked widdershins in an ever-decreasing circle about the area where it should be, and found themselves lost in Muggle suburbia or spinning circles in abandoned parking lots. On their last try, she woke up twirling on the chrome edge of a 20 storey skyscraper, with no way down.

That, she decided, was the end of their attempts to find Grimmauld Place. Even if the house did contain the information they needed, it would do them no good to get killed off by the confounding curses shrouding the place.

Besides. She had one more source of information.

When she wasn’t researching, she was in the dungeons. They’d separated the Sedgewick Heir and his remaining man, moving the former into locked and warded room. She needed the Sedgewick Heir. The spare she would use only for information. She questioned him as gently as he could. For that mercy, he spat in her face, legilimanced her, and left her with a nosebleed and ringing headache.

She made a mess of him then. She cut open his skin and his mind with all the runes she could, to disable his mental shields, and tore his mind wide open. He couldn’t make any more sense of his own memories than she could, after that. When she asked Rupert to read the man, he’d glanced into their captive’s glassy eyes for a few seconds and then eyed her reproachfully.

“If it might be easier if you’d let me try them first,” he told her. She flushed with shame. When this was all over, she reconciled herself, she would either spend many, many hours learning legilimency proper, or learn more of the subtleties of runes than you could get from Encyclopedia Britannica and Netscape.

When she wasn’t studying, she came daily to see Aldon Sedgewick. She wore the respectable witch’s attire Voldemort had dressed her in—dark robes over darker skirts, hair tangled into something like celtic knotwork after hours of labour. She saw to it that his cell was lavishly furnished and he was given water for bathing. He ate the same meals she and her houseguard received. He was given books to read, mostly discarded histories of inner House conflicts.

Their meetings were always the same. An examination by Rupert confirmed she hadn’t entirely
shredded Aldon’s mind when she’d opened it, though he was suffering what amounted to a mild concussion, coupled with a lack of inhibition and PTSD. None of this seemed to have cowed him any, and she grudgingly respected the way he covered up his flinch by scowling mightily when she entered. He was lying on the bed, staring upwards.

“If you’re trying to escape by glaring a hole through my ceiling to climb out, don’t bother. If you hadn’t guessed from the dimensions, the whole room is lined with lead and sits inside a spell-sphere. Even if you can do wandless magic,” she curled her lip, “which I doubt, the sphere will simply short out whatever magic is used inside this room and feed it back into the wards.”

It applied to her as well. He wasn’t stupid enough not to realize that, she hoped.

He kept staring. She closed the door and arranged herself on a chair.

“How do you seriously do that all day?” Probably the answer was yes. The wards, like the Chains she had once worn, wouldn’t affect internalized magic – either in the form of her Parseltongue, or the mind magicks he was doubtless using right now to repair the damage she’d done days ago. She clicked her tongue. “I can’t believe Sedgewick actually made you heir if you’ve always looked so witless. Is he just that desperate, or is he holding out for breeding a better one on Mary Greystoke?”

He tensed.

“Or maybe he already has one. You’re a bastard, aren’t you? Rumour has it that the man has a pureblood mistress in every other county, and a few concubines hidden in the house. What would you bet that one of them already bore him a second son and he sent you to me to dispose of?”

He remained silent. She speculated.

“Or maybe the old man is so impotent he can only get children on Muggles,” she speculated. Dark families had less children. The Potter supposed it was because their frequent use of magics centered on death and sacrifice decreased fertility. “You’re a halfblood bastard, aren’t you?”

He was looking at her now. “I’m not a bloody halfblood.”

“Really? Do you know that for a fact?” She gestured at the histories on his bookshelves. Rupert assured her he’d know the outlines of their contents, if not the details. “Because houselords have an alarming habit of lying about parentage, if only to reassure their useless heirs that they have centuries to wait for their inheritance while they serve their lords and masters. If he’s lying, you won’t know. Not until you’re late into your second century and growing old and feeble, and he looks young enough to be your grandson.” She examined her nails. “But of course you must have reasons for being so confident. You’ve met your mother?”

He was silent.

She laughed.

“You haven’t, have you? She was probably a Muggle that he slaughtered on the birthing bed—”

“She lives in India!” he snapped. “She lives in India and it was a contracted pregnancy. Her masters shipped her over and collected her soon as she gave birth.”

She eyed his fawn-brown skin and snorted. “Right. Because there are no native Brits with Indian heritage so he had to import one specially. Was she some kind of sex slave?”

“She had Naga blood, bitch,” Aldon told her. “Even a doddering wreck with one ball and a half inch
cock could get a child on one of those if they could subdue it first. And then he hears about you,” his eyes flashed. “a pathetic witch who is completely ignorant about our world. A Parselmouth though, and from powerful bloodlines. Even better than a Naga, if you don’t want to pay a small fortune to risk your life in bed. Word gets around. I’m surprised no one’s taken you yet.” His mouth moved, as though to leer, and went slack. She could the memory of what she’d done to the werewolf playing behind his eyes as he thought about what he’d like to do to her. “I would have,” he gritted out.

“Yeah, well, pity you’ll never have the chance,” she told him. “Your father will probably demand I give him a child in exchange for the return of my people. You didn’t actually think you were collecting me for yourself, did you?”

His jaw tightened.

“I’m sorry. He hasn’t mentioned you once in any of our communication.” It was even the truth. “And if I do go to him, he’ll have even less reason to keep you. Of course, I could be persuaded to leniency if only you’d cooperate with us. Swear to me that you’ll bring down the wards on Grimes’ Graves.” Her tone turned earnest. “We could kill your father together. You could become Lord of your House now, rather than waiting and wondering for centuries if he won’t just displace you.”

“Lord of a diminished House,” he sneered. “Do you think I’ve waited around and served him to inherit a chunk of land and a title? I know what you’ll do, the moment the wards are down, bitch. You’ll go after the Grim—you and every other white wizard with a torch. And the power of my House will be broken.”

“What do you actually want then?”

He snorted, though the action clearly worsened his headache. “I want to fuck you, bitch. I want to fuck you, and then drag you bleeding back to my father’s house, where you’ll birth my sons.” He grimaced, nose bleeding as an aftereffect of what she’d done to his mind and the thoughts he thought now, but he continued. “I want you understand, Mudblood bitch, that there are no circumstances under which I would ever betray my house.”

She shrugged. “Fine. Good to know I can only negotiate with your father. You’ll be of even less worth after I go to him and bear him his new heir.”

He threw the waterglass at her. She dodged and it shattered at her feet. She tsked.

“Muggle tantrums. I suppose it probably comes from your mother’s side—since I’m sure your father lied about the Naga.”

She slipped out the door and bolted it, the smile disappearing from her face.

It wasn’t that she’d assumed working with Aldon Sedgewick was a likely option, or even an option at all. It was simply the least bloody one, the one that demanded the least risk and sacrifice on all their parts.

Aldon hadn’t lied about his father’s desire for her to bear him an heir. The letter had arrived that morning. Nine months of her life, and a child on her. That was his price for Severus, her aunt, Hermione, Sirius. It was barbaric, unthinkable in modern Britain, and she was no longer phased by it. Her mother had always called wizards beastly and freakish and dangerous, and she’d been right. So right.

If there had been no other options open to her, she’d pay Sedgewick’s cost. Fortunately, she didn’t think it would come down to that.
Unfortunately, her other options demanded their own payment.

She stared up at the ceiling of her room from her desk chair. A mosquito buzzed about her lantern.

She’d never gone up against a god before, but she’d seen the Dark Lord fight and heard the stories. Beheaded, stabbed, and cursed, he’d fight on. The only way to kill him, at least for awhile, was to burn him to nothing. Part of his immortality was the horcruxes. She and Nagini tethered him to this world, as much (she hoped) as he and Nagini tethered her. The other half was Parselmagic.

She’d long wondered, if creating a horcrux was so easy, why didn’t everyone make one? Dumbledore, who had been weirdly forthcoming after their meeting, said the Dark Lord had made one when he was two years younger than she was. If a sixteen year old student could create one, mature dark wizards shouldn’t have any difficulty.

When she’d pressed for more details after that though—through the intermediary of Rupert, since she wasn’t going to hand Dumbledore written proof of her interest in dark magic—he’d refused her.

She snorted. Tutoring her in the specifics of dark magic to defend herself was off the table, but owling her an unsolicited biography of the man who’d killed her family was acceptable. She had to guess the old man still hoped to convince her to suicide so he could kill the Dark Lord.

She’d finally resorted to asking Draco for the information.

It turned out, splitting your soul was easy. Doing it without killing yourself, going insane, or turning into a vegetable was another matter. Creating a horcrux was the spiritual and psychological equivalent of cutting yourself in two. Done ‘correctly’, you might lose the equivalent of a finger—some memories, willpower, magic—but you could still function enough to recover over time. If you still participate in life, if you still had the same opportunities to experience things, your soul grew back. Though you’d never be the same person you’d have been before the horcrux.

Done ‘incorrectly’—and most attempts, Draco assured her, were done incorrectly—and it was the same as tearing your torso in half. You were left in a vegetative state, without the wits to guide the torn half of your soul into a proper receptacle. You were likely to lose half your soul with no horcrux to show for it—and be left too incapacitated to recover without serious intervention. Given the personalities of most immortality seekers, an incapacitated one was more likely to be shot down than nursed back to health.

So, how did her Lord do it?

Parselmagic.

The serpent was the symbol of infinity and a sign of fecundity. They twined Asclepius’ staff as a sign of healing and Hermes’ as a mark of prosperity. The Rainbow Serpent of Australia created the world, and the rainbow snake of Africa brought forth rain. Yet mundane snakes were neither long-lived, clever, nor particularly fast healers. It made no sense that being able to speak to a snake or embody some its characteristics should also give you these fabled abilities. But did it make any more sense that red people often had freckles?

Magic had momentum, the Dark Lord had said. She tapped her fingers nervously on her desk. Long ago and far away, when man was not yet man, the first Parselmouth had woven her spells of life and death and fertility in and into the simplest language, the only one she knew, and it had changed her and every child after her.

So Tom Riddle with his fledgling legilmency could tear his soul in half, and both parts would have
enough vitality to survive the experience. So he could be mortally wounded and slip his skin for a new one. So she, who could not have been born a Parselmouth, had been changed enough by his influence to do the same—and more, perhaps.

She wondered, sometimes, what he had given up when he’d unwittingly made her. Was she an amalgam of the Dark Lord and the infant soul of Lily and James’ child? Or had the Killing Curse struck true that night, and she, his tattered soul, had nestled down into the vacant body instead of the silver comb Voldemort purposed for her? Did they have the same Parselmagic abilities—or had his magic awakened something new in her?

She made tried to shoo the mosquito, then left the desk to lie down on the bed, probing for her connection to the Dark Lord. She’d tried to reach him the past week, but all she’d received in thanks was a severe headache. She’d tried to use the silver egg as a focus, but whatever the thing was, he hadn’t ensorcelled it. She’d tried to get Draco to let her use his Mark as a focus, but he’d been too busy to stop by.

She traced her scar.

“Voldemort.” She tried.

The line was dead.

“Voldemort? Nagini?” She swore. Was he ignoring her on purpose? She closed her eyes and meditated, best she could, tried to extend her senses the way he’d taught her.

After another half hour she could taste that the house-elves had been here a few hours before and see the heat of her body through the lids of her eyes—which was new—but still hadn’t a damned clue how to connect to him. She felt a sharp sting on her arm and slapped. The mosquito whirred away, leaving her with a welt.

“Bugger all,” she hissed, going back to the desk to rummage through the pencil holder for her wand.

“Relashio,” she snapped, trying to time the movements of the damn wand to the syllables of the word. Up, small loop forward, whip. The damned bug looked like it had been brushed by a gentle breeze.

“Relashio!” The next was even more erratic and out-of-sync, the spell awry as a poorly timed piano piece. She grit her teeth. She hated wand magic, hated it to the roots of her bones, but at least there was one spell that didn’t demand anything more than desire and pointing in the right direction.

“Avada Kedavra!”

A streak of green light, and the mosquito fell to the floor. Slightly dazed, she picked it up and squished it between her fingers. A bead of her blood ran out. She wiped her hand on her skirt.

Angry, my soul?

You’re alive. She wasn’t relieved of course—except that she was, he intuited. She could feel winding about her consciousness even now. It was invasive, and irritating. She couldn’t distinguish his thoughts and words from her own when he did it. How were you supposed to have a conversation when you instantaneously knew what the other person was thinking?

I find it efficient.

An efficient way to try to make me open to whatever you want, maybe.
The coils of his mind about her own tightened uncomfortably. *If I wanted another obedient servant, I’d have made you one,* he told her.

*What did you want then?* she demanded.

*A survivor.* He resumed settling into her, and she felt his displeasure as he saw exactly what she’d done since she’d left him. *Someone who would have the sense to stay where she was protected, or to run far away from the Old World. I’d have risked Sedgewick’s displeasure to kill that Muggle, if I’d known you’d defend her.*

She tightened her own mental presence about his then, until flashes of what he was seeing came to her—a dark room, a fire, his own hands, white and translucent, amphibious as an embryo’s.

*You can’t kill anything right now,* she noted.

*No?* His gaze flicked to the bloodied water of the pool, the corpse floating on the steaming water. She swallowed. *You’re welcome, by the way. Had I not taken that curse for you, the gods only know where you’d have ended up, or what I’d have gone through to drag you back. Am I not a merciful Lord?*

*You act in your own best interests,* she countered. She was thankful their interests coincided, and even more thankful for whatever pain he endured because of their association. He deserved it, for what he’d done.

*Next time I’ll let Dumbledore kill you.*

*I don’t think he’ll try now, actually. He seems more intent on redeeming me. And…* That line of thought brought other memories to the fore, and she groaned as the Dark Lord digested them.

*You made a deal with Dumbledore to go after another Dark Lord in exchange for a worthless Muggle and a Mudblood?*

*And Severus and Sirius.*

*A few decades in Sedgewick’s jails would only make those two more cautious and reasonable—enough so, to prevent any future ludicrous missions of this kind.*

*Sirius has spent enough time in jail.* Heather countered. *And Marge and Hermione’s lives mean as much to me as theirs.*

*They won’t live long enough or have enough power to be worth your time or risk.*

*See, that’s where I think you’re as short-sighted and arrogant as all these old purebloods,* she told him. *Anyone can make a difference. A moment can be long enough to kill someone. Lily Potter’s sacrifice laid you low for a decade. Your own Muggle father generously donated his sperm and redeemed the Gaunts from centuries of inbreeding. So don’t tell me they’re worthless.*

*If I hadn’t already decided to kill Dumbledore, his liberty in giving my personal information would be cause enough. He settled back into her mind. You have not summoned me to discuss that, however. What is it you want?*

*Sedgewick is your enemy too, and I can prepare all the bombs and wards I want for this,* she admitted, *but I don’t think it’s enough. I can’t use any of the lower-powered wandmagic effectively,*
and I’m going to exhaust myself I have to use runes in battle for longer than ten minutes or so.

The image of his body in a mirror appeared in her mind—tall and cadaverously slender, gilled at the throat, his nose flat as a newt’s, eyes albino red, skin so thin it clung and tore on his silk coverings.

I wouldn’t fight Sedgewick when I was healthy, let alone now.

You wouldn’t fight him in your body, she reminded him, her eyes moving to the mirror, her own face, tanned and full from her days in the solarium and jogging alongside Rupert through Potter’s Field. What about mine?

She shivered as he inhabited her fully, their souls merging together like lock and key.

“Yes,” they murmured, looking at her face in the mirror, examining her lean hands. They picked up the wand, twirled it ungracefully, scowled at her lack of muscle memory. They flicked a careful reparo at a run in a pair of tights she’d hung from the armoire. They knit themselves together in an eyeblink.

“Yes,” he murmured, stepping carefully in her body. “This could work.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to everyone who reads and reviews! Have a lovely week!
Very quickly, they had to set up some ground rules for their ‘arrangement’. The first was Voldemort couldn’t outright dispossess her of her body.

From the decade he’d spent displaced from his body after Lily Potter’s curse, he had more practical experience in possession than any known wizard alive. Angels and Demons knew more, she recognized from his idle remembrance of a book long since read and discarded. If those celestial beings had ever existed, they were the magicians of a long-dead world, shamans capable of shifting between corporeal and incorporeal bodies at will. Voldemort didn’t have that particular skill, but the demonic knack of seizing control of a body had become instinctive as breathing after his years without one.

And Heather’s body was easier to control than the shapes of those snakes. Even the most mundane beings had an innate magic, an internalized bond between body and soul. The degree of compatibility between soul and body dictated the degree of control the soul could exercise over it, and the health of both.

You always high compatibility with your own body. Perfect compatibility, she understood, you only saw with those who focused on their own bodies to an astonishing degree. Voldemort used the example of wizards who’d learnt to use their entire bodies as a channel for their magic.

“You mean some famous martial arts practitioners, or like those Tibetan nuns who meditate to change their body temperature—they’re wizards?”

She felt his irritation on the other side of the bond as he floated in the bloody pool, amid flimsy shed skins.

“They’re Muggles.” His irritation spiked at her surprise. “Why the surprise? They can do some magic, though the Ministry goes to great lengths to shield them from anything dangerous enough to also be useful. Tell me, girl, did you think all Muggleborns were as talented as Granger?” He didn’t wait for her response. “There’s as much a spectrum of magical ability amongst Muggles as there is amongst wizards.”

“There’s no difference between us then,” she realized.

“No difference at all,” he said drily, heaving himself out of the pool to dry before the fire. She felt the itching closeness of his skin about him, a size too small again. “Only the minor fact that there are billions of them, they last for a fraction of our lives, and most of them are too stupid and uneducated to recognize how they’re being manipulated by their own leaders, let alone wizards.” He shuddered and his skin loosened, he tucked his head to tear a strip from his arm with his teeth. “Like pigs or other livestock, they possess a rudimentary intelligence, what they lack is the power to determine their own life and its purpose. We usurped that.”

“I’m going to become a vegetarian.”

He hissed a laugh. “Of course you will. You’re too tender, too fast to empathize with those who do not deserve it—and anyone whose welfare does not coincide with your own, dearest, does not deserve it. If any of those Muggles had your power, do you think they’d hesitate to use it on each other to get what they want?”

“It’s a moot question,” she said, affecting boredom. “They don’t have the power. I do. And what I
want is to fix this shit world,” she said, maybe in part to piss him off, maybe in part because it was true. “So are you going to quit paraphrasing Nietzche at me, or you gonna get with the lesson?”

He stared at her through their minds. “It’s astonishing how different you are. Yet we must be the same, in some crucial way, or else I couldn’t fit into your body so easily. The compatibility between my soul, and the bodies of other humans—even willing ones—was never greater than a fraction. They’d mutate weirdly or decompose in a matter of weeks—months, if I could find unicorn blood. You, however—” his glance through her mind was almost affectionate. “You’re a perfect match.”

“I don’t date serial killers,” she deadpanned.

“What we have,” his lipless mouth twisted, “brooks no comparison with any Muggle courtship ritual, or any bond you might have, romantic or otherwise, past or present. See—”

Something twisted in the bond, and she felt as though she was being flung through the air, across a large room, when she suddenly came to herself with a jolt. She filled her lungs desperately and hissed as water rushed through her throat. She clapped her hands to her neck.

Gills.

She ran her hand down her body frantically. Smooth planes of white skin. Her chest had neither nipples nor navel. A cock hung down and its shape was disturbingly different from the ones she’d handled in the laughing dark with Piers Polkiss or the Muggle boys from the bars. Long fingers, nails like a lizard’s.


She felt no choking panic. She was past panic, these days. “This is a thing.” She muttered, barely even weirded out by Voldemort’s new body. “How do I get back?”

If Nagini could have shrugged, she would have, Heather thought. “He will come back when he has eaten.”

Snakes in general were not very good at guessing human motivations or expressing anything abstract. Nagini, as a horcrux, was the exception, but she was generally too lazy to exert herself in such a direction.

“What is he planning to eat?” What, in the Nine Hells, does he want?

She blinked, her nictitating membranes sliding over her eyes. “He’s hunting for you, lover/broodmate/sister.” The word was close as Parseltongue came for a word for an equal. Snakes, even magical ones, weren’t social creatures and ignored their own kind except for food or mating. What she’d read of them in natural histories was so different from her firsthand experience that she almost wondered if the mere presence of a Parselmouth didn’t affect them.

“Hunting?” she tried.

No further responses were coming. Nagini had settled herself in the pool and was gulping down a chunk of bloody meat floating on the surface. Useless reptile.

She lifted her gills above the water and took a couple gulps of air. It stung her throat a little, but it was fine. Probably. She lifted herself out of the pool awkwardly and lost a layer of skin from her palms in the process, decided to forgo patting herself dry. Even in the moist air, her skin already itched.
She went directly to his library. She’d noticed the alcove of books on the few occasions he’d kept her in his rooms. She’d asked him to use their bond to deal with Sedgewick and extracted his vow that he wouldn’t kill any of her people while he was at it. Now, she wondered if she’d been naïve. Clearly, she knew nothing about soul magic or its capabilities.

Looking through his damned library though, she didn’t think she’d learn anytime soon. If his books were organized, it wasn’t by any method she’d ever seen. About half were in English. The rest were in Sanskrit, Arabic, Spanish, and other languages she couldn’t identify. The few written in Old Norse were somewhat legible, given her familiarity with the Futhark alphabet, but that was the extent of her skills. Irrately, she began to open the English books at random and reshelved them almost as quickly. Really, would it kill these people to provide a table of contents and an index?

All of them were handwritten though, and seeing the number of spells described, it looked as though the man had assembled a collection of grimoires and personal notebooks. She had paused on a necromantic text whose descriptions of possession looked promising when someone stumbled through the door.

“My Lord, I have the loveliest little piglets for you this evening,” sang out a familiar voice. Heather shut the book and cringed inwardly. “Sweet of flesh and fulsome-souled.”

She braced herself and came around the corner, trusting the body to move in a manner that was natural to Voldemort. Bellatrix stood before the pool in loose dark robes, looking healthier than she had during Heather’s residency at the Riddle Manor. She had girls with her—one slung over her shoulder, the other at her feet, both nude but for their bindings. Neither could be much older than Heather herself.

She hissed.

“And this is what you bring for my sacrifice?” she demanded, stepping closer.

“My Lord?”

“Put them back where-ever you found them,” she hissed. “They’re lively enough, and a worthy sacrifice in that right, but they’re young. Young enough that they might change their minds and live to serve me.”

“But they’re mudbloods, my Lord!”

“I change my words about the worthy sacrifice then,” she sneered.

Bellatrix looked at him incredulously. “Where shall I find the sacrifice then, my Lord?” she asked plaintively, dropping the girl she carried like so much trash. She flinched, despite herself, hearing the girl’s head hit the floor. Were Bella’s eyes narrowing in suspicion, or was it a trick of the light? “My Lord?”

She wouldn’t legilimence her, Heather thought frantically. Whatever Bella’s suspicions, she wouldn’t dare the insult to her Lord if she was wrong. Bella would sacrifice herself to the Dark Lord if Heather asked her to—and she was sorely tempted—but that would be the end of any aid she could expect from Voldemort.

“Get me a warrior. A dark one, from the prisons. One who has accepted sacrifice themselves, if possible,” she told her. “There’s more of a conquest in devouring such a sacrifice.”

“At once, my Lord,” Bella bobbed a curtsey. “The spares are from Hogwarts. I’ll have them obliviated and thrown outside Hogsmeade.”
“No,” she said shortly, and then, more consideringly, “No. Let them remember this night, and the generosity of Lord Voldemort. Dress them like decent witches and leave them untouched,” she emphasized.

Bellatrix’s eyes shot to hers then.

“Why, Heather.”

She considered denying it, but Bella wasn’t stupid, and she knew the Dark Lord better than anyone. And the Dark Lord would never care so much for the welfare of Muggleborn girls so as to deny his men—or Bella—the pleasure of using them.

So instead of denying it, she did the only thing she could do. She slapped Bella hard across the face.

Bella hissed, a noise near enough to Parseltongue that it made Nagini coil up her head in interest, and she fumbled for her wand. Suddenly confident, Heather seized her arm in one of her webbed hands, tutting her tongue in a mockery of Bella’s habitual teasing.

“And what do you mean to do with that?” she demanded coyly, turning into Bella as she grasped the other woman’s arm. The older woman’s body stiffened familiarly against hers, in Bella’s own peculiar fight or fuck response. Months of sharing a bed with Bella had taught Heather there was no real difference between the two for her cousin.

She didn’t care to assess how or why Bella had developed that connection in the first place. Knowing whether it was by Bella’s own brand of magic or by a tragic upbringing wouldn’t change who Bella was now, what they were to each other.

Bella didn’t speak. Heather grasped her wand and finished her thoughts. “You won’t curse this body,” she told her with certainty.

Bella laughed and turned into her, a move calculated to throw her off. Whether through her memories or this body’s though, Heather anticipated the motion and turned with her, using the motion to fling the other woman away. Bella stopped short of hitting the wall and laughed.

“No. No, I won’t curse you while you’re wearing my Lord’s skin, not after we’ve slaved and slaughtered to slip his soul back within it. But you won’t do anything either, will you? If you’re here, little cousin, it can only be by his will. Which means he’s there, in your body. So stupid,” her eyes gleamed. “What do you suppose he’ll do, but march it back here for safekeeping? He’s saved the goblin steel for you, girl. He hasn’t forgiven or forgotten Dolohov. Antonin was with him from the beginning. As close to a friend as he ever had.” Her voice gained an edge as she crept closer to Heather, until the older woman was staring up at her, and she was no longer smiling. “He’d kill any other of us who dared what you’ve dared. I know what he gave to you. He told me, what he would tell no other. He bestowed himself on you. You don’t deserve him.”

She wouldn’t waste time explaining to Bella what she’d explained to herself a million times in the months since she’d left this house behind. That none of this was her choice—not who and what she was, and how she felt about it. Those, she accepted unhappily, were the Dark Lord’s choices. The choices and instincts of a self and a life she’d left behind the moment that scrap of soul reanimated the corpse of Heather Potter. What she would become was her choice.

Even less would she waste time trying to make the woman see how corrupt her spiritual predecessor was.

So instead, she shrugged.
“But he won’t kill me. He won’t even lock me up, not yet. Where I am now, and what I am doing there, is advantageous to him.

“Yes,” Bella said, languidly coming to her feet. “The Sedgewicks. A bare dozen independent Houses in Britain, unbending to both the Dark Lord and the Ministry.” She smiled a little. “But you have his boy heir, do you not? He’s as much a child as you, not even twenty yet, unmarried and all yours for the corruption. Shall I tell you how to bind him? I’d show you,” she murmured, coming closer, her hand a whisper away from this body’s cheek, so that Heather could feel the heat of her skin and the discomfiture of this form’s arousal.

“No thank you,” she said precisely.

“Well then, into the bath and I’ll feed you his evening meal,” Bella said pleasantly, moving again to the bound girls.

Heather hissed lowly, her gills flaring to the sides.

“There’s nothing for it,” Bella argued. “He’ll have them now or I’ll sacrifice them later, when he’s spirited you—ha!—back to your own body.”

“Your wand please, Bella.”

“Why would I give you that?”

“Would you like it better that I used this body’s magic wandlessly? I understand it’s such a strain, particularly for the young. How old is this form? A few weeks?”

Bella handed her the wand coolly and said nothing more. Heather turned to the girls and gently removed the gag from their lips. One, the plumper of the two, started shrieking almost immediately.

“Quiet,” she snapped, slapping her lightly on the side of her face.

In response, the little ingrate tried to bite her. Well, that was more or less what she herself would have done. The skinnier of the two was silent and assessing.

“Names please,” she requested patiently, coming to a crouch before them. Bella sniffed disapprovingly.

“We’ll never—”

“I’m Candace Bushnell, and she, she’s Apple Whitby,” said the quiet, assessing one promptly.

Apple glared death at her fellow prisoner and began hurling abuse at her, all of which Candace chose to ignore.

“Candace. I’m afraid we don’t have much time. Do you know where you are and what’s to become of you?”

“I’m in the Dark Lord’s Manor, and I’m about to be sacrificed.”

“Good. Deep breaths, Candace. I can’t get you out—” a glance at Bellatrix confirmed this, “—but I may be able to keep you alive. However,” she grimaced, “there’s a good chance that you’ll end up dead anyways, and it will be more painful and drawn out than the death you expected tonight.”

“I’ll take any chance to live.”
Heather nodded.

“Hold out your left arm.”

“Candace—” Apple shrieked.

She curved her wand slowly and precisely, the motions spelling out the Parselscript for chattel, and stabbed it into the girl’s forearm, pierced twixt radius and ulna. It sank into her without resistance. The girl gripped her arm, eyes bulging.

“Don’t move,” she warned. “I’ve never done this before.” She breathed in deeply, imagining she was pulling all the magic of the dark manor into herself in the action. A moment, two, three, and ten, a minute, until black spots clouded her vision like an apparition of death.

She released the magic and the death into the girl.

“MORSMORDRE.”

A heavy pressure at the end of her wand, and the girl screaming and seizing, Bellatrix eagerly grabbing Candace before she could fall, and steadying Heather’s shaking arm.

The girl’s arm was swollen fat around the wand, her hand purpling, her veins creeping black away from the wound’s entry point. Heather could barely keep the wand within the girl, and a frantic rifling through Voldemort’s memories didn’t tell her how long this should take.

“Withdraw it,” Bellatrix told her. “Slowly.”

The older woman didn’t sound nearly as manic as she usually did. Heather did so, with a shaking hand. The girl’s flesh sealed shut as she did so, with only a trickle of black blood—ink?—running from the injury.

Heather fell to the floor, suddenly exhausted. Her gills were dry as paper and she was ravenously starving. She crawled toward the pool on her belly, like a snake, and then Bellatrix was there.

“The Master will be furious you’ve set him back this far,” Bella told her, picking her up tenderly (it was the Dark Lord’s body, of course Bella would be careful) and slipping her into the water. She grabbed the other girl, Apple Whitby, who was still cursing them both to hell and back.

She smiled absently. She liked Apple.

And the pool was flooding over with blood and magic, and Apple hung by her hair from Bella’s hands like a puppet on a string, a red gash on her neck, a moment before Bella flung the body into the pool.

She stared in shock for only a moment, before she forgot herself and the fatigue of this body and shot to the corpse, her lips sucking tight to the wound, her edged teeth gnawing free the flesh, breathing in the blood through her gills.

She didn’t remember what happened next.
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone who filled out the music survey from last chapter. Unfortunately I didn't get enough responses, but I did want to give something to those of you who did fill it out. Sorry it's pretty late!

Warning in this chapter for rape/non-con and sacrificial killings.

He breathed in, breathed out, luxuriating in that basic physical function the girl still took for granted. She wouldn't, not forever. Her life, like his, wouldn't begin and end with a single body. Switching her into his embryonic body was an accidental kindness. When this body died, in a year or a decade or a century, and he had to shift her into another shape, she'd be grateful for the practice.

He searched the room for her wand with some annoyance but no urgency. She wouldn't be back for this body anytime soon—assuming she even could find her way back without his aid. Her magic was as primitive as it was powerful and relied too much on physical media. He'd break her of that crutch someday, but it could be suffered for now, provided they took certain precautions.

He found a letter from Dumbledore on the nightstand, and his lip curled as he scanned the contents. He didn't doubt Dumbledore would join his horcrux to go after the Grim, no more than he doubted that the old man would see to it she didn't survive the experience. He smiled thinly. Unless, of course, he gave the old man a reason to ensure Heather’s survival. The girl would be livid, of course, but it wasn’t as though she hadn’t considered the option. She should be grateful he was handling it for her.

He dressed her body in Muggle clothes—a low-slung skirt, a tight red shirt, ridiculous heels. He painted her lips in carmine and wound her hair up with his wand, in a motion he'd seen Bellatrix practice on the prisoners when she was very, very bored.

He surveyed her image in the mirror.

Beautiful enough, he supposed. She'd do.

Then he checked to see Rupert was awake on the main level, set a silencing spell on a timer for an hour over the dungeons, cancelled most of the spells on the Sedgewick heir’s cell, and loosened the man’s cuffs.

Aldon Sedgewick looked at Heather’s body and its Muggle coverings with an expression that was equal parts contempt and lust.

Lord Voldemort knew then that the Sedgewick heir would give Heather the protection she needed.

She awoke in her own bed to a dream of drowning, and fumbled for the light. The motion was painful. Her whole body felt like a bruise. She reached questioningly for the Dark Lord’s mind. He embraced her with a bloody satisfaction. There was a glimpse of the pool, and the bodies of the girls he’d killed to balance the power she’d used in marking Candace Bushnell, and the sour milk smell of clotting blood. There was no explanation for what he’d done to her body though, so she turned her
focus back to her own eyes.

There were bruises down her own arms, like handprints. She was nude under the covers. The bruises went down her chest, and between her thighs, and there was blood there, between her legs. Her throat went dry.

She knew what he’d done, of course. She’d been stalling, and he’d done it for her. It didn’t make her feel any less violated.

“Milady?” came a questioning knock from the door. Miranda. Of course. At her acquiescence, Heather let the woman come in and cosset her with hot chocolate and biscuits, let her wash her and braid her hair and dress her in soft silks. It was only when the woman began babbling apologies for having failed her in her lack of vigilance that Heather held up a hand.

“Stop. This isn’t your fault. It’s mine. I planned this.”

Miranda’s mouth fell open. “You planned to let Aldon Sedgewick rape you and try to carry you off?”

Not like this, she hadn’t, but, “Yes.”

Idly, she wondered how the Dark Lord could have handled the indignity of it.

I’ve used attraction to gain what I desired before this, he whispered. Immortality has its cost. There was a memory there, of a shrivelled old woman and a golden cup, of cloyingly intimate afternoons and pretended affection, but she didn’t pursue it.

Miranda wasn’t unintelligent. “So you did it so that could bear the Sedgewick heir, and take down the wards.”

That is but one benefit, the Dark Lord murmured. Dumbledore and his men won’t touch a pregnant woman. And Sedgewick’s mother was a Naga. Do you know how rare parslemagic is, how powerful such a child would be?

“I’m not carrying the child to term,” she said in response to both Miranda and the Dark Lord. “But yes. Once the Sedgewick heir is dead, if I’m carrying a boy—” and it had better be a boy, she thought acutely at the Dark Lord, I doubt Sedgewick is so stupid as to try this a second time, “—he’ll be the heir to the Sedgewicks. And carrying the heir will give me the ability to destroy the damned wards. Is that bastard still alive?”

“Yes,” Miranda responded uncomfortably. “Your Uncle Charles shot him in both kneecaps already, but Rupert convinced him that it was up to you what to do with him.”

She laughed unexpectedly. If this was ever over, she’d buy Uncle Charles a holiday house in Majorca and all the classic guns he’d ever want.

And if this were ever over, she’d kill the Dark Lord, again, and make it stick this time. He only laughed at the thought of it.

Setting aside her disdain, she invited him into her mind.

If she had to kill Sedgewick, the Dark Lord would show her how to make good use of his death.
She emerged from the pond fully healed. Sedgewick’s dismembered corpse floated amid the cattails behind her. Rupert said nothing of her red eyes. He handed her a robe, and cast a second Muggle-Repelling Ward as asked, though the Dark Lord was amused that she’d bother.

Yes, well, I don’t leave bodies around to traumatize hapless Muggles, she told him, eying the joggers in the distance. They’d done the ritual in the Thames. Potter Cottage disliked her enough, and the Dark Lord admitted a blood sacrifice on its grounds would either damage its wards significantly, or cause the house to expel her entirely as a matter of self defence. They’d leave the corpse in the river though. As a favourite dumping ground of murderers, the Thames still drank blood, but not as it had in the days when King Olaf’s men pulled down London bridge to drown the invading Danes.

She bent to wash the last of the blood from her hands, and the waters lapped them clean. She shuddered.

The land is alive, and it must eat to regain its strength, he reminded her.

“This is London,” she murmured. “I never thought it was like this.”

Rupert looked at her questioningly. She flinched. She’d forgotten he was there.

“The Muggles have scary stories they like to tell themselves—stories of eldritch horrors, of creatures outside this dimension, that are old and powerful and unknowable, that don’t care anything for humanity. I never expected them to exist, least of all in the places I knew.”

Rupert paused. “There have been people before, Muggles and Wizards both, people like the Dark Lord, who care nothing for humanity, who are powerful and terrible.”

“Yes.”

“And you’ve known people who loved, and were loved, and were familiar and dear to you.”

She nodded.

“Places exist like people do. They’ve always been here. Perhaps you never really knew them before,” he looked out over the Thames, “and perhaps you still don’t.”

She stared at his profile, this man who stood by calmly while she executed a prisoner. Severus had hired him, she reminded herself. She trusted Severus.

She kept staring at him though, past the point when he noticed, and it would have been polite to turn away, and he gazed back, his black eyes barely visible by the light of far-off streetlamps.

“You don’t know how significant you are, do you?” he said quietly. “The Chosen One, the Girl Who Lived, Lady Potter—I don’t think you really understand what those titles mean to us. I don’t think you even understand what you’re doing.”

“Well, thanks,” she said, turning away finally to begin the walk back to the Manor.

He ignored her sarcasm and continued speaking, low and earnest. “Everyone expected you to be another Ministry figurehead. Another façade for Muggleborn integration, while the Old Ones kept killing in their quiet corners of the world. They expected you to oppose the Dark Lord’s bloody revolution. Not to redirect it.”

“Okay.”
She waited for him to say something about what Voldemort might have done while he was inhabiting her body, but he didn’t. Instead—

“Did you know, my father was a Muggle. An anthropology professor from Oxford. He was travelling through religious sites in Japan when he met my mother. Japan—it’s different from here. The wizards there are more tied to the land, are more open about their magic, and the Muggles are more accepting of it. My mother’s magic wouldn’t let her leave Japan for Britain, but it also wouldn’t let me stay in Japan, not when a thousand generations of my father’s family lived and died and bled on British soil.

“So, I came here, and I watched as innocents were killed by their wizards, by the people who should have guided and protected them. The Ministry is built on stolen ground. The white wizards might stop at killing, but they obliviated my father’s ancestors and cast them out into the world nameless. And they still do this. And you,” he continued earnestly, “you respect all people. You respect the land. When Severus told me about you, I was dubious, but you’re the real thing.”

She was uncomfortable. “Severus told you things about me,” she repeated.

“That you cared, about all people,” he repeated. “That you wanted a better world, a world where there weren’t divisions between wizards and Muggles. A world without bloody sacrifices.”

She thought of Apple Whitby, of Sedgewick’s men, of her mother.

Rupert was wrong, she thought uneasily. She wasn’t the heroine of this story. She didn’t care about people, not the way he thought she did, with some kind of disinterested altruism. She cared for certain people. She wanted the world to be the way it ought to be for the Petunia Dursleys and Aunt Marges, and, well, the Severus Snapes of the world. But if it ended up better for everyone else too—well, then maybe what she felt, and what she was doing, was enough.

They returned to the house in silence. A robed figure waited at the periphery of the wards. She drew back her hood, and Heather almost mistook her for Bellatrix.

“You’re a Black.”

The woman sniffed, and stiffened. “You reek of blood magic.” The woman tossed a parchment at her. “Dumbledore didn’t want to risk this being intercepted by Sedgewick or any of the other old purebloods. We’re ready to attack when you are, the sooner the better. Everyone is afraid. The less time they have to consider what we’re doing, the easier this will be.” She sniffed again, speculatively. “You’re pregnant.”

It had only been hours. “How can you—”

“I’m a Black,” the woman reminded her unhappily. “It’s Sedgewick’s, isn’t it. You’re ready then, aren’t you?”

Heather nodded, dry-mouthed.

“ Noon tomorrow then,” the woman promised, and disappeared with no further notice. Heather entered the cottage in a daze, past ready for bed. She could hear Miranda and Charles speaking urgently on the floor below, and another voice that should have been familiar, that she couldn’t place. For once, she ignored it.

She reached for Nagini and the Dark Lord, and their minds cradled hers as she slept, curled up around the silver egg.
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