I would like to thank everyone for their support and encouragement. All your reviews and comments drive me further to write, so keep them up.

Heads up! I have started releasing early chapters on Patre(on). If you would like to read ahead, feel free to join.

This chapter has been edited by Gladiusx. Do check out his awesome works on HP and ASOIAF.

The table was silent, and Harry sat impassively, unwilling to be the first to speak.

The lady had a question?

Well, she was welcome to ask, but he'd not do her a favour and make it easy. And so, the staring contest continued as Harry languidly took small sips of tea.

The silence was broken by Charlie, of all people.

"I'm surprised to see you here, Mrs Malfoy. We are barely related, and I do not believe our families are close enough for you to be invited." Unsaid was the fact both families were *not* close by any means.

Apprehension practically oozed out of the blonde woman, yet her face betrayed nothing.

"It was my idea to invite her, and I had made sure your father approved, Charlie dear. We Blacks have found ourselves in a rather precarious situation. There are hardly any of us left, and they are all of the gentler sex. Except for our treacherous Head of House, of course."

At Cedrella's words, Charlie gave a reluctant nod and did not pursue the matter further but focused on his drink. Harry could guess that Ron's grandmother was speaking of Sirius Black, though he was confused about him being Head of House. How did that work when he was imprisoned?

Rosie wasn't satisfied, however.

"My, so *bold*, Cissa! I have a question for *you*. Is it true that you could have joined the Unspeakables if it weren't for your family springing out a marriage contract with the Malfoys?"

It was minute, but Harry saw Mrs Malfoy's grip on her teacup tighten momentarily before relaxing again. Impressive control over her emotions, Harry thought.

"I wonder where you got such an idea," Narcissa tilted her head questioningly. "The Department of Mysteries is an elusive goal for many witches and wizards. To claim that I could have got in when I

was barely into my seventh year in Hogwarts," she shook her head, her words as smooth as silk hiding a sliver of mirth underneath, "*Dear* Rosalia, you flatter me too much."

Rosie didn't hide the smirk that appeared on her face, "Don't sell yourself short, Narcissa. We were both at the top of our year, with only cousin Regulus coming close to our grades. I just wonder if you had put all those smarts to good use tutoring your son. Why, with such a smart and intelligent mother, he must be top of his year and acing all of his classes!"

This time, Mrs Malfoy didn't try to hide her displeasure. Even then, it was barely a slight dip of her lips and a tightening of her eyes as she stared at her school rival.

Half the table was amused, and the rest felt uncomfortable with the back and forth. Mr Carrow still retained his polite smile but was trying in vain to signal his wife to halt the catfight.

"I wonder how your daughters would fare in school," Narcissa riposted with a squint. "I did not see them with the other children. Did you decide they would not be mature enough to attend a funeral and leave them home? What a pity they missed the school year by one minute. It would be such a shame if they did not *inherit* their mother's wits."

It was Reginald who came to his wife's aid, "Hestia and Flora were unfortunately bitten by Murtlaps when they were helping us in our shop a couple of days ago. They had a serious reaction to it and are staying with my mother to recover."

Narcissa's eyes softened.

"You have my sympathies, and I wish them a swift recovery." Harry could feel true sincerity from her; at least she didn't convey her feelings for Rosie to her children. "Although perhaps their mother should have taken better care of them when they were surrounded by dangerous creatures. Your shop is quite famous and has a solid reputation, Reginald. It would be a shame if your wife causes it any harm."

And it was back to the bickering again as Mrs Carrow glared at the blonde woman who had a faint smirk upon her lips that she tried to hide behind her teacup. Surprisingly, it didn't devolve into a shouting match like he expected, as Rosalia simply mirrored Mrs Malfoy and picked up her teacup.

This was completely out of Harry's depth; the backhanded compliments, the near antagonistic attitude that was barely controlled thanks to the company. He wondered if this was what it was like to be in the Southern courts of Westeros, or were all women simply like that?

Rosalia decided to break their stand-off and quickly turned to him, "Harry, love. Since dear Cissa here would not tell, how is handsome little Draco doing in school? Surely, the scion of the Malfoy house would be top of his year, right?"

Harry stared at the woman incredulously, forgetting to keep his face impassive. He looked around the table for assistance, but the Weasley brothers would not meet his eyes, although he could see their lips twitching in amusement.

Seven bloody hells, woman. Don't drag me into your catfights!

His eyes caught Cedrella's, and the elderly woman gave him an encouraging nod, though he suspected she was just keen to amuse herself further more than anything else.

To Harry's surprise, it wasn't just Rosie; even Narcissa was looking at him with undisguised interest – who would have thought Draco's school performance would be of such interest, even to his mother?

"As far as I know, Draco is not doing too bad but could be better," he sighed. "Quite good at potions and charms, but not as much at the rest. My friend Hermione is the top of our year – in fact, I think she's so far beyond us that she could probably sit most third-year exams and get a passing grade."

Rosie looked like the cat who had just eaten the canary, while Narcissa just seemed… sad. Meanwhile, the rest of the table had got bored and began talking on the side about quidditch as Cedrella was ardently defending the Chuddley Cannons.

"Hermione is your muggle-born friend?" Rosie prodded, totally ignoring the talk about brooms and quaffles.

"She is," Harry nodded evenly, hoping he would not have to listen to disparaging remarks about Hermione from people he was honestly starting to like.

Mrs Carrow looked at Mrs Malfoy with a triumphant look and didn't bother hiding the wide smile forming on her face, "I wonder what dear Lucius would say to that. Not even capable of beating out a *muggle-born*. I guess it does run in the family, being lesser than muggle-borns. Didn't Lucius have this famous rivalry with your runaway sister's husband because he could never beat him in either academics or a duel despite being a *muggle-born*?"

Narcissa's face tightened, though Harry could feel it was the mention of her runaway sister more than anything else.

"Draco has a brilliant mind when he puts his head into it," her response was clipped. "Studying too much does not appeal to him. I would have gladly helped him, but Lucius would insist on hiring tutors or teaching him himself… *not that he ever had the time for either of us*."

The last line was barely a whisper; Harry was sure he was the only one to hear it. It seemed not all was well in the House of Malfoy.

A result of an arranged marriage, perhaps?

He could feel a tinge of sympathy, but no more – he'd been on the receiving end of Draco's provocations and taunts a few times too many. Such was the life of the highborns – they got to enjoy their rights and privileges, but it came at the cost of duties.

Rosalia had seemingly had enough of the talk, claiming it as her victory, and Harry used this lull to ask something that had been on his mind.

"Mr Carrow."

Reginald turned to him and inclined his head, "Yes?"

"I had recently learned that my grandmother, Euphemia, was a Carrow by birth. I wondered if you had ever met her. If so, would you tell me about her?"

Reginald's smile softened, and Harry was assaulted by a feeling of nostalgia and pity.

"She was my aunt," His voice was forlorn. "Phemie would make sure to visit her cousin, my father, whenever she could. Few were as kind or helpful as her, and my aunt never forgot to bring us some of her famed apple pie, along with plenty of gifts when she visited."

Harry felt ecstatic – it was a small, inane thing, but neither he nor Jon ever had a grandmother. Jon's unfulfilled desire to learn about his mother had bloomed into a need to know more about his kin, so he focused on Reginald Carrow, trying to drink in all his words like a parched man in the desert.

The older man shook his head fondly. "Before I was born, my mother had run afoul of a Thunderbird on a visit to the colonies. As a result, her hair was permanently frazzled, and she feared that it would never return to its former sleeky smoothness due to the magic of the beast. It rankled her for quite a while, but eventually decided to accept it as a badge of honour for surviving an encounter with a furious thunderbird."

Harry saw Cedrella giggling quietly, clearly knowing about the story, while the rest listened in interest.

Reginald turned to Harry with a large grin on his face. "Then comes your grandmother. Auntie Phemie ambushed my mother in Diagon Alley on the busiest of days. Before the disbelieving crowd, your grandmother loudly offered a new potion, which instantly straightened my mother's fizzled curls."

"Sleekeazy?" Charlie asked curiously.

“The very same,” Mr Carrow nodded. “It was the first time anyone had seen the potion. Two drops were enough to turn her hair as straight as a line, and hundreds of witches and wizards were there to see it! Your grandfather, Fleamont, was a talented potioneer, and easily concocted such a solution upon my aunt’s urgings. Yet, for all her kindness, Aunt Euphemia had an unrelenting streak of mischief and daring, something your father inherited, I believe.”

That elicited a chuckle from him; a pity he’d never get to see either of his grandparents, for perhaps his grandfather could have helped him with his abysmal potion skills.

“Thank you, Mr Carrow,” Harry smiled gratefully. “You have no idea how important this is to me.”

“It was my pleasure, Mr Potter. Do you mind if I ask what brought this on, however?”

Harry stilled for a moment but decided not to beat around the bush.

“I had a talk with the headmaster about why I was placed with my muggle relatives instead of my magical ones after my parents' death. When I brought up your family, he cautioned that some of the Carrows were known supporters of Voldemort who had managed to escape justice.”

The older man lost his smile and paled considerably, although Harry wasn’t sure if it was from the accusation or just the dark lord’s name. His wife placed her hand on his and gave him a reassuring squeeze, and his face regained some of its colour. Harry could feel resignation coming from the man, yet he was distracted by the waves of apprehension coming from Mrs Malfoy. Quite understandable since her own husband had avoided Azkaban in a similar way.

“I hate to say it,” Reginald’s words were slow and tired. “But Dumbledore had the right of it.”

Harry jerked back in surprise, and he was far from the only one – Charlie and Bill also shuffled uneasily, as did the rest of them to a lesser degree.

“Oh, don’t be so shocked. You have met my uncle and aunt – can you imagine them raising Harry?”

Narcissa snorted, actually *snorted*, breaking all pretence of decorum at Reginald’s question. “Out of the question. I would not trust them to raise a flobberworm, let alone an actual child. Those cretinous, vindic–”

“Narcissa!”

Cedrella's rebuke took the wind out of her sails, and Mrs Malfoy coughed and quickly adopted a serene expression as if nothing had happened.

“I apologise, Reginald. I am sure you know better than I about your own family.”

Mr Carrow let out a mirthless chuckle, “I cannot speak of whether they were truly under the Imperius or not, but I can tell you that you are not wrong about them, Narcissa. My twin uncle and aunt are unpleasant and spiteful people. Unfortunately, they are also older than me by a couple of years. Amycus has a higher chance of inheriting great-grandfather’s seat on the Wizengamot and the Head of House position with my father and his father dead from Dragon Pox.”

Perhaps Harry had been wrong to disparage the headmaster so? Dumbledore did turn out right in the end. Conflict over lordships and other positions of power was as old as time, and Jon could think of a few times when it nearly got out of hand in Winterfell alone.

“Hang on. Your father would have inherited the Head of House position, right?” Harry couldn’t help but flex his fist in apprehension when the man nodded. “Wouldn’t that automatically make you the heir then? You are the son of the eldest brother. Shouldn’t that make you heir presumptive?”

Reginald shook his head, “It’s not that simple. My great-grandfather, Finnian, is old, very old. Yes, even older than Dumbledore. I think he might be even older than Madam Marchbanks, and she tested Dumbledore on his OWLs a hundred years ago.” That elicited a round of chuckles from the table. “Let’s just say that he has some very…*archaic* interpretations of how a magical should behave, even by conservative standards. Then there’s the fact that he is gradually losing his wits over the years and sleeps through most sessions of the Mot.”

Cedrella chose that moment to interject as she noticed his confused expression. “Noble Lords of Magical Britain could disinherit and assign their heirs according to their whims, Harry. While it is highly controversial and would almost always cause problems for the house down the line, an old man like Finnian would hardly care as he knows his mortality. He would be easily manipulated by those he sees eye to eye and agree with his views.”

Harry nodded to her in thanks. This was different from Westeros, where the eldest son was guaranteed the position of heir by both gods and men. He could not recall a single instance of a lord disinheriting his heir in favour of another son. Except if they joined the Kingsguard or the Night’s Watch.

“Thankfully, we do not need the Carrow fortune or connections to thrive,” Rosalia interjected as she hooked her elbow under her husband’s. “We wed right out of school, and with some aid from Reggie’s mother and Euphemia, we managed to set aside enough savings to purchase the shop that you know as the Magical Menagerie. It was barely a shabby, rundown shack back then, but now, it’s wizarding Britain’s best shop for magical creatures. We’ve expanded even further – care kits for pets, creature ingredients, and anything else you could possibly need. Potions, rituals, you name it – we have it. You are welcome to visit us anytime with your friends, Harry – we’ll gladly give you a nice family discount.”

Harry chuckled at the sudden sales pitch and wondered if that's where Hagrid got Hedwig from.

"I shall take you up on it, then."

A comfortable lull of silence followed, and everyone seemed to focus on their drinks. It did not escape his attention that Mrs Malfoy threw the Carrow couple a glance filled with longing.

She quickly schooled her expression and turned to Harry.

"Mr Potter, I did have an important question for you, if you do not mind."

"Go ahead, Mrs Malfoy. I will answer to the best of my ability."

Draco's mother took a slow sip of tea before carefully placing the cup back on the table.

"I need to know exactly what happened in Hogwarts that caused young Ronald's death."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "I thought the ministry had issued an official statement."

"Let's not insult ourselves, Mr Potter," Mrs Malfoy rolled her eyes.

"And what did your husband say? Was he not part of the school board?"

"…I desire to hear the other side of the story," Narcissa grimaced. "I trust that rag they call paper little, and my husband was shifty about the whole affair. He has also been inflicted by some sort of cold malady, and even the Black family library seems to lack the means to deal with such a curse."

Although judging by her tone, she had not tried very hard to help Lucius. And while Mrs Malfoy did not voice it, there was a heavy sense of concern in her; perhaps she wanted to know if her own son had been endangered?

Harry chuckled in amusement, and he wasn't the only one – it seemed the rest had caught the subtle undertone in her words. Schooling his face, he turned to Ron's brothers.

"Do any of you know what happened? What were you told about the incident?"

Bill grimaced, "I know it involved a diary, a shade, and a giant Basilisk. Frankly, while I trust Dumbledore and my sister, it's still very hard to believe that you killed such a beast with a bloody sword, of all things."

"A Shade? Wait! A sword?! What the – Is this true, love?"

Charlie sucked in a breath, “Merlin’s beard! A Basilisk…That’s even more insane than slaying a dragon.”

Harry gave a mirthless laugh as he remembered the desperate struggle and how many times he had been just a hairbrush away from death. He carefully pulled out the Basilisk fang from its makeshift sheath and placed it on the table.

“I’m afraid it is so, Mrs Carrow. This was a gift the beast left me when I gave it the finishing blow.” He pulled his right sleeve to show where the puncture wound was, to the horror of Rosie and Narcissa.

“How did you survive?”

He looked at Mrs Malfoy. “Sheer dumb luck and the help of a phoenix.”

Cedrella looked sharply at Bill. “You mentioned a shade?” She turned uneasily to Harry. “What did you mean by that?”

He looked at the rest of the table and realised that this would be a good opportunity to tell the whole tale instead of the hogwash that Fudge concocted. After a cough, he took a few moments to organise his thoughts and began the story – from Lucius slipping the diary in Ginny’s cauldron a year ago, to describing what the diary was, to the truth of who Riddle truly was. Needless to say, he had a very rapt audience in the end and one distraught yet furious mother.

“T-that…that sheer bloody *moron*. I-I can’t believe th-that he…I’m sorry. A basilisk in the same school as my son?!” The sheer rage emanating from Narcissa Malfoy drowned the tinge of grief and guilt.

“Breathe, Cissa. You need to breathe.” Cedrella placed a soothing hand on her back, “We don’t blame you, child. You did not know, and I’m certain if you had, you would have told someone.”

Narcissa took a deep, shuddering breath before calming down. Her face became blank, and Harry could barely feel her emotions.

Was this some sort of magical skill? Molly had done something similar earlier.

“Thank you, Aunt Cedrella.” She turned to him and bowed. “I owe you a favour, no, a debt for this. Please do not hesitate to contact me in the future should you be in need of assistance.”

“You are welcome, Mrs Malfoy,” He inclined his head. “I am shocked, however, that none of you care that Voldemort was the bastard son of a muggle and a witch.”

Cedrella snorted at that, “It’s not like it was a big secret. A lot of his earlier followers were his fellow students at Hogwarts, and he didn’t bother to change his appearance until much later in the war. We all knew who he was, yet none cared. Do you know why, Harry? Because he had *power.*”

“Might makes right,” Mr Carrow sighed. “It doesn’t matter what your background was or who your parents were. At the end of the day, if you have the power to affect the world, people will acknowledge you regardless. It was the same with Grindelwald, and Dumbledore gathered his following because of his prowess more than anything else, though he’s thankfully far more amiable than the other two.”

Reginald’s words brought a sombre mood to the table.

“It’s ironic that in the past one hundred years, the three most powerful wizards in Europe happened to be Half-Bloods.” Bill rubbed his stubble thoughtfully, “Dumbledore, Grindelwald, and now Voldemort. Really shows how inane the pureblood rhetoric is.”

“It is not about the purity of blood as much as it is about magical heritage,” Narcissa shook her head. “A powerful descendant of Salazar Slytherin was a suitable rallying figure, especially one willing to champion their cause. But he turned out to be a cruel, merciless man with an unquenchable thirst for power and twisted those who had agreed to follow him in turn.”

“Do you also think muggles and muggle-borns inferior?” Harry couldn’t help but ask.

“I do,” Narcissa shrugged unapologetically. “The muggles do the same anyway – they might have discarded their nobility in name but not in spirit. Influence, resources, knowledge, connections – those are things of great import everywhere, and many muggles look down on those they consider their lesser. Magical talent and inclinations run in the blood – Parselmouths, Metamorphs, or affinities for harder branches of magic that were cultivated for many generations, along with unique family magicks. As William noted, the three greatest wizards of the last century are all half-blood – they all built upon their heritage on their way to the top. Though some, like your mother, are talented and hard-working enough, yet talent and hard work can get you only so far – even Lily Evans leaned onto the Potter name and resources in the end.”

Harry would have spluttered in indignation before, but now, with Jon’s memories and knowledge in tow, he was inclined to agree, even if it was somewhat reluctantly.

Heritage did matter a great deal – Jon himself had benefited greatly just from being the bastard of a royal lineage hailing from the Age of Heroes.

He didn’t particularly like muggles, not really. Surprisingly, there was no hate either, despite the malicious pettiness he had to endure at the hands of the Dursleys. No, Harry found out that he simply did not care.

There was a tinge of approval and agreement in the eyes of the Carrows and Cedrella; Charlie, dragonhide gloves donned, seemed to be absorbed in inspecting the basilisk fang, while Bill looked thoughtful.

“Of course, not everyone was led astray by You-Know-Who,” Reginald added. “His brutality attracted plenty of bloodthirsty folks, and there were those who simply joined him because the Mot was slowly but surely suppressing the more traditional of lords.”

“Indeed.” Mrs Malfoy nodded, and turned to the Weasley brothers. “Once again, you have my condolences. Know that I do not support my husband’s actions in this.”

“Thank you, Mrs Malfoy,” Bill inclined his head, seemingly lost in thought.

Narcissa Malfoy stood up and curtsied gracefully.

“I hope this does not stop you from enrolling your children, Rosie.”

“You have no need to worry about me and mine, Cissa.”

The biting remark did not seem to affect Mrs Malfoy outwardly, but Harry could tell she was irked.

“As you wish,” she inclined her head to Harry. “Our talk has been quite… *enlightening*, Mr Potter. It appears that I now have errands to run. I bid you all farewell.”

Narcissa Malfoy turned around and marched out like a woman on a mission. A moment later, her figure twisted and disappeared, shredding the grass and leaves on the ground in her wake.

“And the proud bint is finally gone,” Rosie proclaimed victoriously, only to earn herself a chiding cough from Cedrella and a tired sigh from her husband.

“Well,” Reginald rubbed his brow, “we can hopefully put the unpleasantries behind us. Now, Harry. May I call you, Harry?”

“Sure, Mr Carrow. So long as I get to call you Reginald.”

The man nodded with a twitch of his lips, yet Harry could sense the surge of greed and desire roiling underneath his facade.

“I have a business proposition for you.”

Harry smiled as the whole table groaned, and Rosie slapped her husband on the shoulder. “Not the best time for this, love.”

Harry disagreed and interrupted whatever argument was about to start, “I’m listening.”

*A*L*S*M*

Late evening, Belfast.

An agonising scream rang out for what must have been the hundredth time that night. If it weren't for the sound-dampening runic schemes that were installed in the house, then half of Belfast would have wondered if a banshee was on the loose; the other half would curse the screamer for ruining a good night for drinking even if it was a Tuesday.

Rita Skeeter let out an agonised, ragged breath as she downed yet another vial of pain-relieving potion before throwing it into a growing pile on the floor. She cursed her misfortune. How did her big scoop go so right yet so wrong?

She had planned for this ever since Cuffe gave the Hogwarts fiasco to that dullard Amorim to cover.

Gilderoy Lockhart, a dark lord in the making?

The amount of money she could have made if she added her own touch to the story! The readers needed – nay – *demanded* to be told the truth! Her truth, of course. But no, Amorim had to write it ad verbatim as the ministry demanded. So what if he was the security editor of the Prophet? That didn't mean he got the first dibs on that article!

Regardless, Cuffe did throw her a bone – the dead pureblood and his funeral. Even better, Dumbledore, of all people, would be officiating, and none other than Harry Potter would be in attendance!

This would be the Boy Wonder's first appearance in public that did not include school shopping in Diagon Alley!

All Cuffe asked was for a few photos, and Rita would receive the green light to write the whole article about the affair. Oh, such a golden chance to put the boy who lived in the papers, with her own spin, of course.

Without the clumsy Bozo, she was the one who had to take the pictures.

She took the perfect shot, even! Harry Potter, standing alongside the Weasleys, looking so vulnerable, right next to the red-haired boy with the rat. With such a picture, the readers would have lapped up whatever sob story she wanted to cook up. Even Dumbledore failed to notice her!

'Vulnerable my arse!'

There was nothing vulnerable about the little savage. Daring to punch a lady like her like some… common muggle! She even dropped her invisibility cloak, and that thing cost her a fortune.

With a groan, Rita adjusted the ice pack on her swollen cheek; at moments like these, she regretted not learning some simple healing charms – but her talents always lay in subterfuge and potions. Saint Mungo was not an option either, lest it outed her as an illegal animagus. Arthur Weasley might have been an amiable man, but his children were no less feral than Potter!

Another angry bout of pain, almost waiting for her to think of William Weasley, caused her to scream herself hoarse.

Bloody fucking hell!

Even through the pain-relief potion, Rita could only squirm in agony on the bed. It felt like all of her nails were being pulled out of her hands and feet, and she could have sworn her sense of pain was significantly magnified.

This time, it was her left foot's little pinky that was giving her so much agony. She'd been puking blood from the sheer pain of that curse; her throat had already ruptured several times from all the screaming. If it wasn't for her potion skills and her emergency stash, Rita would probably have given up and gone to Mungos or risked death. She even tried to stun herself, only for the pain to wake her up seconds later, worse than ever.

Bloody buggering redheads!

A glance at the clock on the wall had her continue cursing, bloody Cuffe was supposed to show up an hour ago!

She rolled around, spasming in agony, until eventually, the fireplace flared green, a familiar voice requesting permission to come through.

"Come in, you git," she barely managed to eke out hoarsely.

The fire burned a brighter green before the editor-in-chief of the Daily Prophet, Barnabas Cuffe, walked in.

"Sorry, I'm late, Rita, dear. Lucius would not take no for an–Merlin's Beard! What happened to you, woman?"

Rita quickly summoned another pain reliever, as she felt another bout of agony from her whole right foot this time, and downed it in one gulp.

"Bloody curse breaker happened, that's what. Got cursed by one of the Weasleys."

Her hoarse voice sounded like sandpaper on a drywall, and her throat felt like mush. They were going to pay for this!

Potter or Weasley, it didn't matter.

Although Rita was leery of provoking the Weasleys.

The memory of the Prewett twins burning Galen Mulciber alive in the middle of Diagon Alley for supposedly raping and murdering their aunt was still fresh in her mind, along with the scent of cooked meat. He was found innocent in what she would admit was a bogus trial the day before, but clearly, the twins disagreed.

Bloody hell, she took pictures of that spectacle and could still hear the anguished cries of Mulciber Sr and the smell of cooked meat. It took Mulciber's son and four other Death Eaters to get their revenge on them a week later, but even then, they lost two of their numbers. Both Prewetts and Weasleys were rabid lunatics when provoked, and that was without intermarrying.

Rita would have to be careful, but she *would* get her revenge.

"Did you get the shots?"

Ah yes, Barnabas Cuffe lived off controversy and scandals, with a tinge of bum-kissing certain politicians, even more than Rita did.

"Who do you think me for?!" She glared scathingly at her boss. "Here's the damn film," her hand weakly waved at the nearby table, and her flood of indignation was finally released as she tried to hold back her tears rather unsuccessfully. "You have to do something, Barney. I feel like all of my nails are slowly being ripped off. I think I drank more pain relievers in one hour than I did in a lifetime. My guts are already screaming in protest from the potion overdose. They now know my animagus form, but they didn't know it was me. I can't go to Mungos for this – you have to do *something*."

Cuffe first stored the negatives in a mokeskin pouch before he pulled out his wand and waved it a few times at her. The damned man probably would not have even bothered to check on her if she didn't manage to make the shot.

"Tut tut tut," his face was full of barely contained amusement. "I'm afraid this is beyond even me, my dear. I can recognise that the curse is from the Orient. A torture curse of Turkish or Persian origin, if I had to wager, that simulates the pain of pulling the target's nails at an excruciatingly slow pace. A nasty piece of work – it seems to also magnify your pain, but it should be gone on its own within a week."

Rita was barely hanging onto consciousness as she cursed the man inwardly for his complete lack of concern, no, his outright schadenfreude at her situation.

"Can't you bloody do something? Anything?"

“Hmm, I could try, but don’t get your hopes up,” he shrugged.

Cuffe waved his wand and muttered something in butchered Latin, and suddenly, she felt the pain subside a little. It was not much, but any relief was welcome.

“There. You will still have to endure for a week until the curse runs its course. Be glad that it doesn’t actually rip off your nails, or else you would have been forced to go to Mungos, consequences be damned.”

“When will you print it? And I demand triple what the pictures are worth. It’s bad enough I won’t be writing the article.”

“…Fair enough. Consider it hazard pay. It will take about a week for things to calm down before letting the public know. I will release it before Hogwarts ends, lest the students spread their own *droll* version of the story. Thankfully, there’s only so much that can be put in an owl letter, and children were never considered a credible source of news. Naturally, the picture’s origin will be recorded as anonymous, but make sure not to blab about it. You aren’t that valuable for me to protect you from your own idiocy.”

Rita nodded her head, only to regret it as she felt dizzy from the amount of blood she puked and the hours of unending pain. Needless to say, she will never dare to appear before that man again. Just thinking about William Weasley put fear in her that she hadn’t felt since seeing the Dark Lord in the flesh.

Cuffe was saying something more, but she was barely conscious as she began to doze off, trying to ignore the pulses of pain and agony.

It was going to be a *very* long week for Rita Skeeter, plagued with nightmares about redheads and purple lights.

So, a bit of disclaimer here: I’ve obviously been using characters that were already dead and taking some liberties with OCs and family lineages. Retcon galore all around, which I’m sure is quite normal for an HP fic. For any clarifications, feel free to PM me or discuss on Discord.

Grindelwald’s blood status was never detailed, so I went with half-blood to show how little the pureblood rhetoric actually matters regarding blood. It's tradition and their culture that matters more than anything to pureblood society.

I’ve also changed, and will change, some character's ages to suit my plot better. It’s not like JKR didn’t retcon certain characters' ages multiple times.

Finally, Rita Skeeter is introduced to the concept of consequences. She now has a severe phobia of red-haired men. She's also incredibly delirious with pain and swings back and forth – don't expect logic and reason from her.

If you like my works and would like me to leave me a tip or read a few chapters ahead, feel free to join me on Patre(on). My Patre(on) name is the same as my pen name. The full link is on my profile.

Comments? Criticisms? Leave a review. I read them all, even If I don't answer them all. If you do have any questions, though, feel free to PM me or join me on Discord (rvxqmhqnqh). I will answer to the best of my ability.