

Elemental (The Illustrated Edition) by deslea

Tom wouldn't be Tom without dirty tricks and mind games. That doesn't make it any less of a love story.

Winter 1995

Flying with her again is like soaring to the moon.

It isn't only her head, comforting weight against his neck. It isn't only her scent, Azkaban's excess blown away by the wind leaving only familiarity in its wake. It isn't only her lips on his collarbone or her hair billowing around them in the wind. It is all of these things, and none of them.

More than anything, it's the sensation of lightness. Of leaving tethers behind.



So far as he knows, he is the only wizard, living or dead, who has achieved unaided flight. Magical energy is an erratic thing, and even the most gifted, even those who can focus enough for wandless magic, still require some sort of focus object to achieve the necessary concentration of magic to fly. He'd managed it by sheer bloody-mindedness in '52, verified the absence of prior recordings of the feat across the world by '65, and by the time his life collided with Bella's in 1969, he'd mastered it enough to bear her weight, too.

That was twenty-six years ago, but up here, it seems like yesterday.

Summer 1969

"I'm sorry, Tom," Cygnus said with genuine regret. "I cannot give you Bella's hand."

"I love your daughter, Cygnus," he'd said in a low voice, and that was a baldfaced lie. What he was, that feverish summer, was desperately, achingly in lust with her.

He'd already found in her mind her decision, and could have guessed it before that: As much as she wanted him too, she would not jeopardise her future. It was marriage, or nothing. Their smouldering gazes lit up the room, and she had carefully compensated by being chaperoned at all times. Her reputation was her greatest asset, and it must not be put at risk.

Smart girl, that one. He thought that was at least half the appeal.

"I know that, Tom. But she's eighteen. You're forty." Forty-three, actually, but Cygnus was seemingly not splitting hairs. "I do realise that an older man can be a stabilising presence for a young woman, but the age gap is simply too great. I'm really thinking of you as much as her."

It was a lie, of course. The truth was in Cygnus' thoughts. *The children will be one-quarter Muggle. And they say the Gaunts were mad...the man's as sane as I am, but it can skip a generation...*

Tom thought at lightning speed. Did he want to press? He decided he did not. If he pressed Cygnus into an admission of his reasons, that would open doors about his past that were best left closed.

"Well," he said quietly. "I'm sorry to have taken up your time."

"Tom," Cygnus said kindly. "Work is a wonderful distraction at times like these. And Merlin knows, our world needs the things you promise."

"Thank you," he said, with a passable imitation of socially-expected sadness. It wasn't even all that difficult. All he really needed to do was think of her *skin* and her mouth that he wanted to devour until they both were *raw*, and know that she was forever out of his reach. Sadness, no, but the weariness of interminable thwarted need, fuck yes. He'd wanted her for six long aching months and it felt like a decade.

"I know you've been looking for donors. War is an expensive business," Cygnus said, drawing his chequebook across his desk. "Let me help you kick off the bankroll."

He'd have settled for being able to shag Bella



senseless before she was married off like a brood mare, but he wasn't about to turn down cold, hard cash, either. "That's very kind, Cygnus. Thank you." Delicately, he put one finger on the cheque Cygnus had written, face down on the desk, and drew it towards him. Managed to catch a glimpse of the number as he discreetly folded it without appearing to look at it. The first year of the war was assured. He worked to keep his face neutral.

"Sometimes disappointment is the making of a man, Tom. Make the best of it."

He smoothed the crease on the folded cheque again. He said with some warmth:

"I always do."

Spring 1972

"They're just *kids!*" Rabastan was saying.

"They're Dumbledore's pawns," Lucius agreed. "We should rough them up a bit as a warning, and let them go."

Tom, observing this with interest from the doorway, rolled his eyes heavenward. Ever since he'd started courting Narcissa Black, Lucius had gone bloody soft. Merlin knew *whatnonsense* he'd come up with once Cygnus agreed to her hand (and at this, he felt an acid tug of envy).

"Don't be so bloody stupid. They're *not* kids and they're *not* pawns," Bella said crisply. "They're the same age you were when you took the Mark, Lucius. You weren't anyone's pawn, you were a *zealot*. They're enemies to be executed, and if you won't do it, I will."

"That's my girl," Tom said with genuine warmth, striding into the room. "She's smarter than the lot of you put together."

The men jumped, and Lucius turned beet red with embarrassment. So he damned well should.

Tom reached them, and allowed his hand to linger for a long moment on Bella's shoulder. Heard her swallow. Felt the little shiver of her beneath his palm.

Good, he thought with grim satisfaction. The least she could do was suffer along with him.

"The Prewetts are formidable enemies," he declared, pretending not to notice that he was still touching her. "We're very fortunate to have captured two of them together." He slid his hand along her collarbone, beneath her hair.

Rodolphus watched them with a steady, neutral gaze. With an interior smirk, Tom reflected that he had chosen Bella's husband well. He could take her right here in front of them all and Rod would probably just lean against the mantel and start cleaning beneath his fingernails.

The idea was tempting. If Cygnus would just fall off the damn twig already, he'd do it, too. Hell, he'd do it anyway if Cygnus wasn't funding half the damn war.

One day, he counselled himself. One day.

"My dear, faithful Bella," he murmured, and she turned her head to look at him, eyes dark and molten. Her face was tilted at just the right angle that he could lean in to kiss her, if he wanted. "You will carry out the sentence."



"My Lord knows I will do anything he wishes," she said with a hint of a curling smile.

Some days, he would have cursed himself for the images that arose at *that*, but today, he couldn't be bothered. She was a distraction, and that was unfortunate, but he had come to accept it as just another thing to manage. Managing it was one part self-control and two parts moderated self-indulgence.

Though Merlin knew, he wasn't feeling very moderate now. Bella the eighteen-year-old debutante was one thing. Bella the twenty-one-year-old war-witch was another thing completely. She was becoming a force to be reckoned with, and that was fast outstripping her considerable physical allure. He had observed that men his age who fell for younger women, tended to be stricken with it rather badly, and much to his chagrin, he was no exception.

He risked sinking his fingers just a fraction deeper into her hair. Concealed by her curls, he caressed her there. Rodolphus would tolerate virtually anything - from him, at least - but Rod and Bella's kinsmen wouldn't. He was playing with fire.

But then, Bella was fire anyway.

"Perhaps this would be a timely moment for a lesson in using ricocheting spells. It isn't often we can demonstrate it in a controlled environment."

"Of course, my Lord," she said in a low voice, leaving her mouth open a tantalising fraction on the final syllable. He suppressed a smirk. It wasn't desire, or not only desire. It was revenge for messing with her head.

And her hair.

"We would welcome your guidance, my Lord," Lucius burst out. About time he started grovelling. Let the Prewetts go, indeed.

Tom dropped his hand to Bella's waist and squired her over to where Fabian and Gideon Prewett lay on the floor, deathly still, but eyes wide and aware. The *Petrificus Totalis*, then. Rather more merciful than was usual for Bella, or Rodolphus either. He slid into Fabian's mind and identified the caster as Lucius.

He glanced over at Lucius with more than a shade of contempt. He might be obsessed with Bella to an almost embarrassing degree, but no one could say he'd lost his edge. Lucius would have to be toughened up, and fast. If he hadn't already promised Bella the privilege, he'd have made Lucius do it, and the bloodier, the better.

Next time.

"Hard things penetrate, and soft things bounce. So if you want to avoid a ricochet - say, you have friendlies near your target - then cast in a solid stream. If you want to ricochet and hit two targets at once, you need to cast a dissipating stream - the sort of dramatic colourful nonsense cast by Dumbledore. It looks impressive, but usually it indicates an undisciplined mind."

The others had followed them; now, Lucius nodded. "Yes, my Lord," said hastily. The others made murmurs of agreement.

Bella did not. Her eyes were already darting between Fabian and Gideon. Trying to figure out how to influence the direction of the bounce.

His respect for her lifted a couple of notches. If he *had* to fall prey to this most wretched foolishness of men, he had at least chosen a worthy object for his weakness.

"What you can see is almost irrelevant for aim. The human eye, as an organ, is quite a poor one. Much of our perception is blanks filled in by our brains, and that draws on past experience. There is no substitute for practice. It is not a talent that one is born with. And you should be aware that in this area, age will almost always be an advantage. An otherwise elderly and doddering wizard can surprise you with his aim. So you must work doubly hard to equip yourselves for an older opponent."

This time, Bella did nod.

"The biggest variable in the angle of bounce is the softness of what is being bounced. So you must strive for a consistent level of dissipation every time you cast. That gives you the greatest chance of successfully predicting the angle the ricochet will take." He wondered if Bella was aware of her own advantage in this area. Her spellwork was fairly consistent.

"May I?"

He inclined his head. "Please."

Bella took aim, and said meditatively, "*Avada Kedavra*."

The power left her, in a somewhat blurry stream of green light, and hit Fabian squarely in the chest. It glanced off him and hit Gideon, too. Not cleanly - a little haphazardly on the right shoulder - but it hit.

He let out a low whistle. "Not bad."



"But not clean, either. What did I do wrong?"

"It's an awkward angle. You're casting from above, down to ground level, and then flicking sideways. Your depth perception gets skewed. Again, a matter of practice." Out the corner of his eye, he noted that Lucius looked a little pale.

Honestly. You'd think they'd never seen a pair of dead bodies before. Did it really matter whether they were eighteen, or thirty?

"Lucius. Rabastan. Clean that up," he snapped.

"Yes, my Lord," they chorused dully. Together, they Levitated the dead boys and left the room.

With an air of reluctance, Bella stepped away from his hand in the small of her back and moved beside Rodolphus. "That was most instructive, my Lord, thank you."

Rather tightly, he nodded politely in their direction. "Of course."

The moment was broken, but the hold she had over him was not.

It never was.

Winter 1972

For all its inconvenience, his fascination with Bella was something he had never really questioned.

It had surprised him, yes, but then, he often surprised himself. His continual re-invention of himself was his only true constant, and he trusted it. He was not in the practice of questioning his own greatness. And Bella, in her own way, had a greatness too. The logic was impeccable.

It wasn't that he had ever been actively opposed to the idea. He had as much appreciation for a woman's charms as any man. But he'd always been detached from (*better than*) the people around him, and never really thought he would meet a woman who would interest him in more than a passing way.

He thought all this at yet another of Druella Black's interminable fundraisers. The men had retired to the smoking room. So had Bella. It was testimony to her acceptance in their world that her presence was no longer questioned, and the women had long since abandoned their reproaches. Bella was a lost cause to them, regarded with shaking of heads and perplexed gossip, and nothing more.

She was sitting across from him on Cygnus' big overstuffed leather couch, drawing on a cigarette in a long, silver holder, a heavy cut-glass tumbler of Firewhisky at her side. She was listening intently to the conversation; after hours of society women's prattle, it was an intensely masculine one.

She commented intelligently from time to time, but now and then, he saw her mouth open, then close again. Sliding into her mind, he saw the trend. Each of these suppressed comments was from a distinctly female point of view. She understood that she was a guest in this environment, and respected it.

In her own way, she was as much of a chameleon as he.

"I don't know how you stand for it, Rod," Lucius said easily, stretching out in his chair. He gave a deferential nod to Bella, and said, "No one's disputing her worth in battle, but there's no way I'd let my woman do it."

Bella inclined her head with a politely interested expression. Tom wondered with amusement whether Lucius understood just how dangerous a sign that really was.

Rodolphus said mildly, "Well, I've never really thought of Bella as *my woman*."

"How very modern of you," Lucius said dryly.
"Narcissa rather likes being mine."

Tom shrugged. "Some women choose to be owned. Some do not. I fancy that Bella is the latter." He suspected, in fact, that even Narcissa's alleged ownership was very much on her own terms - a fact that was likely to hit Lucius squarely in the face one day.

Lucius said curiously, "Do you really think it a matter of *choice*? What about the natural dominance of the male of the species?"



Bella snorted.

Tom said, "In my experience, women love men in spite of their urge to dominate, not because of it."

Lucius gave a withering look. "With all due respect, my Lord, I doubt you would be saying so if Cygnus had allowed you and Bellatrix to wed. She would have been well and truly owned then."

"No," Bella said with a chill in her voice. "I wouldn't."

"She wouldn't," Tom agreed. "Not the way you mean." There were ways, of course, in which she was already his, but those ways were far beyond Malfoy's comprehension.

"It's all ancient history anyway, Lucius," Rodolphus reproved. "It's really in very poor taste for you to bring it up at all."

Lucius bowed his head. "It was. I've had one whisky too many. Forgive me." He didn't sound sorry in the least.

"Of course," Bella said with a tight little smile. She blew lazy, elegant smoke rings into the air; through them, he saw a flicker of hurt cross her features. Rodolphus saw it too; he rose to get a drink, and laid a comforting hand on her shoulder as he passed.

Tom watched the scene unfold with interest. Rod and Bella's relationship was an intriguing one. It was utterly platonic, utterly unpossessive. He thought it was, in fact, the truest example of friendship he had ever encountered. Yet again, he congratulated himself on his choice of husband for Bella; not only was Rod not a threat, he was a genuine companion and comfort to her. The man was a godsend.

Not that he'd planned it that way, of course. It had been sheer bloody-mindedness. In his thwarted state, he'd thought that if he couldn't have Bella, no one else would, either. Rodolphus, gallant yet completely lacking in a red-blooded man's interests, had seemed like the perfect choice. Bella had been merely a greatly-coveted object for him then, and her wishes and needs hadn't even entered the equation.

She was more than that now, though.

He still wanted her, of course - more than ever - but some days he thought he would settle for being alone in a room with her. He had never done so, even now. She was as careful not to be on her own with him now as she ever was. That had perplexed him for a long time, and affronted him, too. But he had gradually come to understand that it was herself she feared, far more than him.

More than once, he had considered hastening Cygnus' demise. The old fart was dying by inches. The only thing that stopped him was a dull certainty that she would never forgive him. He did not underestimate her ability to find out.

The old man would have to die one day, though, and then, she would be his. He was sure of it. Not only would Rodolphus not stand in their way, Tom thought there was a pretty good chance he would be their active accomplice.

Just as well, or he'd have killed him, too. Waiting out a frail old man was one thing, but Tom had no intention of waiting until they were old and grey.

Wanting her was eating him alive.

Spring 1973

In battle, Tom felt at home.

His life was a stressful one. His mind was too active. It went in too many directions at once, foreseeing too many paths. It was a great gift, but it was tiring, too. Like being endlessly trapped in a noisy, crowded room.

Battle was different. There were so many things to track, different yet part of a unified whole, that his mind rarely wandered any further. He was comfortably occupied. Completely in the moment. Undivided.

Whole.

The only other time he felt like that was with Bella. Being with her was immersion. The rest of the world, past and future, fell blessedly silent.

She was there this time, and as always, he felt drawn to fight beside her. There was something irresistible about partnering with her in a duel. They sparked off each other like two electric charges crossing streams. Often, he fought the urge – it wasn't always the right strategy – but today, he wasn't needed anywhere in particular, so he decided to indulge.

He made his way over, and fell into formation beside her.



"I wondered when you'd get here," she said through smiling lips, but her eyes remained trained on Dumbledore's forces, such as they were. Not much had changed since he'd been at Hogwarts. The old fart still chose his pets on the basis of sentiment rather than skill. Marlene McKinnon was a reasonable fighter – he'd have her on his side, in a pinch - but the rest of them he'd have used for target practice long ago.

"Am I that transparent?" he wondered, deflecting a surge of solid green from McKinnon, who broke ranks to do it. He thought, with some admiration, that she must have decided to take a shot at him while she had the chance. "How disappointing."

"Never disappointing," she demurred, fending off a distant renegade Black with the barest flick of her wrist. He was a filthy specimen, rather reminiscent of the boy Sirius, who was already showing signs of blood treachery at the tender age of fourteen. No doubt the boy would soon follow in his kinsman's footsteps. Bella would hate that; Tom found it amusing. For all the Pureblood sensibilities to the contrary, family loyalty was usually only skin-deep, while shared values were forever.

McKinnon took another shot at him, and this time, she struck Bella.

He whirled, his stomach plummeting, and gave a low rasp of horror-relief at the sight of her on the ground thirty feet away, screaming with pain, slammed there by the force of McKinnon's Killing Curse. Lightweight metallic plates on her battle clothes had deflected the spell; it happened that way sometimes, but it depended on force and angle. It was never a sure thing. She could have been killed.

He turned on McKinnon with a furious cry, and charged.

"The Dark Lord has a Dark Lady," she panted, fighting off his vicious strikes. "That's very interesting."

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm incapable of love, haven't you heard?"

"The predestined monster theory? That's strictly Dumbledore's thing," she countered. "I just think you're another stinking man who wants to rule the world."



He smirked, and struck again, but this time only to keep her on the defensive. "I like you," he said. "Join us."

McKinnon cocked an eyebrow. "Even though I hit your girlfriend over there?" Her strike was just as formulaic.

Tom gritted his teeth, but said mildly, "She'll live." He said again, "Join us."

"No."

"Is that no-for-now, or no-forever?"

"Depends," McKinnon said. "Will you kill me if it's no-forever?"

"Of course," he said with a wolfish grin.

"Then it's no for now."

He laughed uproariously as she Apparated away.



"How's Bella?"

Rodolphus shrugged. "She's all right, I guess."

"All right?" he echoed. He'd seen her crumpled body on the ground, all sorts of unnatural angles. Only her screams had reassured him she was alive.

"Oh, she's in agony, of course. Skele-Gro is a nasty business. But give it twenty-four hours and she'll be fine."

"Plus a week to recover from the Skele-Gro," Tom snorted.

Rodolphus made a wry sound of agreement. Said thoughtfully, "The Order doesn't normally fight as dirty as that. Dumbledore doesn't have them on as tight a leash as we thought."

"No," Tom agreed. "McKinnon's a fiery one. Tell them not to kill her for the moment. I want to recruit her if I can."

"As you wish." Rodolphus nodded to the door to Bella's room over his shoulder. "You can sit with her tonight, if you want."

He *didn't* want. Sickrooms were ghastly things, and what fascinated him was Bella vital and well. The idea of seeing her frail and in pain was really rather repulsive. But Rodolphus clearly thought he would.

"Oh, no, Rod. Think how it would look."

"I'll keep her sister out. I'll say the Healer drugged her and gave me strict instructions to make sure she was left alone. She'd want you there." Rodolphus flashed him a meaningful look.

It was a concession, unmistakable. To not take it would be unforgivable. And the occasion called for a concession of his own.

"You're a good man, Rodolphus," he said. "One of my best."

Rodolphus gave an embarrassed little shrug, and they left it at that.

"What can I do to help?" Tom wondered.

It was his go-to phrase for such situations. Partly because it made him look suitably concerned, partly because he was usually absolved by the other party from doing anything at all, and partly because he honestly had no idea what was needed anyway.

Now was no exception. "Nothing," Bella said through thin, hard lips. "I'll be all right." She was very white.

He found the truth of it in her mind with ease. What she really wanted was to not be alone with it. What she really wanted was to be able to scream the bloody place down, and have the scream be heard.

On an impulse that he couldn't explain, he Transfigured the bed wider, and settled there beside her. Drew her against him. He felt her shudder with pain when he moved her.

He slid into her mind. It was loud in there; she was screaming.

I'm here, he said/thought, his arms tightening around her. Let it out. I won't leave you alone.

She did, and he didn't leave her alone with it, and that was when he knew that he loved her, after all.



Winter 1973

Lucius and Narcissa's wedding was a sombre affair.

Narcissa had collapsed not long before the wedding. Tom hadn't troubled himself with the details, but he did know she'd been treated for some sort of malignancy, and now her ability to give Lucius an heir was in question. Lucius had defied his father to marry her; Abraxas was conspicuous by his absence. Narcissa was still not well, and the newlyweds passed only a single dance before retiring to their table.

While Tom had little patience for heroic gestures, the whole episode had heartened him somewhat. At least Lucius had fortitude for *something*. Perhaps he would be of use after all.



Tom absorbed the little drama playing out before him, filed it away in his brain, and turned his attention to Bella.

She was sitting at the bridal table, listening politely to one of Lucius' distant kinsmen. He appeared to be droning on about architecture, if his enthusiastic gestures towards the cornices were any indication. She looked bored to the point of coma.

He approached them. "Malfoy, my good fellow," he said heartily (for he had no idea of the man's name). "May I steal this lovely lady for a dance?"

Bella turned and rose, a little too quickly. "I would be honoured, my Lord," she said, a little too fervently.

The unknown Malfoy made vague sounds of agreement and turned his mind-numbing conversation on the hapless distant Black on his other side.

Bella looked sheepish as he squired her away. "Poor Ita. She didn't deserve that."

Tom snorted. "So you say *now*." He drew her into a waltz, fitting his body snugly to hers.

She eased back, just a fraction, so there was an inch between every part of her body and his. Said with an air of idle conversation, "My father's watching."



He smiled politely as though she had made a rather insipid joke. "He always is."

"I would rather say nothing than exchange meaningless prattle with you," she said, glancing sidelong at the other dancers around them.

"Then let's say nothing."

She tightened her fingers around his, and fell silent. Her eyes were big and dark.

Without any conscious thought about it at all, he slipped into her mind. He did it automatically, seamlessly, as easily as breathing. It was just what happened in silent moments. They rarely knew.

Sometimes, if there was nothing of interest to be found, he didn't even know himself.

He found himself in a pristine marble room, immaculately polished. The parts of her life were displayed behind glass in niches in the walls. Her parents. Her debut. Her wedding. Her battles. Trophies depicted in still life.

He was nowhere to be seen.

"I know you're here," her voice came presently. It came as a whisper coming from all around him.

"How do you know?"

"I know because I know you. I know because you're always here."

His brow puckered with confusion, but he decided that since it was her mind, she could be cryptic if she wanted to. He only asked, "Where are you?"



She fell silent, but one of the niches, a portrait of herself the first time that he'd met her, swung to one side to reveal a staircase winding downwards.

He stepped inside, and descended, and when he reached the bottom, he realised this was where she'd been all along.

It was a cluttered room, vaguely reminiscent of the Room of Requirement. It was resplendent with red and gold, cushions and curtains and tapestries and scatter rugs and throws. Things were piled high, a hotch-potch of things that were important to her. Her robes from when she took the Mark. The dress she'd worn the first time they danced. Her old owl, Drake, the only one she'd really loved, stuffed and posed on a perch. A corsage he'd given her when he'd courted her. Parchments, love letters long forgotten, carefully crafted ones he'd written in hopes of winning her hand. A million things, most of them familiar, most of them about *them*. Some were theatre from a time when she'd been just a prize for him, but most were more than that.

In the middle of it all, she sat in an armchair, gazing at him with big, watchful eyes.

It dawned on him that here, in her mind, they were alone. Unless you counted the night she was half out of her mind with agony – and he didn't – it was for the very first time.



He strode towards her. Stooped down before her and took her face between his palms.

She covered his hands with her own, but shook her head. "Don't," she whispered. "Please don't."

"You don't want me to?" he insisted. He knew that she did.

Her gaze slid sideways, away from him. "It isn't a matter of wanting. It's a matter of me having a whole other life."

"Dead things behind glass in a sterile marble room?" he demanded. "That's not life." He glanced around the richly textured room. "*This* is life. Can't you see the difference? Can't you feel it?"

Still she wouldn't meet his gaze. "It isn't life. It's a mirage. It's the comfort sought by children."

He snorted. "I am many things, but a comforting mirage is not one of them. You'd have chosen Rodolphus for that."

She did look at him then. "*Chose?*" she demanded. She thrust out her hands, symbols of the two of them in all directions. "You're *everywhere*. You always are. When did I ever have a choice? How do I know you didn't just force your way in here? You could, if you wanted to. How do I know that this is even me?"

That struck a nerve. He withdrew his hands and stood. Backed away. He said in a low, harsh voice, "You are the only one I would *ever* give a choice."

She drew in her breath. Sat back in her chair. Her eyes were suddenly soft and red.

"It isn't just the thrill of the chase, then," she whispered. It wasn't a question. "You love me."

He looked away. "I suppose I do." He said it grudgingly, but she didn't take him to task for it. She just offered a watery, sad little smile.

He supposed that the grudging was how she knew it was true.

"I know you love me," he said diffidently. Still not quite looking at her.

"Of course I do," she snapped. "But that isn't the point. You still don't get it, do you? I have to be – I *need* to be – good."

"Good?" he echoed. Incredulous. "Good is for *war*. It's for the *world*. Good isn't for – for *this!* Do you really think *this* changes the world for anyone but us?"

Abruptly, a bereft look rose on her face. It was a look he had seen in his soldiers before. It was the look of unquestioned beliefs colliding with reason. Sometimes they crumbled, leaving clarity in their wake. Sometimes they didn't.

"Please," she whispered after a long, long moment. "I need to be good."

"Bella-"

Abruptly, Tom was dragged out of their trance by Rodolphus' voice. "Tom, old fellow, can I steal a dance with my wife?"

He came to himself with a little gasp.

"Rodolphus," he managed, frantically piecing together the shards of reality. Bella's husband. They were dancing.



"Cygnus is watching," Rodolphus said in a low voice. "The old boy's about ready to have your head."

His gaze darted to the clock. They'd been dancing for quarter of an hour. Probably staring deep into one another's eyes the whole time.

"Let him," he said venomously. Merlin knew what heavy-handed guilt the old bastard had been heaping on Bella, to cultivate her obsession with his idea of *good*. He'd probably been doing it since the cradle.

"Go and cool off," Rodolphus said with a tone of warning.

No one else could have done it and lived to tell the tale, but Rodolphus was, in his own way, an extraordinary man – dedicated, completely without hunger for personal power or gain. To the extent that Tom trusted anyone, he trusted Rodolphus. And he trusted Rodolphus now.

He battled with it for a moment, then wordlessly, he dropped his hold on her, turned on his heel, and walked briskly away.

He thought about it, standing there on the Black balcony, staring out over the grounds.

He had miscalculated Bella. He had miscalculated badly.



It struck him forcibly that Cygnus' death, whenever the hell *that* would be, wasn't going to change anything. He had thought that Bella, like him, feared losing the old man's money, but he realised now that it went deeper than that. She feared losing his esteem. And that would continue to matter to her even after he was gone.

Bella, his strong beautiful Bella, had a weakness. And it was one that might keep her from him forever.

It was a realisation that, just for a moment, derailed him completely.

It did not derail him for long, however. Nothing ever did.

Slowly, methodically, he worked it through. He analysed and calculated and looked at it from every angle. Then, slowly, his mouth turned up into a smile.

Tom had a plan.

Spring 1974

Cygnus died within weeks of Druella as spring melded into summer.

Bella observed a formal grieving period. She retired from war duties and secluded herself in the Black family home, cleaning it out with her sister.

He saw her only once, at the reading of the will. He knew there was a bequest in support of the war effort even before Xalvador the Litigator requested his attendance. The choice of solicitor amused Tom; Cygnus was a blood purist for everything but money. And in areas financial, the goblins were the best.

Today, Xalvador was in fine form.

Tom thought this as the craggy little creature looked over his glasses at them all, from his position perched atop a tall stool behind his oversized desk.

He intoned solemnly, "To my sons-in-law, Lucius Malfoy and Rodolphus Lestrange, I leave ten percent of my estate, each. In the event that either initiates a divorce



from my daughter, for any reason, his share will be forfeit and distributed among the other beneficiaries."

Lucius and Narcissa shared a grimace. The irony was that theirs was a far more committed marriage than Rod and Bella's, and Lucius' need for the money far less. But the spectre of Cygnus' ongoing control from beyond the grave clearly grated on them both.

"My daughter by birth, Andromeda Tonks, is excluded from consideration as a direct result of her abandonment of the family. To my remaining daughters, Narcissa Malfoy and Bellatrix Lestrange, I leave ten percent of my estate, each, without condition."

Tom arched an interior eyebrow. He and Cygnus and Xalvador had discussed thirty percent for the war effort only a few days before he passed, but there was sixty percent unaccounted for. Surely, the old man hadn't left more than half-

Bellatrix was serene. Serene, and unsurprised.

Clever girl, he whispered in the depths of her mind. The corners of her mouth twitched.

Narcissa's jaw was hanging open. She could do the math as easily as he. She was appalled, and trying not to let it show.

"To the Dark Lord, Tom Riddle, Lord Voldemort, I give the balance of my estate in trust to fund the fight for the rightful supremacy of Pureblood wizards and witches."

Tom glanced around the room, gauging the reaction. Rodolphus was clearly surprised, but not perturbed. The muscles in Lucius' cheeks flickered and his knuckles were white.

"Cygnus was a great visionary," he said evenly. "His greatest bequest was the gift of a better world for his daughters."

"Hear, hear," said Bella and Rodolphus in unison.

Lucius looked rather ill, but said nothing.

"There are conditions," Xalvador said with a tone of caution.

Tom glanced at Bella. Her expression was one of irritation - and worry. She knew as well as he that when gifts from Cygnus came with strings, the strings were long.

"In the event that you are named as a third party in any divorce of Madam Lestrangle, the bequest will be forfeit, and Madam Lestrangle will not receive a share in its redistribution."

Bella jolted visibly. The colour drained from her face.

"In the event that you father a child with Madam Lestrangle, whether legitimate or not, whether brought to birth alive or dead, the bequest will be forfeit, and Madam Lestrangle will not receive a share in its redistribution."

She gasped. Flinched, as though she'd been slapped.

Rodolphus spoke up valiantly. "Any child of Bella's is a child of mine. There will never be a question about it from me."

Xalvador's eyes narrowed. "It will be my duty as executor to seek the appropriate medical confirmation in the event of a birth. Your acknowledgment of the child, while noble, is irrelevant."

Tom's and Rodolphus' gazes met, then fell on Bella. She was very pale, gripping tight to the arms of the chair.

"In the event that you marry Madam Lestrangle, whether subsequent to divorce, nullity, or her husband's death, the bequest will be forfeit, and Madam Lestrangle will not receive a share in its redistribution."



That did it. Her chin began to tremble visibly. Hot, angry tears streaked down her cheeks. "How *could* he?" she demanded in a low, hurting voice. "Bad enough to think it, but to let it be *said* - in front of everyone like that -"

"Bella, darling," Rodolphus soothed, "the poor old fellow was fixated on a girlish romance that's years forgotten. None of us believe you have acted

with anything other than the utmost dignity and fortitude."

Lucius snorted.

"You see?" she burst out. "They *already* think it! We've never passed a word you couldn't have heard!"

"That's true, Rodolphus," Tom said, and it was. At least a word spoken out loud.

Rodolphus looked very tired suddenly. "I know that, Tom."

In the circumstances, Tom allowed the slip of protocol to pass.

Narcissa rose. "This is an *outrage*. In my father's fixation on controlling where my sister spends her nights, he has favoured someone not of his blood - and at the expense of a good, faithful son-in-law who married his daughter, though she could not guarantee him an heir. I could not care less who beds whom or who tolerates it, but I care very much about that. He has done a great injustice to everyone in this room - even you, my Lord," she added, looking straight at him, "for he has found a way to control you, too."

Rodolphus turned to face Xalvador. "He has tried to control my wife like a pimp with a common whore. I'll have no part of it." He turned to Bella. "Do as you will, with my blessing. I'll not divorce you and I'll not take you to task for it. His control ends here."

Xalvador spread his hands wide. "I care nothing for the personal intrigues of wizards, Mr Lestrangle. So long as the conditions of the estate are met, you can do as you like."

Narcissa made a sound of disgust. "Arrange yourselves as you like. I ask only that you refrain from dredging our family through the muck while you do it."

"I'll embarrass no one!" Bella burst out. "Why does everyone think so ill of me? I've done nothing to deserve it! All those years of doing what he wanted, at any cost, and it's counted for nothing!" She looked from Lucius, to Narcissa, to Xalvador, and said coldly, "Now I will make my own happiness. To hell with you all." She squeezed Rodolphus' hand, gesture of solidarity, and got to her feet and stormed out.

Rodolphus shot Tom an apologetic look, and followed. Grimly, Lucius and Narcissa rose too, and exited without a word.

Tom and Xalvador were alone.

"That went rather well, didn't it?" Tom said presently.

A faint smile curled around the goblin's features. "Lestrangle is a good chap."

"An exemplary soldier," he agreed.

"Fancies himself as an old-fashioned gentleman more than a husband," Xalvador said, peering at him over his glasses. "A deviant deep down, I shouldn't wonder."

With the benefit of access to Rodolphus' thoughts, Tom thought him lacking in sexual interest altogether rather than queer, but he made it a point not to discuss sexual politics with the ignorant. He bypassed the unpromising topic of deviance entirely and said only, "I'm rather glad you suggested him for her."

"A perfect match, in all the circumstances."

Tom went on, with a hint of a smirk, "Tell me, Xalvador. Did Cygnus ever know about those clauses, in the end?"

"My good man, he brought up the subject first. He was very worried after the Malfoy wedding, you know. He was most amenable to the clauses I proposed." The old goblin tilted his head and looked at him curiously. "You don't *want* children with her?"

"No. Merlin, no. I won't share her."

"And yet you don't want marriage either. What do you want?"

"Her," he said simply. "Forever."

"But my good man, what is that, if not marriage?"

Tom shook his head. "I don't know. Something deeper. Bigger." He *didn't* know, but he would know it when he had it.

Xalvador said quizzically, "And you think this little piece of theatre will somehow bring it about?"

"I think her need for her family's esteem has held her back. From perfection, and from me." He went on, with satisfaction, "And now it has gone."

The goblin made a noncommittal sound.

"I've set her free, Xalvador. You'll see."

Summer 1974

When it happened, it happened without fanfare.

It was simply answering the door one day - Merlin knew why it was him and not one of the elves - and she was there.

"I'm ready," she said softly.

He had visions of crashing into her, hungry mouths colliding. Of tearing at clothes and tugging her hair. Of kissing her so hard that she would bruise, five years of overripe longing coming to fruit at last.



He didn't. The magical storm between them would likely burn the house down, and half the county with it.

"Come away with me," he whispered.

She nodded. She didn't ask where.

He put one arm around her shoulder, hoisted her up with the other, and together, they began to fly.



Her lips met his just as their feet touched the ground.

It was their first kiss, deep and falling in together as they fell against a tree. She was already breathing hard, big fistsful of his shirt in her hands. His hands were splayed out over her back, pressing her hard against him. Magical power came off them both in waves, showering light in the darkness over River Erme.

When he touched her flesh for the first time, she flung back her head, shivering with need. He ran palms up her sides, over her ribs, over the sides of her breasts, rucking up her jacket and shirt together. He pushed them up over her arms, and she ducked her head under and found his lips again before he even got them all the way off her.

"Where are we?" she gasped between deep, breathless kisses. Dragging his shirt off his shoulders.

"Dartmoor. Does it matter?"

She shook her head, curls falling free around her. "I'd fly with you to the moon."

There were no more words after that, only the elements, water and wind and fire and *power*, rising and falling with them, as everything fell into its rightful place at last.

Autumn 1979

"You rigged my father's will."

She said this at the height of the war, after coming upon him





deep in discussion with Xalvador the Litigator. Up until then, he had managed to conceal his dealings with the annoying little creature completely.

"Why would you say that?" he asked mildly, but with only the slightest effort at feigning innocence. She knew him well enough by now that outright lies were no longer an option.

He found this both aggravating and exhilarating.

She paced towards him. "Because you're you, and you wouldn't be you without dirty tricks and mind games."

He rose. "Doesn't make it any less of a love story." He took her hands in his.

"Why would you want to be something as insignificant as my *wife*? When you can be my moon and my stars? When you can be my world?"

"Oh, please. You're a manipulative bastard," she said scathingly.

"And you love me," he murmured as he leaned in to kiss her lips.

"*Bastard*," she hissed, but her lips were already crumbling beneath his.

"I'll marry you if you want," he said, tugging her close. "I have enough money to pay back the estate ten times over."

"Don't be bloody ridiculous," she chided, and it was settled as simply as that.



Winter 1995

1981 was the end of the world they had made together.

He had thought, when he finally got her, it might burn bright and then burn out fast. But it had only burnt deeper into him, year after year, right up until that wretched boy had seen him near-obiterated and her consigned to hell.

He hadn't had a body, all those years in between, only phantom aches and feelings. He isn't sure whether that had made missing her better or worse. Merlin knew, what was between them was visceral, and having a body to want her with physically would have been torture. But nor had he been completely free of it, either. He had felt aches even where there was no body to feel them, aching to fuck, yes, but aching to hold and be held, as well.

These days, of course, he has read enough about Lily and James Potter's saintly world-saving darkness-conquering love in the *Prophet* to make him physically *ill*, and if he hadn't loved Bella already, he doubts he would have started now. But he had, and he still does.

He isn't the same, though, and neither is she.

He can feel the madness in her, even without entering her mind. There is something about her eyes, the way they dart about, that reminds him vaguely of Barty Crouch Jr. Something about the nervy, restless way her hands clench and unclench. It could just be nervous tension, fear of being caught, maybe even fear of the outdoors after so long locked away, but he doesn't think it's only that.

It doesn't matter. She's still *Bella*.

"Tom," she whispers.

It's the first time anyone has called him that in fourteen years. He wonders how she still can. Tom is a memory. All that's left is a monstrous shadow of him.

"Yes?"

"I don't want to go to Narcissa's. Not yet."

His jaw becomes hard and stiff. "Where, then?" he says, but really, he already knows.

"Dartmoor. Please."

He doesn't want to. He wants to leave Dartmoor as it was. He doesn't want it tainted with what they've become.



"Please," she says again.

He doesn't have the heart to say no. Seeing what they've done to her has left him too demolished for that.

"All right," he says grimly. He feels suddenly, inexplicably tired and sore.

They don't kiss as they land this time, but they fall against the same tree, her palms cradling his face. His arms are hard around her despite himself. Their foreheads rest together, hard, pressing into each other as if trying to meld into one being by sheer strength of will.

"I'm not what I was," he grinds out.

"You're everything I want," she hisses, and it's the way she says it that makes him falter. It's a war sound, a call to fight. A demand, not a plea.

More than anything, it's that she doesn't say she wants him *still*. It's always existed outside time, what they have, out here with the elements where what was and what is are one and the same.

He doesn't kiss her, but he doesn't stop her when she kisses him, and soon, she's scorching him with wind and fire and what they are together all over again. She takes the parts of him that are raw and wretched and burns them all away. He takes her harder than either of them usually likes, driving them both until they shatter, harsh edges breaking apart in the night. The power washes out of them, hard and brittle, and breaks the sky with rain.

Just for a moment, there in the downpour, they are as they always have been.

Everything is in its rightful place again, at last.

END

