

Washed Clean

by janus

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Rodolphus had been sitting in his cell ... all he had known for... how long had it been? He had lost track. The cell was dark. It would have been like a womb, if a womb could have been cold and washed with periodic storms of despair, more regular than meals, as the dementors patrolled outside. It would have been like a womb, if a womb could have provided him with jarring sudden sounds of irregular, unpredictable screams, cries, pleas and outpourings of pain and offence. It would have been like a womb, if a womb could have been so filthy that his shredding prison clothes filled with grit and his hair filled with grease and he came to *itch*. He had become so used to itching that he scratched without noticing. He had become so used to the smell of his body that the stench permeating the small stone room was almost friendly. It was not like a womb. But it held him, alive inside it ... still alive, if stunned. It held him, but he could not see out, and there was no stimuli that could reach him beyond the voices and thrashings of the other prisoners outside the door. Was it life?

He was careful. From the beginning, he had been careful. He and Bella had talked about it long before they had been arrested. After each pass of the dementors, and after each subjection to the spells and probings into his mind, he would refocus, no matter what he had thought, no matter what he had done.

Bella. Rabastan. He let them fill his mind. Rabastan. Bella. He deliberately remembered them and recreated them. Bella. Rabastan. He let his focus on them keep him sane. Was he sane? He didn't know any more. He knew that he shouted sometimes. He knew that sometimes there was blood on the walls. Rabastan. Bella. He reached for them, for their voices, for their eyes. Bella. Rabastan.

He remembered his wife's skin and her laugh, her thick, curly, clean hair and the conspiracy as they smiled their mutual conviction to one another. Bella.

He thought of his brother's big, shining eyes as he had smiled with his arms open, running down the path to welcome Rodolphus back home from his first term at school. Rabastan.

He conjured his wife's body as he made love to her. He thought each day of more and better ways to give her pleasure and make her turn beneath him, beside him, over him. Oh, sex. Touch. He was not alone in his mind, until he was dragged back by the imperatives of the gaol. Bella.

He conjured his brother's big, solid, supportive form, proud of him, calming Rodolphus with his quiet reliability and loyalty. When he hurt, he conjured Rabastan's arms about him, holding him tightly and warmly to his brother's chest, keeping him from madness. Sometimes this seemingly-tactile vision arrested him, and he snapped back into awareness of himself, scraping his torn fingers at the cold, rough stone of his walls. Rabastan.

At night his Dark Mark always itched briefly with a soft creeping, almost like a crackle. He knew it was night because then the cells were plunged in absolute blackness as opposed to the more general gloom from the barely-lit corridors. He imagined this was his wife, trying to reach him and touch him in the only way she could. On these nights the feeling was erotic. Bella.

If he was feeling more badly than usual, he imagined this contact was his brother, stretching out a mental hand to soothe and calm him. Rabastan.

So passed the eternal round of years, with no difference for day or season. He had tried making marks on the wall each time it grew dark, toying with a bit of stone he had managed to chip from the wall. He lost track, however, and during one of the times he was taken from the cell, the stone was removed and his marks scored away. The attacks of the dementors made him forget what he had been doing or thinking before their arrival. All he knew was to think, no matter what doubt they had set in his mind: Bella. Rabastan.

And one night he woke, dazzled.

Half the wall was missing, and the light... oh, Merlin, the light... Squinting, he made out a figure before him on a broom, arm outstretched to him. He rose. How could a dream of light be so painful? But any chance ... anything ... was something to seize. He did not even question, but took the hand and mounted behind the figure. He realised the brilliance was only the moon.

He... oh, Merlin. The room suddenly shifted away from his feet, and they dangled bare in the wind and air. Panic. Nothing was solid or sure. He pinched his eyes shut tight but threw them open at once, realising blindness was even more fearful, nauseating and vertiginous than sight. Although he could not look, he could not avoid looking either. As he tried to compensate for a slight curve of the broom's path, he caused it to lurch and dip. He hung on grimly, his fist twisted tight in the robes of the man before him, kicking his feet desperately to propel himself back to equilibrium on the perch of the broom.

"Sit still," the man before him hissed. "And be *quiet*, can't you?"

He realised he was screaming, and that the keening sound around them was not the sirens of Azkaban, but the product of his own throat and lungs. He ceased abruptly and nearly bit his tongue.

The ground was so far away. He felt ill. Instead he looked up and was crushed by the full weight of the vast sky, studded with shining nails of stars. It was unendurable, and he was screaming again. He crouched his head down, tucking it against the back before him. *I must remember not to scream*, he thought.

"Yes, you must," answered the man's voice. He didn't recognise it. It was not Bella. It was not Rabastan.

At length, he dared peek out in front of him. Not up, not down, but straight in front. There were other brooms. One was swinging wildly. Another was simply flying, its riders motionless as it sped through the night. Behind a third broom, an owl flapped determinedly.

At length he grew, if not more comfortable, at the least less acutely uncomfortable. Finally they landed. *I must remember not to scream*, he told himself again.

This time it was a figure shining in white that answered his thoughts, blandly. "An excellent idea." There was no welcoming embrace, though all Rodolphus wanted was touch ... human touch making him human.

He dredged his mind. It was disordered and filled with images and words that were now random scraps. Memories had been tossed by winds of air pressure systems endemic to a decade of random periods of attack and solitude. Lucius. He retrieved the man's name. *Lucius*. And this must be his home. The house rose against the stars and the line of angry fire behind it. Dawn.

The other shambled figures stood about the yard. One broke away, dancing down the garden, her torn, frayed dress swirling around her like feathers. Her arms spread; her feet beat a tattoo. Bella. Bella. *Bella. Bella-Bella-Bella-Bella*. He reached for her without moving his feet, but she was many yards down the hedge now.

"You fetch her." Lucius gestured to one of the other men. "I'll get these into the bath. You two first." He herded Rodolphus and the silent, still man nearest him towards the house.

Rodolphus looked into the grimy face. Rabastan. *Rab*. His brother must be doing so much better than he. Rab had always been the stable one. He took his hand. Surely this would be forgiven. The fingers closed around his automatically.

Lucius spelled off their ragged prison suits as if they had been children. "Here are your new robes for you, when you are finished. Use anything you wish." He cast shaving spells on them. They were not to be trusted with a razor, much less a wand. He filled the big deep tub with steaming water. Tub. It was more like a pool. The room seemed like a pavilion. "These are taps for soap, shampoo, oil and bubbles. Towels and flannels are in the cupboard. When you open the door again, it will end the time-stasis within the room."

Rodolphus found himself nodding. That he could do so was a good sign. It was interaction. It was a start.

The room was so clean ... not just the counters and floor, but the ceiling itself, arcing up in curved, white bows. It was glass, and with that intervening, half-reflective surface, the sky was less oppressive and immediate. The moon was white and the black was just lightening to early-morning blue and orange. He realised he was not cold. When had he not been cold? He opened his hand and flexed his fingers experimentally. Bath. How did one bathe? Occasionally a bucket and a rag had been thrust into his cell. Occasionally a striped suit had been tossed at him, less gritty, but as torn and frayed, as the filthy one he had been expected to remove.

A flannel. Soap. Water. And such water. It still moved after it had poured from Lucius' wand. It sparkled and glinted in the light set above the pool. The water reflected the candles. It was crystal and alive. It gently distorted the pattern of white and pale green tiles that formed the bowl that held it. But first a flannel. He approached the cupboard, simple and white, tall with shuttered doors. Did he dare to touch them? Did he? Should he? He felt like a thief. He placed a finger on the silver knob. No, he couldn't turn it like that. He grasped it. What would emerge? When it opened, would he be thrown back from this beautiful dream into the filthy dungeon?

No, it had concealed piles of soft, white, fluffy, Turkish towels. Rodolphus very carefully took a flannel, touching neither any other flannel, nor any of the towels. He was not stealing. Lucius had told him he could use it. He was not stealing. He would not ruin it. Lucius could spell it clean. Lucius had a wand. A wand. A wand. Rodolphus had felt naked without his at first ... even more naked than he felt now, without clothing. But the ache had dulled long since. A wand. It seemed like a fairy story.

No, he had to remember. He always had to remember. Bella. Rabastan. Rodolphus sat on the edge of the pool to focus himself, setting his feet into the water, looking down at the hair and scratches and filth on his pale legs. They seemed like dirty sticks dropped into a pure lake. The dirt swirled around them in the water as he moved, but it vanished almost instantly. It must be a charm. It had been so long since he had seen anything so innocently beautiful. When further drops cast little rings onto the surface he gazed at them appreciatively, until he realised he was crying. No, he had to remember. Bella. Rabastan. Bella. Rabastan. *Bella. Rabastan*.

There was a choking and a shifting behind him, by the door, and his Dark Mark sizzled.

His brother was standing as Lucius had left him, his forearms dangling from his elbows, and Rodolphus had not noticed. Rabastan's right hand swung up to touch his naked Dark Mark. Rodolphus' own tingled again. "Come, Rab. I think it is all right. Come and wash." Was that his voice? It echoed gratingly rough, and he found himself with his arms curled over his head protectively at the sound. Again Rabastan touched his own arm, and Rodolphus' responded. Just Rab. Just Rab. Rabastan. Why was he just standing there? He wasn't moving at all.

Oh... *He wants me to touch my Dark Mark to call him. He is calling me. He is telling me that he is Rab through the Dark Mark*. And Rodolphus did the same thing. Did he have magic left to run through the Dark Mark? Rabastan did. There had been that crawling pulse every night. Had that been his brother, calling, even as Rodolphus had dreamt of him, conjured him, focussed on him?

"Oh, Rab." Rodolphus stood, and walked gingerly over the tiles, his feet and calves wet and dripping. He whispered, softening his voice against the echoes. "Come bathe. We're supposed to bathe." He wrapped the skeletal figure in his bony arms.

Rodolphus felt Rabastan's arms rise to loosely lie at the small of his back. "Come," he said again. He took his hand and led him to the edge of the tub. They both respectfully watched the floor. Rabastan followed him obediently into the water, where he then stood, almost thigh deep, not moving after Rodolphus released his hand. He trailed a blanket after him, and Rodolphus realised it was clean. How could it be clean? He lifted it out and it was also dry. "Did you do this?"

His brother rushed forward, lurching and splashing to take it back.

"It's all right. It's all right. Here, look. It's right here." Perhaps this was how Rab had kept himself in gaol ... by nourishing this little charm. His brother stood by the edge now, gripping one corner of the blanket fiercely, though his face was still blank when Rodolphus dared to look at it. "All right. Here. Sit down."

He padded over to get another flannel, bolder with the cupboard this time, as if he did this every day. Back in the pool, he waded to the taps that Lucius had indicated. This one was for bubbles, that one for soap, the other for shampoo, the fourth for oil. Oil. The water was already like cream, soft and smooth. There was no grit in it at all. He turned on the bubbles and they filled the big oval slowly, glittering in different colours, so round. Each one was so round. He had done this. He was almost proud and turned to look at Rabastan, but his brother sat now, as he had been told, clutching the blanket.

He had expected the reaction of a child, maybe, as Rabastan was so docile, but his brother simply sat, his face impassive, with wonderland expanding around him. It was all wonderland, of course, after the gaol, but Rodolphus had expected some reaction. He turned the tap with soap and covered the flannel in it.

Rodolphus returned to sit next to Rabastan, close, so that their thighs touched, and he moved his foot against his brother's under the water. Submerged, their outer layers of grime were disappearing and their skin was beginning to soak to greater softness. He began with his Dark Mark and his left forearm. Rabastan still held his flannel and had not moved to use it. But he was interested in the Marks. Perhaps Rodolphus could rouse him with his own. Please, Rab. *Please*.

He began to scrub it, his fingers feeling clumsy with the cloth. How should he hold it? His mother would have used a finger. A fist held it most firmly. He scrubbed until the skin was pink around the black of the skull and snakes. Rabastan was watching him closely, stroking his own arm. When he was finished, Rabastan held out his arm towards Rodolphus' cloth.

He scrubbed it too, until both their left forearms were pink, giving relief to their perfect Dark Marks, unfaded once again. They *had* faded, in the beginning, but then returned, deep and sure as ever. Brothers. This was his brother. Their arms had condemned them, had given them salvation, and now they matched, shining. Rabastan stroked his Dark Mark, and again Rodolphus felt the tingle of magic moving from it to his own arm.

Even while Rabastan did this, his head and eyes looked down. Rodolphus knew Rabastan had learned, as he had learned so painfully himself, that a gaze into another's eyes was defiance and would be harshly punished. But he wanted... Oh, Merlin. He wanted to be human. How many times had he dreamt of his brother coming to him to soothe him in his cell, with his old knowing half-smile, to look into his eyes and know him; to offer comfort and the confirmation of this very thing. He was human. Please. Please, Rab.

"Please, Rab." He put two careful fingers under his brother's chin, raising it so perhaps he could get him to look at him. And as his brother did, he saw the guarded, vacant blankness change to fear and almost panic. He watched as something in Rabastan mastered it. He watched as his eyebrows came together above his eyes. Drawing his breath in a sad, mourning gulp, he watched as Rabastan's hand moved to his face. Feeling his brother trace little paths down his cheeks, he was puzzled until the moving finger carefully and gently wiped beneath his eyes. He realised he was crying again. Oh, Merlin. Oh, Rab. What have they done to us? I need you. I still need you.

He watched as Rabastan's hand dipped water from the pool, still full of bubbles, and began to wash his face. He was surprised that there was not even a burr of whiskers catching the careful fingers on his cheeks and chin. He had worn a beard a long time. Rodolphus gave him the soapy cloth and was sure this worked better, because when he opened his eyes and looked down, he could see the dirty waterfall running from his chin before it touched the pool and vanished. The other flannel lay over Rabastan's leg.

Apart from this, it was as if his brother were empty, as if he were gone. He looked at his face as he was washed. There had just been that momentary frown of his eyebrows, and perhaps that had been awoken by fear. He could see the purple hollows that looked like bruises beneath his brother's eyes. His cheeks were no longer full and soft, but revealed the bone and tendon structure beneath them. But his face was relaxed. It was immobile and expressionless, but relaxed. His lips were thinner, but they were closed. Probably they had spent the entire intervening time thus. He had never heard his brother's scream, over all the years in gaol. It was as if Rabastan had retreated inside himself, then Apparated. Everything indicated that conclusion save his brief frown as he had been startled into recognising Rodolphus' tears.

It was Rabastan's turn now, and Rodolphus got more soap to wash his quiet face. He did so tenderly, for all the thoroughness needed to rid the poor, dry skin of its prison grey. *This is for you. If I can still love, I love you.*

They washed each other, first Rabastan, then Rodolphus. Their still-strong fingers massaged one another's feet, seeking to ameliorate the embedded blackness and stiffness they had become accustomed to, walking on filthy prison floors without shoes. There were wounds there, and scars on what had been white soft feet. There was no infection, for the lime and rock dust lining the floors of their cells had scoured any such disease as soon as it had manifested itself. Rodolphus remembered how, when they had been children, there had always been a first spring day when the two of them had dared to sneak from the house barefoot, with their delicate, perfect, warm feet freezing in the morning grass until they had almost hurt. His feet and Rab's. His brother's.

They washed one another's hair. He sat on the edge of the pool, in the air, and held Rab still, one arm about him, his hand splayed over his brother's chest. He tended to his hair with the other. The first task was to separate the greasy, dirt-clumped mess into strands. He massaged his brother's scalp, even while he tried to gently comb the hair itself, helping it by letting it drift beneath the water. It was quiet, almost meditative, and where Rab would once have been impatient, made shy by the attention, now he lay against him willingly. Their hair would never be soft, until it had grown, and they had spent some time absorbing and adjusting to better food, but it would be clean. Again he added oil afterwards, as it still felt so dry and stark. They needed haircuts. Rab had always kept his hair so short and neat.

Then it was his turn, as Rab moved his hair, unravelling and untangling, where even a comb would have become lost. The pressure of his brother's strong, bony fingertips against his skull had seemed sharp at first, but when he became accustomed to it, the movement was soothing. Rab was very careful, and the gentle tugs became a rhythm. Rodolphus was too wary to close his eyes, but he was tempted. As they worked with one another, their fingers loosened too, and became more accustomed to precise movements. When Rab had finished, Rodolphus found his hair was no longer a simple wet clump, but a tight braid, with the end wrapped about itself.

He just rested there a moment then, in his brother's lap. The room was charmed with a time stasis spell, after all. After a time, of peace and indulgence, in Rab's closeness and the warm, comfortable pool, he decided it must be time to go. "Come, Rab. Come."

He led him up out of the pool, then went to the cupboard again, this time with complete confidence. He simply reached in and took an enormous, fluffy white towel and wrapped his brother in it, then tugged another about his own shoulders. They dried one another, then dressed one another, somehow almost innocent in the air, Rodolphus thought. They were clean, and renewed. They fastened one another's buttons ... Rodolphus first, then Rabastan.

It was time to go. Rodolphus turned to open the door.

"Roddy?" A voice came from behind him. The first word his brother had actually spoken. "Roddy?"

He still had his blanket around his shoulders as clean as ever, Rodolphus noticed as he turned. There was no need now, but...

Rabastan's hand extended to his face. It stroked his cheek, felt the bones of his face; a soft thumb moved over the hollow just below his eye. Gentle fingers touched his lips as he watched, quiet.

"Roddy." And Rabastan met his eyes with some degree of returned peace and satisfaction, before they left the beautiful, warm, clean room for the world of Bella, Lucius and their Dark Lord.