

Outsiders

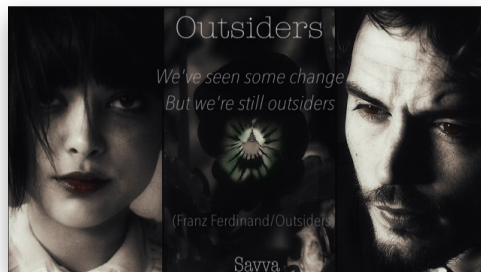
by Savva

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These Days

Chapter 1 of 1

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Outsiders

We've seen some change

But we're still outsiders

(The Outsiders/Franz Ferdinand)

I

These Days

Pansy opened her eyes right before the usual morning Howler appeared. The damned thing shrieked, "Wake up!" three times and burst into flames. She swore and sat up, shifting to the edge of her narrow bed. The ratty old blanket slipped from her shoulders, exposing her skin to the chilly air. Pansy shivered. A rotten, cracked window-frame didn't keep the icy October wind from entering the room.

For a while she just sat there, rubbing her shoulders in a futile attempt to get rid of goosebumps and staring at the wall across from her. There was a patch where the paint was peeling, and in the dim light from a gaslamp outside, it always reminded her of a flying Hippogriff. It was the only thing in this Merlin-forgotten hole that could make her

smile, though rarely, and only in a certain light. Today it did, and she grinned, not caring how idiotic it looked in her situation.

When she heard the chiming of a distant clock, she snapped out of her stupor and drew a slow breath *Five-in-the-morning smell like shite*, she thought, wrinkling her nose. She dragged herself from the bed and shuffled towards a slightly dented washbasin in the corner. She splashed her face, shivering from the cold water, and swore again. She hated cold water! Then she rinsed her mouth, and smoothed her short locks, looking at her reflection in a tarnished old mirror. Her morning routine was brief, since such luxuries as soap and toothpaste were just that...luxuries and therefore unattainable. She kept reminding herself that in Azkaban, there hadn't been any morning routine at all. Sometimes the thought cheered her up, and sometimes not so much. She hated a lot about her life these days, and at times it seemed that there was no reason to keep breathing with so much animosity in her heart. But her survival instinct was much stronger than her hatred, and so she went on, day after day after day.

Putting on her only robe and worn-out shoes, Pansy went downstairs, got the wooden stove going, and began working on the dough. She'd been living and working in this bakery for three months now. It wasn't the best job, and there was no money, but at least it provided a roof over her head and food. It was better than nothing. Those first weeks after Azkaban, when she had been living on the streets, had been much, much worse. So, although she loathed working for a balding, burly, red-faced wizard, she kept quiet and did as she was told. It was hard to bite her tongue almost constantly, but eventually it had paid off: for the last two months, the owner had put her in charge of all morning preparations. It meant more work, but it also meant that she was alone in the morning. That suited her perfectly, since she felt better when no one was around to breathe into her ear or taunt her.

Of course, she did sometimes have the urge to poison the dough, but there were two problems with that. First, she didn't have any poison, and second, she didn't want to go back to Azkaban. Moreover, a Dementor's kiss wasn't on her wishlist. The bloodcurdling screams of Lucius Malfoy were the most terrifying memory of her time in jail, though many other dreadful things had happened to her there. They haunted her no matter what she was doing. Not a day went by without her thinking about the way her parents had died, or about the hollow feeling that had settled in her chest when the guards had smashed her wand. She would have gladly forgotten all of it, if only for a little while, but the tattooed "33667" on her wrist wasn't going to let her do that. Ever. The work, however, helped suppress those memories and kept her hands from doing something stupid.

Soon, it was warm in the kitchen, and Pansy was slowly kneading the dough. Of all the things she now had to do without a wand, working with the dough was her favourite. Who would have thought that she, a Slytherin princess, would ever find comfort in manual labour? But she did. It was better than cleaning the kitchen at the end of the day. Also, the dough was warm and felt almost alive under her fingers. She basked in its warmth and suppleness. The soothing process helped her forget the gloom that burdened her soul.

Closing her eyes, she let her fingers sink into the warm mass. With the low hum of the oven, and the smell of burning wood, she imagined herself being home on holidays. She could almost hear her mum's rambling talk and see soft buns on the dinner table ...

"Hello, beautiful." A whisper near her ear cut short her reverie. Startled, she tried to turn round, but was immediately pinned to the table by a hard body. "Shh," said a man behind her, putting his arms on both of her sides, making it impossible for her to move.

Recognising the voice of the baker's son, Pansy snapped, "Let me go!" She'd seen the git once before, when she had started working in the bakery. She didn't know much about him, only that he was a Quidditch player and looked like an utter sleazebag. "Let me go," she said again, when she felt his nose behind her ear.

A low chuckle was his only reply, as he pressed even harder into her. "Shh," he repeated, and then, grinding his budding erection against her backside added, "Such a nice arse. I've been thinking about it since August."

Suspecting where all this was going, she tried to push him off, hissing, "I'll scream!"

The man just guffawed into her ear. "Relax. No one will hear you. Also, I'm just having a little fun. I'm not going to harm you. Well, not much, anyway." He cupped her crotch with one of his hands. "You know, you have to be proud that a famous Quidditch player wants to shag you. 'Cause, as far as I'm concerned, you're nothing, just a filthy Death Eaters' whore."

His fingers began to bunch the material of her robe, and terror began to pulse in her temples. He pushed her legs apart, and she could feel his now fully erect prick prodding between her buttocks. Pinned down, unable to move, and feeling helpless, she gasped, "Don't!"

"Ah, stop this. I'm sure you like it rough," the wizard chuckled and pinched her nipple, causing her to yelp. Mistaking the pained sound she made for a moan of pleasure, he smugly added, "That's a good girl. I knew you'd come round, you filthy little cunt." Roughly squeezing her breasts with both hands, he murmured, "Mmm, I like your tits."

Trying her best to relax and gain some time, Pansy laid her head on his shoulder. The man behind her hummed with appreciation, assaulting her breasts with even more enthusiasm. Sensing that his hold on her had weakened, she mustered all her strength, grabbed the dough-barrel, and twisting around, threw it right on the git's head. She didn't expect him to collapse on the floor with a loud thud, but he did. Looking at his body through blurry eyes, she drew a shaky breath. Then, suddenly feeling sick, she doubled over and threw up all over his shoes.

"Fucking bastard," she hissed, angrily wiping her mouth with her sleeve. "I hope you're dead," she added and kicked him. Ignoring the tears that burned in her eyes, she shouted, "I hate you!" and kicked him again and again and again, letting out all the fury that accumulated in her heart. It felt so good, so liberating, she didn't want to stop, but when she heard a stifled moan from inside the barrel, she hit him one more time, muttered, "Fucker," grabbed someone's jacket from a hanger, and ran from the bakery.

The streets met her with darkness and chill. The only thought that came to her, surprisingly enough, was that it really did smell like shite at five in the morning.

Two hours later, Pansy found herself half-frozen, hiding under someone's doorstep. Her head refused to offer any ideas of what to do now, and she felt completely lost. Also, she had managed to convince herself that the Aurors were probably looking for her. Even if they weren't, though, she couldn't imagine that anyone would hire her now. Her threadbare robe and tatty shoes were the least of her problems. The number on her wrist and the fact that she didn't own a wand were much bigger. She really had got lucky with that bakery.

"Shite," she muttered, thinking about the horny bastard who had ruined everything. Good thing she wasn't one to give up. She hadn't died in that bloody Azkaban, and she wasn't about to die now. No fucking chance.

Willing her teeth to stop chattering, she peeped outside, and saw a litter bin with a corner of the *Prophet* sticking out of it. Pansy cautiously crept out, took out the newspaper, and dashed back under the steps to look over the classified section. Unfortunately, there weren't a lot of want ads, and those that were there had one thing in common.

'Kindly no Squibs and no Animagi'.

Pansy was neither, and yet, in the eyes of today's society, she was as bad or, perhaps, far worse. An outcast without a wand. A Death Eaters' whore. She wasn't considered a human any more, just a piece of rubbish, discarded after the war.

She was almost ready to throw the *Prophet* back where it belonged, when her eyes fell on another ad. She hadn't noticed it before, probably because it was printed in the tiniest print possible and placed among the obituaries. Squinting and cursing the microscopic letters, she managed to read,

Live-in governess needed.

Details will be provided during an initial meeting

Please inquire at the address provided below

To her astonishment, there was no mention of any special conditions. Feeling hopeful, she carefully folded the Prophet, crawled out of her hiding-place, and began to walk. It was still early, and the streets were empty. The address in the ad wasn't far away. The wind was still bitterly cold, though, and attacked her at every corner. She cursed her old robe for not keeping her warm and wrapped the jacket she'd 'borrowed' from the baker tightly around her body. It was too big for her, and the smell of yeast and sweat wasn't her favourite, but it did the job.

Focusing her gaze on her shoes and trying to look as inconspicuous as possible, Pansy made her way to the corner, and found that she was passing by the old hat shop she'd known from her childhood. Something from the long forgotten past nudged her, and she crossed the road without thinking. Standing in front of it, she couldn't help glancing at the dark window. It was a mistake. Instead of pretty hats, she was met with her own reflection. Stifling a gasp of disgust, she stared at herself. She hadn't realised how filthy she was. She looked like a beggar. Everything about her was just revolting: her horribly-cut hair, her robe, her shoes. Especially the shoes. A bitter chuckle rose in her throat. Once upon a time, in her other life, she had collected fine shoes. It seemed unreal now.

She sniffled. There was no way anyone would let her near their children looking like that. For a moment, she thought about returning to her hiding-place. It would have been so easy just to sit there until she died of hunger and cold, probably even without any pain. She'd simply fall asleep and not wake up. As those thoughts swirled in Pansy's head, she unconsciously reached for the ring tied to a thread around her neck. That old family jewel was the only thing left from her old life. Pansy still couldn't understand why the Aurors hadn't taken it away along with everything else. Her fingers found the ring, and she felt an old familiar magic embracing her. An idea popped up in her head, and even though she didn't like it, it was much better than the one about dying under someone's stinky stairs.

She was too young to die. Too fucking young! She wasn't ready to let them win; those bastards who'd reduced her to this. She still clung to the asinine idea that she could make a comeback. She didn't know how and when, but when she did, she would show them all that she wasn't just a piece of rubbish, and definitely no one's whore. Defiantly jerking her chin up, she hitched the collar of the jacket up to her ears and marched forward with a sense of purpose. She needed to find a pawnshop.

It didn't take her long to find what she was looking for in Knockturn Alley. Luckily, she didn't see any familiar faces. The pawnshop was closed, but she could see a light inside. She knocked, and a shady-looking wizard opened the heavy door. Unimpressed with her, he tried to close the door, saying, "Shoo-shoo! I don't have any change for you."

Moving quickly, Pansy pushed her foot between the door and the frame, snapping, "I don't need your bloody change."

The wizard stopped trying to push her out, and asked, "What is it, then?"

She showed him the ring. His colourless eyes sparkled with excitement, and he stepped back, letting her into the shabby shop.

It took a while for them to negotiate a price, since the bastard tried to rip her off. Well, that didn't work. Pansy Parkinson hadn't been born yesterday and knew a thing or two about diamonds and emeralds. They did eventually meet somewhere in the middle. There was a moment of hesitation on her part, when it was time to complete their transaction, and she had to let go of the ring. Her heart tightened painfully in her chest, and a hard lump lodged itself in her throat. It hadn't dawned on her until then that she was about to give up the only thing that she had from her mother. It was hard to let go.

Ignoring the burning in her eyes for the second time in one blasted morning, she gave up the ring, though not before she made the wizard write her a receipt, in which he vowed not to sell it for at least six months. It wasn't a guarantee, of course. The wizards of Knockturn Alley were unreliable. She also didn't know how, when, or if she would have an opportunity to buy the ring back. But she needed to have at least a semblance of hope, unfounded though it probably was, in order to keep going. So she deceived herself. She was, after all, a Slytherin, a master of deceit.

Noticing her internal battle (because her stupid eyes couldn't stop burning), the wizard asked why she wanted to sell the ring. She was surprised by his sudden concern...he didn't come across as a particularly compassionate type - but decided to tell him about her predicament anyway.

The second she mentioned that she needed a new robe and shoes, the wizard's face lit up with a greedy smile. "Ah, my dear. You're in the right place, then. I have everything you need." With that, he disappeared into the adjoining room, and then rushed back holding a grey robe and short black boots. "Here, not new, but a lot of life left, I'd say."

No fucking compassion here, Pansy thought as she warily eyed the shoes and the robe. They looked stolen. But she was in no position to complain, since she couldn't very well waltz into Madam Malkin's shop. "How much?" she said, knowing damn well what was coming. Of course, it took her another thirty minutes to negotiate the price, but this time it was much harder. The bastard was determined to get his money back, or at least a good chunk of it. Like a shark that felt blood, he didn't budge until she'd paid him almost two-thirds of the money he had given her for the ring. By the time she left the shop, she felt exhausted and almost as violated as after the incident in the bakery, though it was her soul that had been fucked this time.

Still, she had a new robe, new boots, and a receipt for her ring, securely hidden in one of the pockets, and that was what mattered. The streets were already a little too crowded for comfort. Hiding her face under the hood of the robe, she hurried to the address given in the Prophet. She quickly found a detached brick house and knocked on the door, which opened with a squeak. She looked up and froze with her mouth open.

"Miss Parkinson, what are you doing here?" the man at the door asked eventually.

Refusing to acknowledge the feeling of doom settling in her stomach, she forced a smile and said, "I'm here about your ad, and it's nice to see you again, Professor Lupin."

Of course, it just had to be her former Professor, who probably knew all too well about her current situation. She could see that he had been taken by surprise and, judging by his incredulous expression, he didn't consider the surprise a nice one. "Oh, my ad," he said after a long pause.

"Yes, the one about a governess, in the Prophet," she said, fighting the urge to roll her eyes. The man was so bloody slow.

"I ..." He pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Yes," she said. "I gather you need one?" Narrowing her eyes, she waited for the inevitable rebuke.

"Yes, I ... we ... need one. I'm just not sure that..."

She didn't let him finish. "Oh, no need to continue, Professor. Thank you for giving me a chance. It was very kind of you." Pansy turned on her heel and took a few steps. She was bluffing, of course, but it was what she knew best. Plus, she really hoped it would work.

"Miss Parkinson, wait."

Suppressing a triumphant smile, she spun around. "Professor Lupin?"

"I think it would be prudent for us to talk first. Please, come in," he said, stepping back with an inviting gesture.

Yes! She thought and followed him inside.