

Memento Mori

by Memento

This story deals with the Malfoy family; it begins with Narcissa Black's first day in Hogwarts and ends with her grandson Scorpius' time in school.

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 21

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- Prologue -

LECTORI SALUTIM!

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair; we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way...

CHARLES DICKENS – A Tale of Two Cities

Ah, there you are! I've already been waiting for you. Now hurry up! Frankly, being so tardy without a proper excuse is very impolite, but I suppose that's just the way it is with you young people nowadays. Well... I had prepared an excellent speech to welcome you all, but seeing how late it is now, I'm afraid I've got to shorten it considerably. Now don't you complain, you've got only yourself to blame, you know!

Ehem... For those of you who are so unfortunate as not to know who I am yet, allow me to introduce myself. My name is Professor Phineas Horatio Emerald Nigellus – I am *sure* you have at least heard of me. Yes, of course you have. In my time, I was an Honourable Member of the Wizengamot, and for more than thirty years, I've been Headmaster in Hogwarts, School for Witchcraft and Wizardry. As it is, I am dead – technically – for ninety-four years, next October, so that you've got to content yourself with my portrait self. I'm sure you don't mind.

Unlike most of my colleagues, I've kept an open mind for the world around me, even after my own death, and since no one else has bothered to volunteer, I've made it my profession to serve as a historian, a collector you might say, as the memory of this noble school, its chronicler, and ultimately, also as an editor of the story you have come to hear. Which was a difficult labour, as you can imagine. So many things have happened, so many voices had to be heard, memories had to be collected and sorted... I've worked day and night for more than a year.

But the results have not failed to satisfy me and reward my efforts. I am pleased to be now able to present you with a first-hand version of the story, how *really* happened, or at least with the closest version of reality possible among so many people who all have had their own points of view. I was able to convince some of the eyewitnesses and participants to conserve their memories by magic so they could be examined by the means of a Pensieve. Others were so kind to write down protocols of their experiences. I've interviewed a couple of other portraits, evaluated official documents from the Ministry of Magic and so forth, and brought it all into a rational order. Also,

you can take a look at the seven-volume-edition, recording the famous Harry Potter's school-time. I was told that it is by now available in Muggle shops, too.

I will start my recounting in September 1967, and basically move on chronologically, unless I feel that a short detour to past events needs to be made for your better understanding. So be attentive, I won't repeat myself merely because you rascals think you can interrupt while I am speaking! I also advise you to be patient – patience is a *virtue*, but it appears to be considered old-fashioned nowadays. It is for your own benefit, you know. It is my firm belief that this story can tell you a lot about life and human nature in general, if you've got it in you to listen, which is, sadly enough, a –

– *My dear Phineas, I think this is really enough of an introduction. Do not test your audience's patience too much*–

Excuse me? Oh, yes, yes... My dear fellows, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls – please allow me to introduce you to my assistant editor, Professor Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, former Headmaster and one of my successors. Incidentally, since we're talking about them, in the corner over there, you can see Professor Armando William Benvolio Dippet – try not to wake him up, please; he can be a little tiresome once he's awake, and we don't want him to interrupt our tale –

– *Phineas, go AHEAD, please!* –

Yes, yes... Talking about *patience*... However – I shall thus begin...

Lectori... Hail to the reader!

The Beginning

Chapter 2 of 21

Narcissa Black comes to Hogwarts and is quite displeased.

- Chapter One -

THE BEGINNING

This was love at first sight, love everlasting: a feeling unknown, un hoped for, unexpected ... in so far as it could be a matter of conscious awareness; it took entire possession of him, and he understood, with joyous amazement, that this was for life.

THOMAS MANN *Early Sorrow*

"I'll die with shame if my next sister comes to Slytherin as well," Bellatrix sighed, gazing at the long row of first years, but not looking embarrassed at all. She never did. There couldn't possibly be a single thing in the world that could ever make Bellatrix Black embarrassed, Lucius thought dimly and followed her gaze. Gosh, had *he* looked that small and intimidated as well? The new students were clearly frightened, uncomfortably shuffling their feet and clenching their tiny hands. He *couldn't* have been that small.

"At least, she's holding herself well," Bellatrix exclaimed, half derisive, half satisfied. "If there's one thing that girl can do, it's keeping *hecounenance*."

"Which one is it, anyway?" Carrow asked.

"The little blonde, with the haughty expression. Can't you tell?"

Some of the boys laughed, and Rabea Lestrangle snarled, "Since*you're* not blond, Black, we've got to tell by the haughty expression, right?"

The two girls squabbled, much to their house mates' delight, but Lucius had caught sight of the girl that was supposedly the youngest Black sister, and he recoiled slightly. Whatever he had expected, this was not it. Bellatrix Black was three years his senior and therefore naturally a superior, by age as much as by her attitude. She had a natural confidence that was hard to match, even though Lucius himself didn't lack self-confidence either. Tall, athletic, with thick, shiny, black hair, equally shining black eyes and great looks, she was a true sight to be seen, even a thirteen-year-old boy could judge that. The next Black sister was in his own year, a Slytherin too, but totally lacking the proper house pride that was what Bellatrix' first comment referred to. Andromeda was very pretty as well, with chestnut brown hair and light brown eyes, not quite as tall as Bella, by no means so athletic, and certainly not nearly as intimidating.

Their younger sister though... She was very small, in every respect. In later years, he'd call such a frame 'petite', but at that day, he hadn't known that term yet. He could only see the slender shoulders, covered by sleek, golden blond hair, a small face in profile with very distinct features and an unearthly complexion. He thought that complexion must be due to the candlelight, but a quick glance assured him that none of the other children looked like that. She was pale, like milk running over marble, perhaps, somewhat translucent, somewhat strange. Certainly, neither of her older sisters had such a face.

"Aubrey, Bernadette," Professor Slughorn read out; a girl with thick curls stepped forth and sat down on the rickety stool, the row of students moved on, and Lucius could only see the back of that little Black girl.

"Why am I getting worked up about this, anyway," Bellatrix grumbled, her eyes fixed on her sister's back. "She's too bright to be a Hufflepuff and hasn't got enough of a backbone to be in Gryffindor."

"And since when does a *backbone* belong in Gryffindor?"

"Oh, shut up, Lestrangle, you know what I mean. My little Cissy isn't anywhere close to bravery, I tell you that. She knows how to keep out of trouble."

"And you're quite sure she really *is* your sister?"

"I keep asking my mother, but she won't stand for shhhh! Be quiet now!"

Professor Slughorn had called out 'Black, Narcissa', and the girl sat down on the stool. For two seconds, Lucius could see her face fully, feeling oddly struck. She didn't seem nervous at all, but supremely self-assured, and then, the moment was gone. The shabby old hat fell down to her shoulders, threatening to drop further yet since she was so tiny, and a swift look at Bellatrix told Lucius that she was much more anxious than her sibling sitting up there.

Narcissa Black herself found she had different problems. That hat smelled *dawful*, she didn't wish to start considering *what* exactly she was smelling there, or what might be stuck in her hair once she got rid of it again. She wasn't too curious to which House she would be sorted she'd make Slytherin, as sure as her name was 'Black', and even if not, it'd be all the same boring business anyway. Narcissa had little taste to make friends with anyone around here.

She heard a small voice in her head. 'Hmm... That's a hard one to call, isn't it?'

"You tell me," she muttered, repelled by the horrid stink around her.

'Loads of brains... A sly knowledge of how to use 'em... Staunch loyalty if needed... And no fear...'

'Now what should I be afraid of?'

'You're a cheeky one, are you?'

'I cannot say that, but what *I can* say is that roughly a hundred people are waiting out there still. If I were you, I'd hurry up a bit.'

'Just like your sisters.'

'Were they cheeky as well?'

'No, they, like you, were particularly hard to sort. They both would have been in good hands in Gryffindor, too.'

'And how come they ended up where they are?'

'They wanted it.'

'So do I.'

'Why?'

'Because I know what's expected of me there.'

'That's just the kind of reply I'd expect from a true Slytherin, child. You shall have your wish then.' *Slytherin!*

The smelly hat was lifted off her again, and without a further look, she walked over to the Slytherin table. She spotted Bella, who was clearly trying her best to suppress a pleased expression. "Blimey, now I'm stuck with you, ain't I?"

"Don't worry, I reckon I'm old enough to do without a nanny!"

"So you are little Cissy?" Travers asked with a sneer.

"Indeed, I am not," she replied calmly. "My name is *Narcissa*, if you don't mind."

Bella chortled, pushing the girl next to her away to make place and ushering her sister to sit down. "That's right, Travers! There are exactly two people entitled to call her 'Cissy', that's me and Andy The Odious Oddball over there. I believe an introduction is in order. Cissy that pert person here is Marianne Travers."

She beckoned to the stout girl and went on, pointing at several people. "That's Venus and Elias Yaxley Rabea Lestrangle Amycus Carrow Damocles Belby Bertram Higgs Lucius Malfoy "

A couple of people beckoned at her, among them a tall, silver-blond boy with a high and mighty sneer curling his lips, which she returned just as dauntlessly. Bella introduced more people to her, but she paid little attention, more occupied with ignoring the stares of the Malfoy boy. Hadn't his mother taught him not to stare at people?! More first years trailed over, some of whom she knew by sight, some better unfortunately and Bella chatted away.

"Lucius, we need to win this year; I've got a bet running with my bloody sister. Not you, Cissy, of course. You know, Lucius here is a very decent flyer."

"Is he," she muttered in a bored voice, positively hating the boy for his smug grin in that moment. "I'm delighted to hear it."

"Now that you're in Hogwarts, you'll finally have to take some interest in Quidditch, kid. Paramount matter."

Narcissa shrugged and exhaled in silence. This was going to be every bit as bad as she had imagined it. Malfoy eyed her in amusement, asking, "So I take it you dislike Quidditch?"

"I don't think 'dislike' is the right word," Narcissa said, looking straight at him now and smiling softly. "I think it is a perfectly pointless way to spend one's time, racing through the air and being bludgeoned by some stray Bludgers, but watching it is an even greater waste of time, if you ask me. I do not *dislike* Quidditch. I detest it."

"Now, now, Cissy," Bella sniggered. "Keep calm. I told everyone how cool you were."

"Excuse me. I merely meant to answer the question," Narcissa said loftily, not taking her eyes off Malfoy and arching a brow. "I hope you're not so easily offended?"

"Not at all, I assure you." Lucius returned that look likewise, but was privately wondering what he had done to get on the wrong side of this person in less than a minute. ~~He~~ hadn't called her 'Cissy', ~~he~~ hadn't started talking about Quidditch. As far as he could see, he hadn't done *anything* to account for her obvious contempt. Bellatrix was quick-tempered, undoubtedly, and rather violent when annoyed. Her sister didn't seem like one to start hurling curses around, admittedly, but like one to hold grudges instead, and if anything, oddly enough, he didn't want her to be cross with him.

What did he care? He didn't depend on little Narcissa Black's approval of him or not! Who was she, anyway? All right, her eldest sister was pretty formidable, but what about the other one? If ~~he~~ had been in her place, he wouldn't have been that proud! ~~He~~ was Lucius Malfoy, ~~he~~ was the last and only descendant of England's eldest and noblest dynasty, ~~he~~ had no brothers or sisters to shame him, ~~and~~ he was the heir to the country's largest gold treasure! Okay, the Blacks were a very old and very noble family, too, and more than merely well off, financially. Nonetheless! She had no reason to disapprove of him!

He got through dinner tolerably well, but as soon as he was in the dorm with his mates, he no longer held back and spluttered with anger. Graham tilted his head, listening in silence, and murmured eventually, "I wouldn't bother if I were you, Lucius."

"I do not *bother!*"

"Could have fooled me there," Bertie said gleefully.

"All I'm saying is that she's holding her chin up way too high!"

"I don't see what she's done to you to make such a fuss about it. She's barely spoken three words!"

"But the way she's been *looking*!"

"So how has she been looking then?"

The way she had looked at him had slapped him around the face, but he wouldn't have spoken that aloud for the world. He was still trying to figure out what it was about her skin, why it would glow like that, or how any person in the world could have such long, silky black lashes.

"Honestly, Lucius, you mustn't take that amiss. A lot of girls don't dig Quidditch," Graham muttered genially. "And apart from that, I thought she was quite all right."

Yaxley giggled. "Yeah, right. And as my father would say give her a few more years and she'll be some nice piece of crumpet, I bet you!"

Lucius irritably turned around, joining the other boys' 'ewww!', but Yaxley simply shrugged, murmuring that he was just saying 'how it is'. Presumably, he meant that she'd be as pretty as her two sisters, but Lucius found that *this* was obvious anyway and by no means an excuse. He was accustomed to Bellatrix' whims and extravagances, but another prima donna like her would disturb the balance, certainly, and good-looking or not, a first year had no *right* to loathe Quidditch!

Thoroughly disgruntled, he finally fell asleep, but even in his dreams, that weird kid haunted him. He dreamt that he was trying out for the House Team, he was doing fine, until he realised that it was none other than little Narcissa Black evaluating the performances, and from there on, everything went wrong. Diving after the Quaffle, he did a back flip, utterly embarrassing himself because his robes slipped over his head and revealed his underpants; his hands became so sweaty, he dropped the Quaffle; and next, he was shocked to find that the Black girl swirled a club, hurling a Bludger at him. He tried to dodge it, but it was no good; the Bludger hit his forehead just like that, and he passed out, faintly noticing that he fell off his broom.

He woke up in the moment when he was crushed on the ground in his nightmare, bolting straight up in his bed and panting. Merlin's beard, what ~~was~~?! 'Calm yourself, it's just a dream' he told himself, but that wouldn't do. He was a *good* flyer, an *excellent* flyer to be precise, *no one* was going to see his boxers, he'd be wearing gloves during try-outs and matches, and the last thing he was afraid of was a blasted Bludger, for heaven's sake! Now this girl was in school one day and already giving him nightmares!

"You okay, Malf?" Graham groaned sleepily in the bed next to him.

"What?"

"You sort of squealed."

"I *never* squeal," he retorted snidely, slumbering on his cushion again, grateful for the curtains concealing his undignified pose. He was strangely afraid of going back to sleep what if he had another nightmare? The guys would die laughing at him, even more so when guessing who it was that scared him so. If it had been of any comfort to him, it would have interested him to know that 'little Narcissa Black' had no pleasant night, either, in the part of the dungeons that hosted the girls' dormitories.

She wasn't exactly haunted by nightmares her burden was far more tangible. It had taken her roughly five seconds while unpacking her luggage to see that she hated literally, *hated* her new dorm-mates. Perpetua Parkin was a plump girl from a butcher dynasty with matching manners; then there were two giggling cows named Valeska Tugwood she had introduced herself as 'Lassie' and Jeanie Greengrass and a nosy, brazen person by the name Martha Jorkins, who had lost no time and tried to go through the books that Narcissa had brought.

She'd be stuck with those characters for seven solid years; good heavens, what had she done to deserve such punishment? She wasn't surprised that Perpetua Parkin snored like a singing saw she ought to see a Healer about her sinuses, to be sure. Narcissa couldn't remember ever having felt more miserable than now, lying in her bed and struck by dark premonitions of her future. She had practically begged her parents to be allowed to stay at home and continue to study with some tutors. But Mr and Mrs Black, normally inclined to oblige any of their youngest daughter's wishes, had not yielded this time.

"You'll be 'aving so much *fun*, chérie," her mother had said.

"You'll find Hogwarts *brilliant*," her father had assured. "You'll like it so much, you will hardly want to go home for the holidays!"

Yes. *Right*. If someone had asked her in this moment, she would have offered them her entire share of her parents' inheritance, or vowed to start playing Quidditch, if only they allowed her to return to London next thing in the morning!

Meet The Malfoys

Chapter 3 of 21

It remains to be seen who's the more sympathetic member of the family - junior or senior? One hates all women, the other can't get enough of them.

MEET THE MALFOYS

Neminem prope magnorum virorum optimum et utilem filium reliquisse satis claret.

SEPTIMIUS SEVERUS

He gazed at the pretty girl in his arms, once more pleased. She was ~~was~~very pretty. A pretty sight to behold, yes. She was breathing gently, her chest was a perfect study. When she was asleep like this, he sometimes fancied himself in love with her. Sincerely. And why should he not be, as pretty as she was? That question, of course, was a

total sham.

He closely regarded each single bit of her, top to bottom, starting with her hair. One could tell that she took great care of her appearance, that more than one spell was needed to make her hair so shiny, so smooth. Right now it was the tiniest bit greasy, and it only made her look even better. The glossy strands softly curled over her temples, half-hiding her ear, pouring down over her shoulders and tickling her trim stomach. Her face was even and symmetrical, and when she was asleep, irresistibly peaceful. One could see whatever one craved in these features when she was sleeping. She plucked her brows to perfect shape; there was nothing in this face that... Indeed, artful care had made her every feature perfect, yet, at the same time, meaningless.

Smooth skin with just the right measure of tan, a great figure, perfect hair right out of a commercial. Not a single hair astray, not even now, after spending the night with him. He gave a dry laugh, but stopped at once. He mustn't wake her up. He liked her better when she was asleep.

In love?! What a ridiculous phrase to use. Maybe *she* was in love, though he doubted it, but *he* most certainly wasn't. And neither was she. Either he was getting a little soft in the head for being so sentimental, or for some other reason unfathomable, he had lately formed the distinct notion that *love* requested a certain depth. Which this girl lacked entirely. As shallow as she was pretty, she surely had a mad crush on him but she couldn't *love* him.

A small part of his mind was aware that she wasn't quite as stupid as he wanted her to be. Annoying, silly, mindless sure. But acknowledging that she was more than a pretty, brainless doll would also mean that he would have to take responsibility for his actions, and the greater part of his consciousness strongly disapproved of so much consequence. Taking her seriously would mean... well, what, really? Breaking up with her because he was deceiving her about the depth of his emotions for her? This wasn't true for a start. He had never pretended to take much interest. And he'd break up with her anyway. It was astounding how long they had been together, if he thought about it.

He chewed on his bottom lip. She was pretty. Perhaps he should have a bit more fun with her before telling her that it was over? Waste not.

'Diaboli virtus in lumbis', his father always said, right? On the other hand all the girls he went out with were uncommonly pretty. One could claim that he wouldn't do as much as sit down next to a plain girl at dinner. Why were these girls so silly, eh? He'd dump her, she'd cry and complain and tell all her friends what a bloody jerk he was and still he'd have a new girlfriend before the end of the week. Appraising her, he went through his list of eligible objects. Who was going to be next? He could make his pick as he pleased; half of the girls in school fancied him like mad, and there was still a long row of candidates that he hadn't disappointed yet.

But could he? Could he *really* pick whomever he liked? His jaw tightened and he winced back he had bit his own cheek. What would he say? He rehearsed the lines he had uttered so often his cheek was still hurting he must be bleeding, he was tasting the blood and a sudden thought darted through his mind. Why not do it differently this time? He was easily bored, and dumping a girl needn't be *boring*, right?

He stirred and carelessly reached out for her shoulder. "Wake up."

She blinked, thoroughly confused. "What is it?"

"I thought it'd interest you to know that it's over."

She made no reply, looking even more confused. This was going to be fun. Most of the time he didn't bother, but he knew very well what girls liked, how they wanted to be touched. All a mere matter of practise. His right hand cupped her face, carefully teasing, his left hand caressed her back. She closed her eyes again and enjoyed his kisses.

She gave little hums of pleasure, snuggling up to him, and with his most sardonic smile he asked, "You like it?"

Her only reply was a moan of delight.

"Relish it. This is the last time."

Her eyes flew open. "What?"

"It's bye-bye time."

"*What?*"

He brushed a kiss on her temple, still smiling broadly. "You heard me, didn't you?"

"Heard you?"

She was trembling and he took her in his arms, lifting her up. "I just told you that it's over. I'm breaking up with you. I'm dumping you. Call it what you like."

He hadn't really stopped kissing her when carrying her out of his bed and over to the windows, a fact of which she was utterly oblivious. "Breaking up...?"

"Yes. You see, I've made it a rule not to go out with a girl for more than three weeks, and you have expired that date for almost an entire month already. You may feel flattered if you wish."

Rather unceremoniously, he fumbled with his wand and pointed it at the window, opening it with a little flick. Another flick, and her robes, shoes, and underwear rose from the floor and hovered over, and out of the window, where they fell on the snowy ground. Her cloak was the last to go; she watched with wide eyes but no quick retort, until all she had left was Lucius' old Tornado T-shirt, which she was wearing.

It had sufficed anyhow. He should have tried this ages ago he had never enjoyed another break-up as much as this one. She was still speechless, and tears slowly welled up in her eyes. She stared at her wand, which he had pushed into her hand, and Lucius laughed.

"It's called *dumping*, dear," he drawled, brushing a kiss on her quivering lips. "Ever wondered why?"

So saying, he dropped her out of the window, too. He half expected that she wouldn't muster enough wits to use her wand, but before he had to soften her fall himself, she finally swished her wand and saved herself from further harm. He had to cast a Shield Charm to keep her from smashing the windows; standing scantily clad in the two foot high snow, she screamed all kinds of curses up to him, but seeing that this was not getting her anywhere, Chloe stamped her foot one last time, gathered her things and trudged away, down the swept way, lifting her arm for a rude gesture at his last remark "You can keep the T-shirt!"

Still sniggering, he took a shower, got dressed and went down for breakfast.

"Tell that chick to eat in your own room," Abraxas growled without looking up. "I don't fancy strangers at my table."

"I know, Father."

"If you know, why is it that I always have to endure your petty affairs?"

"Be glad you won't have to endure this particular one again."

This did the job. Abraxas lowered the *Daily Prophet* and threw his son a long glance, partly quizzical, partly amused. "Well, I must say I'm not sorry to hear this. I'd be even

more delighted if I could deceive myself sufficiently to believe that no other replica is already waiting in line."

Lucius sat down and grinned. "Envious, are we?"

Abraxas laughed heartily a sight that did not occur too often. "I pity you sincerely, boy. No such annoyance known as women. I wonder when you get enough of 'em."

"You're an old man, Sir. I reckon you've long forgotten the easy pleasures of youth."

The smile vanished as quickly as it had come. "You're one useless cad, boy. Fooling around with these mindless cows, as mindless as you are yourself. When will you finally start to make some sense of your life?"

"Soon enough, Sir. When you're dead, at the latest."

He knew that this was too much the moment he had said it. Abraxas could put up with some cheek when he was in good humour, but this was not one of those rare occasions. Old he might be, but still bloody fast when it came to retribution and Lucius had no chance left to react. In the blink of an eye, his father had produced his wand and thrown a curse at him, making his cup of coffee explode right before his face.

The humiliation was far worse than the actual pain. Hot liquid in his lap, splinters in his face and hands, he hurled a sequence of fierce insults at the old wizard, fumbling for his own wand to clear up that mess. He siphoned up the coffee, mumbled another spell to remove the splinters from his hands and reached out for one of the silver plates instead of a proper mirror to take care of his face.

"What's *wrong* with you?!"

"What is wrong with *you*, Lucius? Seriously, boy! You have no respect."

"Respect?! Are you crazy? Why the hell should I have respect for a fool such like yourself?! Iratus filio ipse te obiurga, Pater!"

"Careful, sonny." Abraxas' voice had sunk to a menacing gnarl. "I may be old, but I haven't lost any of my power. You don't want to mess with me."

"Stop calling me *sonny*, Father!"

"If you started behaving like a grown-up, I might give it a thought."

He found the hopefully last piece of porcelain and removed it, turning his head this way and that and checking his reflection in the plate. He mumbled a healing spell to prevent scarring and the bloody spots vanished one by one, leaving no visible trace. He was pretty good with healing charms; they were inevitable with a father like his.

"A couple of scars would do you good, sonny," Abraxas cackled spitefully. "And spare a dozen broken hearts, possibly!"

"Why do you worry for them if all girls are so bloody useless?"

"True. Yes, indeed, I have to admit you've got a point there." He sipped his coffee. "Why should I worry for other men's daughters when I've got enough worries for my own flesh and blood?"

It was always the same old story. His marks, his Quidditch results, his lack of interest in the *proper* things. No matter what he did, Abraxas could never be content with him, and he made no secret of his disapproval. Lucius didn't listen; he had heard that speech too often. Study harder, practise more blahblahblah. In his first year on the House Team, they had won the cup. Abraxas hadn't cracked as much as a smile. In his second year, he had broken the old school record and scored twenty-seven goals in the first forty minutes of a single match. Abraxas hadn't even mentioned it. In his third year, he had been made Captain, they had won the cup the third time in a row and not lost one match. Abraxas had merely sneered and muttered, "If you trained more, you might be a good player one day."

He had felt so damn good when getting up, and one breakfast with his father was enough to spoil his mood for the rest of the day. Merlin, he couldn't wait to get back to school. He was so displeased, he truly felt like going out, finding a new girl to drag home, only to spoil the old trout's day in turn. This was no struggle of adolescence Mr Malfoy senior and his son had never felt anything but mutual dislike for one another. The only reason why Abraxas had got himself a wife and produced a son was the need for a continuation of the ancient dynasty. A misanthrope by nature, he despised anyone and could hardly endure the sheer presence of others, let alone a child tormenting his nerves and ears. Or a wife.

Lucius could hardly remember his own mother. Shortly after his birth, she had been equipped with ample of money and sent on a journey, from which she had never really returned. When he was younger, she had sometimes shown up at Christmas or his birthday (but never both in the same year), and since he was eleven, he hadn't seen her again. She had gone back to her family in Southern Germany Lucius had visited her and his grandparents two or three times, but in all honesty he felt as little urge to see them as vice versa. Elisabeth had got married to her husband for the motivation of unimaginable riches; he had married her because her family was ancient and her blood untainted. That was all. And one day Lucius would do the same. Two thousand years of pureblood ancestry must be continued. He'd propose to one of those cows, and he'd have a son. This was no fantasy or wishful thinking but genuine fact a handy curse of old had taken care of the business. There could only ever be one Malfoy in each generation, always a boy, thus preventing the division of the family fortune, and consequently, these riches had accumulated beyond imagination. He was only sixteen and already a made man, knowing for a fact what his future had in store for him. And if there was one thing for sure it was this *he* would be a better father than old Abraxas!

Neminem... It is a well-known fact that only few of the great have fathered a good, competent son.

Diaboli... The devil is in the loins.

Iratus... If you're angry with your son, blame yourself, father!

The One - The Only

Oh, just imagine the frustration of a boy who's got everything he wants when finding out that there are ~~some~~ things that money and good looks cannot buy.

- Chapter Three -

THE ONE THE ONLY

Behold, thou art fair, my love; behold, thou art fair; thou hast doves' eyes within thy locks: thy hair is as a flock of goats, that appear from mount Gilead. Thy teeth are like a flock of sheep that are even shorn, which came up from the washing; whereof every one bear twins, and none is barren among them. Thy lips are like a thread of scarlet, and thy speech is comely: thy temples are like a piece of a pomegranate within thy locks. Thy neck is like the tower of David builded for an armoury, whereon there hang a thousand bucklers, all shields of mighty men. Thy two breasts are like two young roes that are twins, which feed among the lilies. Until the day break, and the shadows flee away, I will get me to the mountain of myrrh, and to the hill of frankincense. Thou art all fair, my love; there is no spot in thee.

SONG OF SOLOMON King James Version

In at least one respect Abraxas was perfectly right, of course. Lucius was a lazy student. In his case one could well say that talent and laziness were evenly balanced, resulting in slightly-above-average marks. The boy himself could not have cared less; it wasn't like he'd have to apply for a job one day, right? And those subjects that would have raised his interest were sadly, deplorably really banned from his own school. But there were lots of other things to do, Quidditch for instance, parties to attend, pretty girls to seduce.

Speaking of girls he had found himself a new girlfriend before the start of term. This one was called Imogen, Imogen Vaisey of the Swansea Vaiseys. He had settled for blonde this time, with small, diminutive breasts. Nothing like the real thing. But, he kept reminding himself, if you can't have the real thing, you just ought to settle for the second best. That tenet left a stale taste he was *Lucius Malfoy* after all! Nothing but the very best for him, eh? But what could he do? Nothing, nothing... And the bottom line was Imogen would have to do until the next second best thing came along.

Predictably enough, Chloe was a little upset, to put it mildly. As an additional unfortunate circumstance, Imogen was her dorm-mate, causing a bit of a fuss between the two. Not that he minded. In fact, he found it rather amusing. What the heck was she thinking? She must know the exact details of the dumping by now, and still she assumed that she'd be better off eventually? How stupid could one person be? Among his pals he was a hero though. He was very popular anyway, because he was great at Quidditch, because the only thing his father had ever taught him was that well-aimed generosity never failed to do the trick, because he emanated an air of self-confidence and ease that was quite irresistible, and last but not least because he had had more girls than the rest of his mates put together. But the tale of his break-up with Chloe propelled his fame to so far unimaginable heights. The guys had never been more impressed.

There was one particular thing he had looked forward to going back to school oh well rather say that it was half heaven, half hell. Literally. He suffered and relished it at the same time. Each day had at least three special moments in store for him breakfast, lunch and dinner and it was by no means the food that elicited so much excitement. At breakfast, lunch and dinner he saw *her*. The *real* thing. The one girl he could never have and that he couldn't stop pining for, ever since the moment he had first set his eyes on her. Naturally, he had taken some time to understand this. Back then, three years ago, he had been a small kid really, strangely mesmerised by an unknown girl that had waited for her turn to be sorted into one of the Houses.

She had caught his eye at once; she must have caught anybody's eye and full attention. She had sat down on the stool; the Sorting Hat had slouched over her tiny shoulders and taken ages to sort her out. Back then, he could not have accounted for it, but all the time, he had crossed his fingers and prayed, 'Slytherin, let her be a Slytherin!' He had got his wish, but that was as lucky as he had ever got with her since.

She had the looks of an angel and the temper of a demon from hell. No, that wasn't right. As a matter of fact he admired her temper even more than her beauty. She was smart, smarter than anyone else he knew. She was quick-witted, in a way that could hurt more than curses. Most of all, she was perfectly independent. She cared for no one's opinion, not for fashion or gossip, Quidditch or peers or parties. He had not once seen her without a book, the only thing she ever did was reading. She was an excellent student, and even this did not appear to interest her the tiniest bit. He could have continued forever listing all her marvellous qualities, but to cut a long story short: Narcissa Black was the coolest witch he had ever met. She was so cool, in fact, that she wanted nothing to do with him. She hated him. Well, she basically hated everyone, but with him it was personal.

As soon as she had been a second year, he had plucked up all his courage and dared to ask her out to Hogsmeade, because he knew a secret way out of the school to circumvent the prohibition for younger students. She had been puzzled for a moment he'd never forget her expression. She had critically appraised him, her sapphire blue eyes narrowed, her marble brow slightly furrowed, and then she had shrugged and smiled that incomparable smile. "Sure, why not."

For approximately five seconds, he had been in paradise. Dear Merlin, his heart racing, his breath caught, he had smiled, too, *but then then* his mates had appeared on the scene, who had overheard the conversation. They had screeched and laughed and cackled, Marlon holding his belly for laughing so hard, and Yaxley had shouted, "Look, she's blushing! Awww! Got a little crush on him, have you, Black?"

The others had made comments of a similar kind, and Lucius had been so stumped that he hadn't managed to react immediately. Narcissa *had* reacted though. She had put on her iciest face, arched a brow and said coldly, "My, I hadn't yet figured *what* a total prat you are, Malfoy."

And thus she had turned on her heel and marched away, straight-backed, dauntless, proud. He had called after her, in a last desperate attempt, "Next weekend then?"

She had not turned around; she had merely raised her arm and made a gesture that had unmistakably answered the question instead. Directly after cursing the guys (which had been seen by old McGonagall and brought him three nights of detentions), he had rushed after her, he had tried to explain, to apologise, but she would not listen. She wouldn't even be in the same room with him. He had written her letters, which she hadn't opened but thrown at once into the next fireplace. He had even sprayed a huge graffiti in the Entrance Hall at night, spelling 'Narcissa, Forgive Me'. She had never seen it, because Filch, the useless caretaker, had caught him in the act and forced him to remove it without magic! only with a toothbrush, all through the night.

And since then, she had only gotten prettier, wittier, more excellent in each and every respect. There was no girl in this school remotely as pretty as Narcissa, was there? Blast it. Why the heck did he have such a selective taste? Unexpectedly, she had grown rather tall, and even in the unbecoming school robes, one could still tell that she had a great body, a body that promised to be as perfect as that face of hers. And what a face it was! If he hadn't found it beneath his dignity, he would have asked that Hufflepuff Mudblood that was dating her sister to draw her, even though no picture could ever capture those delicate features faithfully enough, those stunning dark blue eyes, the silkiness of her lashes, the velvet of her cheeks, the softness of those lush lips, the immaculate arch of her brows, the tower of ivory that was her neck... But he must not dwell on it, he kept reminding himself, it was no good. She hated him, and in turn, he was determined to hate her as well. All right, be careless, at least. All he needed was a bit more practise. She was a smart aleck after all, was she not? What was he supposed to do with a girl who knew just everything, and everything better than him?! What sort of relationship was it going to be, with a girl with more talent than he had?!

"Uhm..." Graham cleared his throat, looking uneasy. "Er, Lucius... I just thought you should know, but "

He gave a little start. "What?"

"You're doing it again "

"Doing what?"

He lowered his voice. "You're *staring at her* again..."

"No, I'm not!"

He looked down at the chessboard, finding that this total moron Goyle had beaten him in only twelve moves without his notice, and in a sudden uproar of anger, he hurled the board into the fireplace.

"I'm sorry," Graham mumbled, twisting his face and getting up to summon the figures. Yeah Lucius was sorry, too, although not for losing his temper. He felt ~~entitled~~ to lose his temper being beaten by Goyle of all persons in chess *ridiculous!*

He wasn't the only one with an awful crush on her; all the guys in school unanimously agreed that there was no other witch that could compare to her. His only luck was that she didn't want any of these blokes either. They had *all* asked her out, every single boy in Slytherin and Ravenclaw, everyone with a little boldness in Hufflepuff, and even half of the Gryffindors. She had always refused; actually she was quite famous for her snide rebukes.

One of the first ones had been Elias Yaxley, Lucius' very own dorm-mate. Gee, he had been frothing with rage, downright telling Yaxley what he'd do with him if he dared to approach her. Yaxley had been impressed, but not frightened enough not to give it a try nonetheless. In the middle of the Slytherin Common Room, he had boldly headed for her and put on his sleaziest smile. In *that* second, Lucius had had *very* violent fantasies, but he had called them off when witnessing Narcissa's reply.

Yaxley had coughed to raise her attention, but she hadn't looked up. "You should see Madam Pomfrey. Sounds like you've got yourself a serious case of bronchitis."

"What? Oh er... I wondered if you've got any plans for the next weekend yet," Yaxley had said bravely.

"Yes."

Lucius had felt his tension slowly decrease. Yaxley wouldn't have any success there, so much had been clear only the boy himself hadn't noticed yet.

"And the weekend after that? Or the Halloween Ball?"

"Get lost, Yaxley," she had simply said. Good girl.

"Oh, come on, don't be like that. You've got to give people a chance, Black!"

She had sighed, slowly straightened up and given him a very bored look. "So that's what I've got to do, you think?"

"Yes! Definitely! Look, you can't know how nice a bloke may be if you haven't given him a chance to prove it!"

"Ah, I see. And *you* are one of those *nice blokes*, right?"

"Indeed, you will see once you "

"Get me right, Yaxley I won't go out with you, no matter how much more you bother me. I haven't the faintest wish to find out anything about you; what I know so far is more than enough to convince me that I'd rather take the veil than spend only half an hour with you. Why don't you just spare your breath and pester some other girl?"

Yaxley had been deeply red by then, clenched his fists and spat, "You're ending up an old spinster, Black, which is all the better; I'd pity the poor lad who'd have to put up with you and your foul temper and "

"For a *nice bloke* who wanted to ask me out thirty seconds ago still, that's an interesting statement, Yaxley. Doesn't really encourage any of the other girls round here to 'give you a chance', don't you agree? I suggest you reconsider your strategy and try it with a Hufflepuff next. I've heard they're not fussy."

Lucius had pulled himself together enough not to applaud and put on the most compassionate face he could muster when his mate had returned like a dog beaten, growling, just waiting for a chance to bite. Served him right enough.

Now this was his first evening in Hogwarts after the holidays. Next to him Imogen, and five seats further down the aisle was Narcissa, lovely, gorgeous Narcissa. That wasn't prone to improve his opinion on his latest acquisition. Imogen chattered away, uninteresting stuff that he hardly listened to while unobtrusively squinting over. Blimey, she was goddamn *gorgeous!* Those cheekbones! The turn of her head!

"Lucius?"

"Hm?"

"Yes or no? Please, say yes! *Pleeeaaase!*"

Imogen smiled expectantly, and he racked his brains for what on earth she might have asked. "Sorry. What'd you say?"

Chloe, who sat nearby as well, sneered and snapped, "Get used to it, sweetie. He'll *never* listen to a single word you say!"

True. Admittedly. But that wasn't due to a bad memory. Though they never, never talked to each other, he had registered and memorised every word he had ever heard Narcissa utter. He could have written an entire book on her, on each of her gestures, her facial expressions, the rare occasions when she'd smile, how her voice would change between chill and casualty, indifference and commitment, mockery and contempt. He knew her face like the back of his hand, her finely chiselled cheeks and chin, the length of her lashes, the royalty of her nose, the soft curve of her rose petal lips. He knew each hair on her head; normally she'd tie it up, fastening it with an opal clasp, but sometimes, only sometimes, she'd let it fall over her shoulders and it would pour down like molten gold, shine like honey and ripe barley and amber and sand in the sunlight, sleek and shiny, waist-long silk. She was the very epitome of elegance and gracefulness, of composure and countenance. She would never raise her voice and what a pleasant voice it was! she never lost her temper, she always remained calm and controlled.

Narcissa was perfection itself, and he would have given his right arm, all his father's money, if only this sweetest of all creatures liked him just a little bit!

Kindred Spirits

Chapter 5 of 21

Narcissa meets a strange boy and takes a liking to him.

- Chapter Four -

KINDRED SPIRITS

Ludere si cupias, aequos socios tibi quaeras.

WALTHER Proverbia Sententiaeque

Narcissa turned the page, pretty much oblivious to the turmoil around her. She disliked the Common Room for all its commotion; she'd rather sit in the library or in her dorm, but on evenings such as this, she had to content herself with the noise and trouble instead. Students weren't allowed in the library after curfew, and the other girls were having quite a ball in their joint dorm. Jeanie had brought a trunk load of new clothes from home, and they were trying them on while getting drunk on sweet liquor. De duobus malis minus est eligendum.

The book was a Christmas gift from her father and utterly fascinating, at least for someone like her. Narcissa found Arithmancy thrilling; it was her favourite subject after potion-making, in fact, and she devoured her new lecture with utmost attention.

"Ehm... Excuse me..." A shadow fell over the pages, and irritably she looked up. A skinny first year that she knew by sight from the library was standing in front of her, his face showing awkwardness mingled with curiosity. "Forgive me, but I couldn't help noticing your book..."

"Yes...?"

"This *is* Wildsmith's latest anthology, isn't it?"

"It certainly is," she said in mild surprise. Only the worst Ravenclaw swots in her year did know this author. It was *very* advanced, and she didn't expect a first year to know as much as the author's name.

"You see I've wondered uhm... You see, this book is not available from the library... *Yet* well, at least that's what I *hope* that they'll get it sooner or later, I mean, and..." Scarlet crept up his sallow cheeks; he clasped his hands but didn't appear capable to utter any other word.

"You mean are you telling me you wish to what *borrow* it from me?"

"Yes!" he spluttered, obviously relieved, but his face only flushed more. "If it's not too much to ask, of course... I mean, I know how valuable it is, and you must be very reluctant to "

"No problem. I've almost finished it, you know?" She was surprised with herself for that statement. She wasn't known for her niceness, and she had no wish to change this. She found other people tiresome and dull, infinitely preferring to be on her own, and consequently staying away from company. "But why the heck are you even interested in this?"

The kid was suddenly beaming, adapting an almost dreamy expression. "Oh, I've read everything from Wildsmith that I could lay my hands on which isn't much, sadly very expensive, naturally "

"And very demanding to boot! You you're a first year, aren't you? What's your name?"

There must be no blood left in his body for it had all rushed up into his head. He was purple by now, his voice becoming a mere whisper. "I'm Severus... Severus Snape, Miss Black..."

She tilted her head and took a closer look. Everything was odd about this boy, his clothes for a start. They were worn-down, cheap cotton that was thin around the elbows, not so much black but a washed-out dark grey. Unlike her dorm-mates, Narcissa was no fashion expert, but she could tell for sure that those robes must be more fifth-than second-hand. The next drawback was his appearance as such. He was meagre to a degree that looked unhealthy, and 'unhealthy' was written all over his face as well, which was gaunt and sallow, and ruled by a very prominent hooked nose. Was he ill?

The next weird thing was his address. Except their teachers, *no one* ever called her 'Miss Black'. 'Black', if people meant to be particularly polite, but most of the time they were more rude and creative in making up names for her. Certainly, this boy couldn't afford to be rude, because he was only a first year, because he wanted her to lend him that book, but still she was half amused, half intrigued.

"Snape, Snape... Are you American?"

"No," he whispered unhappily. "I'm from Birmingham."

"Funny. Never heard of a family by that name."

"Yes... Of course not... I my well " He bit his lip, and for a second she feared that he might pass out on the spot. He opened his eyes again, announcing more boldly, "You could have heard my mother's maiden name though she's a Prince, of the Ely Princes "

"Ah, yes, yes. So your grandfather is *the* Severus Prince, right? The cauldron-maker?" He nodded feebly, and Narcissa suddenly got an unlikely idea. "So your father is Muggle-born then?"

"No..." He sounded deeply despairing, making her feel genuine pity. This was the oddest thing so far he was a Slytherin, and Slytherin House would only take pureblood students. This boy was a half-blood, so he must have the other Slytherin qualities in abundance, or he wouldn't be here, right?

"Come on, kid. You ought to keep your head up high. What's a Muggle father when you've got talent to make up?" All right, so this was like the feeblest comfort she could have uttered. In Slytherin, pure ancestry was *all* that mattered, at least in the eyes of the other students. Having Muggle parents must be an awful drawback in each and every respect, for every child that'd call themselves wizard or witch. But in Slytherin House, it was socially unacceptable. Poor boy. What had that sordid hat thought, putting him here of all places? Just to say something, she uttered, "My own cauldron was manufactured by your grandfather, incidentally. That kind of quality is no longer available, you know?"

He looked confused and indescribably grateful for so much praise. "So says my mum... But..."

She couldn't account for what she said next. Was it sheer pity, or a sense of rebelliousness? In any case, she put on her best smile and said, "If you are indeed interested in Arithmancy in general, I might have something for you, Severus Snape."

She told him to wait, went to the dorm and fetched Mortimer Knightley's anthology about the influence of numerical mysticism on everyday matters. She returned, finding the kid hadn't moved an inch. "There you go. Here. Take it." He clearly was too petrified to stir, and she pushed the book into his hands. "It's very interesting, and they don't have it in the library either. Something to pass the time until I can give you this one."

His gaze alternated between the book and herself, thoroughly incredulous. "You this thank you *so much*, Miss Black, I I don't know what to say, really, I I am "

"Relax, will you? Just take the frigging book and get lost." She smiled once more. "And tell me how you've liked it."

'Tell me how you've liked it?!' At first, Lucius had watched from the corner of his eye, but after a minute, he had abandoned all caution and simply stared over. *What the hell* was going on there?! Why was this positively ugly kid talking to Narcissa Black there? And what was more why hadn't she just kicked his butt, like she kicked everybody else's?! But there *there* yes. She had got up and marched away. Of course. The kid had looked as if he had been struck by lightning. Well, he was just a first year; he'd have to learn things, starting with the fact that one didn't simply address Narcissa Black.

But what was this? She came back? She handed him a book, and Lucius would have given a lot if he could have read the title. One glance was enough to know that the kid was an oddball, so what did he have to do with *her*? Imogen must have had the same thought, for in this second she cried, "That's fitting. He's as mad as she is."

"She's not mad."

"Oh, very well. *He* is mad, and she's just a haughty old cow. Still, don't they make a perfect couple?"

Lucius merely shrugged. He would *not* discuss the subject of Narcissa Black with anyone, least his present girlfriend. He wasn't so much scared of trouble with Imogen, but he would not acknowledge for the world that he had a soft spot for *her* of all persons. He wasn't keen on humiliating himself. He kept on observing the two; the kid left after another minute, and under a pretext, Lucius followed him to his dorm. Two other boys were there, lying on their beds as well. The ugly kid was reading in Narcissa's book, the other two were playing chess. All three looked up in amazement when he entered.

"Bugger off and don't come back for the next half an hour." He beckoned at the chess players, and they obeyed without protest, but a visible amount of glee. The ugly kid looked scared and strangely resigned. He probably believed that Lucius was going to beat him up or something; some of the elder students did those things with juniors. The impression must have got stronger because Lucius hexed the door soundproof after the chess boys had disappeared. The kid cautiously put his book away and made a gesture as if to say, 'Go ahead, I'm ready'.

"I'm not going to harm you, keep cool. You " He wondered what to say and narrowed his eyes. He had noticed this boy before... "Aren't you the kid who did that incredible transformation curse on that Gryffindor last week?"

"Yes," the kid muttered.

"Yes? Well, I must say... That was *pretty* good for a first year!"

"Thank you, sir." His uneven features reddened, and he stared at a point somewhere in the far corner of the room.

Lucius didn't get what was wrong with the child. He was being *nice*, wasn't he?! He had made it clear that he would *not* beat him, or curse him, he had even made him something like a compliment about his skills which hadn't even been a lie. If this was indeed the student who had performed that curse in the Charms corridor, he was a diamond in the rough as far as talent was concerned!

He cleared his throat and indicated the huge pile of books on the boy's bedside table. "So so you're a reader, eh?"

"Yes "

"And what is it that you've been reading there?" He pointed at the book the kid had been reading when Lucius had entered the room.

"That's that's not mine."

"I know, but that's not the answer to my question, is it?"

"Oh, the book! This is Mortimer Knightley's anthology on numerical mysticism."

That boy *was* an odd number! "I take it you're keen on *Arithmancy* then?"

"Yes, sir."

"But this you don't have Arithmancy before your third year!"

"No, sir, but I found it interesting nonetheless."

"Aha..." He had imagined something more exciting than this, honestly! "So you've borrowed it? From Black?"

"Miss Black was so kind to lend it to me, yes."

"Miss Black was so kind, oh yeah... Friend of yours?"

The boy was briefly confused, but vigorously shook his head then. "Oh, no, no. No, I wouldn't call it that."

"So what *would* you call it?"

"Tonight was the first time that I've ever talked to her, sir. But she was very friendly and obliging..."

Friendly and obliging? Narcissa Black? Why would she be nice to *this kid* and treat everybody else like dirt under her shoes?! "Was she? I see... So what did you talk about?"

"About books..."

Boring. On the other hand perhaps Lucius should give it a try and talk to her about books, too? Just that he didn't have much to say on that score he made a mental note to ask his dorm-mate Damocles; he was the cleverest of their bunch. Anyway... Maybe he should try to gain the boy's trust? No harm. "I don't think I know your name, pal."

"My name is Severus, sir."

"Severus, right. I am Lucius Malfoy."

"Yes, sir, I know. Of course."

"Quit calling me 'sir', will you. Who are your folks then? Someone I should know?"

"No, probably not. But I have heard about *your* family, naturally!"

Something was *really* weird about that boy, about the way he was looking and speaking, but Lucius couldn't point his finger at it. It didn't matter either. ~~What~~*nattered* here was that Narcissa had been *kind and obliging* to him. Lucius was clever and sly, and that he hadn't got a clue ~~yet~~ didn't imply that he wouldn't come up with some plot to exploit this source.

Ludere... If you want to play, look for equal partners.

De duobus... Of two evils, pick the lesser one.

Acts of Charity

Chapter 6 of 21

Narcissa decides to befriend little Severus.

- Chapter Five -

ACTS OF CHARITY

But charity begins at home, and justice begins next door.

CHARLES DICKENS Martin Chuzzlewit

It was a hard one to call who was most dumbfounded that evening. Neither the involved nor the bystanders could have given a plausible reason, least of all Narcissa. It was a chilling cold evening in January; the Slytherin Common Room was as crowded and rambunctious as ever. Everything was as usual. Narcissa Black came in with a large pile of books which was such a common sight that no one took notice except Lucius Malfoy, who always registered any of her moves.

She gazed around, found who she was looking for and headed for the skinny first year who was sitting on his own in a corner, brooding over his Transfiguration homework. She let the books slide onto the table before him, put on her best smile and announced, "There you go, Severus Snape."

He gave a start, peeked at the books, at her, and jumped up to make a little bow. "Miss Black!"

"I've written to my parents, and they've sent me some things I've asked them for. Here's the Wildsmith, which I would like to get back when you've finished. You can keep the rest if you like."

The boy's gaze returned to the eight fat tomes on the table before him; he opened his mouth and shut it again, but no sound would come. Helplessly, he looked back at her, to the books, to her, and with a little shrug, she murmured almost as insecurely as he clearly was, "Well, don't you want to have a look at them, at least?"

"Sure!" He took one book after the other, his face eloquent with amazement and enthusiasm. They were valuable and rare; Narcissa had only chosen specimens that weren't available in the Hogwarts Library. She felt almost sorry now that she had wanted to do the boy a favour, that she had believed she could help him. She had thought that he could simply sell any of these books and gain enough money to get himself some decent robes, and that he would be interested in the contents themselves, but seeing his face now, she regretted her unusual helpfulness. This wasn't like her anyway, was it?

After a while, he whispered, "Thank you! Thank you so much, Miss Black! I'll give them back to you as soon as I can! Actually, I'm as good as through with "

"Didn't you listen? You can *have* them. They're *yours*." She shrugged again. "Unless you don't want to have them, of course."

It turned out that he did want them. He was just shy and humble and inhibited. Narcissa felt strangely endeared to this weird child, who seemed to unite some of life's greatest disadvantages, and who could only claim for himself to be rather bright and advanced in his reading. Perhaps he reminded her of herself back then in her own first year in school. How she had hated it. How the prospect of seven whole years here had sickened her. Certainly, she still hated it, she still could hardly wait to see the day of her graduation, but she had accommodated well enough. The place was horrid, the classes were boring, and the other students unbearable well, one had to deal with the unpleasant aspects of life. Maybe it was just this. Maybe she just believed little Severus Snape to be a kindred spirit despite all the obviously different circumstances.

They sat down together; Severus Snape flicked through the books as if they were some treasure carefully, cautiously, reverently. She revised her notion that it had been a bad idea. These books could be in no better, more reverent hands. In a low voice, she asked him about his classes, straining to be as friendly as she could, which was a new experience for her. Normally, she tried to be as distant as possible, with no wish to befriend anyone.

He *was* clever. After a while he had lost enough of his inhibitions to talk more freely, eagerly speaking about his classes, the books he had read; both of them enjoyed their

conversation since they had no one else to talk to about such things. They didn't notice one bit how every eye in the room began to stare at them, by and by.

"Now I know why she doesn't want to go out with *me*," Elias Yaxley growled ungraciously. "She's just a frigging child molester!"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, get off it!"

"Don't talk so big, Lucius. If I remember correctly, she's turned you down as well!"

"I *told* you they'd make one lovely couple." Imogen looked thoroughly satisfied with herself, snuggling up to her boyfriend. "How foolish can a girl be, turning *you* down?"

He rolled his eyes. "Well, it's been some years."

"Funny, back then you must have been in her target group, age-wise. Perhaps you were just too sophisticated for her taste."

"Yaxley," Lucius snarled, putting as much menace in his voice as he could. "Perhaps *you* remember the curse marks I gave you then? Trust me, I've become even quicker, and I've learnt some nastier curses since then, too!"

"Calm down, pal! Why are you getting worked up about this? We're just having some fun."

"She's an arrogant bitch. She deserves it," Imogen said in a tone as if the matter was settled.

"Perhaps she *is* arrogant, but she's also smarter than *you* lot put together. And the same's true for the kid."

"Since when do *you* meddle with first years?"

Lucius adapted an indifferent expression and said lightly, "Oh, I've talked to him. He's all right."

Yaxley lifted a brow. "You are aware that he's a Mudblood, right?"

Nope, Lucius had *not* been aware of this, but he wouldn't let it show that Yaxley had taken him by surprise. Anyhow, that little piece of information explained *a lot*. "Yeah. So what."

"So *what*?! You taken a Bludger to the head, buddy?"

"He's not about to marry one of your sisters, Yaxley. Why don't *you* calm down?"

"He's a disgrace for our entire House! What's this abomination doing in *Slytherin*?"

That *was* a good question, if he indeed was a Mudblood, but Lucius was too much out of humour to side with Yaxley right now. "The Sorting Hat must have known what it was doing. Who are *you* to judge?"

"I beg your pardon?" His roommate looked at Lucius as if he were showing the first symptoms of Dragon Pox. "Seriously, Lucius, you might want to see Madam Pomfrey. You're not feeling well."

"I feel just fine, I assure you. It's just that you *are* so getting on my nerves! *You* are here by default, man, because you are too stupid for Ravenclaw, wouldn't fit in Hufflepuff either because you'd sell your own grandparents if the prize was good enough, and you've got nothing to do in Gryffindor because you're a bloody cowardly chicken." He glared over, subtly touching his wand through the fabric of his robes. Yaxley got the message, shut his mouth, and Lucius added less hostilely, "Just leave the kid alone."

Imogen was visibly proud of her sweetheart and patted his shoulder. "Right. Let's all be a little more social. My mother always says that more charity is what our community needs."

"Giving your old clothes to the Witches of Mercy isn't exactly charity," Chloe butted in. "Not enough fabric to warm the poor."

The two girls exchanged a couple of venomous scowls; Imogen prevailed in the end by simply taking Lucius' hand and putting it on her thigh. For Merlin's sake, he had enough. He reclaimed his own limbs, pushed her up and said coolly, "Fancy a walk, dear?"

"Sure!" She gave a shrill giggle. "Nothing as exciting as taking a *walk* with you, after hours!"

He returned to the dungeons as a free man. Imogen returned as a weeping bundle. He had endured her insipidity long enough, and for the first time in some years, he was determined to remain single for now. Sex wasn't everything, was it?

That night in their dorm Damocles remarked confidentially, "You don't stand a chance. You know that?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I can well understand why you would dump Vaisey. A dozen sound reasons to get rid of her. Yet I can't help feeling that you've done it for the wrong reason."

"And that would be?" Lucius glared at him, ready to curse him on the spot.

"Relax, Lucius. I mean well."

"Oh, do you?"

"Yes, I do. I'm not blind, you know? Don't make a fool of yourself; you can have every chick you want. Don't waste your pride and time *on this one*."

The Chosen Few

Horace Slughorn has got an eye for promising students and set his heart on supporting them - whether they want it or not.

- Chapter Six -

THE CHOSEN FEW

Attitude is a little thing that makes a big difference.

WINSTON CHURCHILL

Traditionally, Slytherin House was the smallest in numbers among the four Hogwarts Houses. If one looked at the statistics, the figures would say that in average, 50 out of 120 first years went to Hufflepuff, 35 made Ravenclaw, 20 were sorted to Gryffindor and no more than fifteen children received the green Slytherin emblem. Naturally, there would have been more sly than truly brave, or even erudite children, but only Slytherin made the extra request of a pure-blooded ancestry, meaning that, usually, at least all four grandparents were wizards and witches.

Curiously, the pedigrees of almost every Slytherin went back much further. Those families that set store on a pure bloodline took care that their offspring continued to stick to the tradition, so most students there hadn't got any Muggle ancestors since the eighteenth century, if that was enough. The Muggle ancestors of most dated back to even earlier times. Among those older families, the Malfoys were the purest dynasty by far, followed by the Rosiers, the Lestranges, the Mulcibers, Rookwoods, and last but not least, the Blacks, of course.

The latest offspring of the London branch of this family, which incidentally dated back to the Dark Ages, were the two sons of Orion Black and his wife Walburga, and the three daughters of Orion's older brother Cygnus and his wife Amandine. All five children recommended themselves by their great looks and apt skills, but otherwise they could hardly have been more different from one another, to a superficial observer.

The eldest and most trying to her parents' nerves was Bellatrix. She had been a handsome child, which had led her parents to spoil her to no end, and she had grown up to be a true beauty. She had sleek black hair and fiery black eyes, a determined chin and dramatic brows. More dramatic than her brow, however, was her character. Benevolent observers would say she was fierce, the rest of the world would call her foul-tempered. She was easily annoyed and highly irritable, completely lacked patience and self-control, and combined those shortcomings with an unsettling amount of talent for curses and nasty jinxes.

Her poor mother had stopped counting the owls sent home on her account, reporting incessant trespassing of every rule that had ever been laid down. Mr Black, who was a man of steady principles, had punished his child in every way he could think of, but the only result he had obtained was an ever-growing alienation between her and her parents. After her graduation from Hogwarts, she had assigned for Artemis College, taken a flat of her own, gotten married all in six months and only returned to her father's house on special occasions.

Not only had Bellatrix moved out at the earliest occasion, she had also married the first man of pure ancestry who'd worship her. This wasn't just a phrase; he did worship her and the ground she tread upon, reading every wish from her eyes, never disagreeing with her, never restricting her in any way, in short: a man nine years her elder who enabled her to follow each of her whims and caprices however and whenever she wanted.

Still, Rodolphus was too nice, in a manner of speaking, and sadly, not the sharpest tool in the shed. But Bellatrix was bright, extremely bright, and she admired talent when she found it in others. In combination with her long-standing interest in the Dark Arts, she quickly found the right place for sheer and heartfelt happiness she and her husband joined the ranks of a certain warlock, who had returned to England after many years of travelling. This wizard styled himself 'Lord Voldemort', but his disciples did not pronounce his name, reverently calling him 'Master' or 'My Lord' instead. He had founded an Order in which the Dark Arts were practised, and from Bellatrix's point of view this meant: there were clear rules to follow and retribution when they were violated; there were demanding tasks and praise when she succeeded. She had found at last what she had been looking for.

The next sister, less dark and far more moderate, was Andromeda. She was a sweet girl in fact, *not quite* as accomplished as her sisters (which didn't say much), but making up by much more pleasant manners. She had not once given their parents a sleepless night, her marks were very good and so was her appearance, with her shiny auburn hair and light brown eyes, even features and slender figure. Later on, she would trouble her parents beyond words, but at that time, there was no indication whatsoever that she could ever fail in delighting her family.

The youngest girl was Narcissa. She was fair, the essence of a fair girl really, and although it seemed almost impossible, the most beautiful of them all. She was her parents' pride and joy, finally reconciling them to all the trouble they had had with Bellatrix. She could boast many talents of magical and other nature; she had a special gift for languages and music, for drawing and most of all, she was a great reader. At first, her proud parents were nothing but delighted by her quiet ways, but Narcissa was *so* quiet and reserved that their anxiety for her sake had grown with each year. It could not be healthy, it could not.

As a first measure, they had dragged her to every good family with daughters roughly the same age. They couldn't have done worse. The poor girl abhorred everything about that scheme: playing for the hosts, piano, flute, violin or harp, or if nothing else was available she was coerced to sing, delighting everyone older than thirty, disgusting anyone younger than that. After this, she was sent upstairs to accompany supremely belligerent children, sometimes boys who would pull her hair, but mostly girls who would scowl at her and mock her and make up rude insults.

Other remedies tried had included horseback riding her dislike for horses had grown by the hour; sailing which she had really enjoyed, but after a minor incident her father would not permit her closer to open water than fifty feet; and enrolling her in a choir which had been so awful an afternoon that she had been sick on the next four dates, until her mother had showed some consideration and cancelled again.

But the very worst of all had yet been to come. Her eleventh birthday, and with it her Hogwarts letter. How she had begged her parents to let her stay at home! She had literally been on her knees, imploring them to go on like before, with some capable tutors... But she had shed all her tears in vain; as much as Mr Black doted upon his darling daughter, on this point he remained inexorable. Hogwarts it was, a dormitory with four other girls it was, classes with twenty to forty other students it was. Narcissa lacked an adequately profane vocabulary to describe the ghastliness of it all.

In Hogwarts, she also met with her cousin Sirius, three years her junior. He, too, was exceptionally good-looking and as smart as his older cousins promised. Unfortunately, he had got a share of Bellatrix's unstable temper and recklessness. He also had a ridiculously high opinion of himself, though this was a general family defect, and was too proud for his own good. Narcissa and Sirius couldn't stand the sight of each other; she avoided him if she could, he wouldn't stop taunting her whenever he got the opportunity. With Andromeda, he got along much better. She had a more sociable disposition, and her easy-going attitude impressed him enough to bridle himself.

Sirius was in many ways a blend of his cousins' tempers. Bellatrix's fire, Andromeda's easy-going attitude as far as his friends were concerned, Narcissa's cold contempt for those he detested. Although he was only a first year now, he was vastly popular among the members of his own house the first Black in four centuries who hadn't been made a Slytherin, and to make it all worse for his mother, he had instead gone to *Gryffindor*... Walburga Black could have handled a Ravenclaw son, but *Gryffindor* she regarded as a bad omen. Her eldest son was obstinate enough as it was, and his new House *couldn't* but make it worse, she feared. This fact had toned down her former criticism of Amandine's daughters considerably. Nagging about Bellatrix when her own flesh and blood was going so much further astray nah, not even Walburga was that much of a hypocrite.

The youngest of the lot was Sirius' brother Regulus. When the former rejected his cousin Narcissa, one could well state that he downright detested his little brother. He was their parents' favourite, being so much more gentle and obedient. Where Sirius was rebellious, Regulus was submissive, where Sirius would stamp his foot, Regulus would duck and cower. The softer Regulus was, the more Sirius despised him, and the more cruelly Sirius treated him, the more Regulus tried to please him. It was a vicious circle, and Orion and Walburga only made it worse by favouring Regulus so blatantly.

Sirius was ashamed of his own relations. Those cocky cows always excepting Andromeda, who was pretty cool and his brother sucking up to them still. All that ridiculous pureblood rubbish, the *noble* family, the *sacred* values, the *wonderful* Slytherin House! Idiots, all of them! On the other side, Narcissa wasn't exactly *ashamed* of her cousin she'd rather be embarrassed by Regulus' dim wit but she strongly disapproved of Sirius' complete lack of manners, the disparaging fashion in which he'd talk to his own parents even, let alone everyone else. She could only despise the way he'd jinx everyone whose nose he didn't like, and that he particularly enjoyed humiliating little Severus was unpardonable in her eyes. That little hypocrite! On the one hand, he'd nag and complain that his parents set great store by the purity of people's pedigree, on the other hand he tormented a kid as unfortunate as Severus!

This one was the most grateful object for attention one could possibly imagine. Poor kid. Literally. His parents had no money at all; apparently his father wasn't only a Muggle, but also a complete waste of time and space, a drunkard, unreliable, choleric and good-for-nothing. Narcissa would have pitied Severus' mother, but then again why had she married this bloke? She had no one to blame for that but herself. The boy had been sent to school in hand-me-down robes, his shirts so grey that no magic could bleach them white again. Narcissa had given it quite a few tries, and she was usually very gifted with spells. His textbooks were so old and worn-down that they positively fell apart, mended by masses of spell-o-tape, just to rip on the next use.

She had written to her mother to send her some of her own old school books, which were much better-kept, but that had only worsened the boy's embarrassment, and Narcissa decided she wouldn't humble him again. Why had the Sorting Hat placed him in Slytherin, eh? To humiliate him in every possible way? Not only did he have that infamous Muggle parent, which would have been bad enough in the midst of all the pure-bloods here who looked down on him. Poverty was second only to a lack of pedigree in the eyes of most Slytherin students even those families that had no money at all would go and pretend, rather taking up mortgages than sending their kids to school in second-hand robes. Clearly, Severus' mum hadn't thought of that, or her vile husband didn't allow her to equip their son properly.

His situation had slightly bettered since Lucius Malfoy had made it clear that nobody was to touch the kid. He couldn't force the boy's dorm-mates to truly respect him though, and Severus was too proud to be a telltale, so Lucius never got to hear of the majority of snide insults and jibes that the child had to endure from his peers. Lucius had indeed increased his efforts to befriend the boy and was more than pleased both with himself and his protégé. As it turned out, the boy was truly as apt with curses and hexes as any senior student, more than most in fact. He was intelligent and endlessly grateful for the great Mr Malfoy's attention. To be sure, he flattered Lucius' vanity well enough, and he had already found a possibility to assure the kid's genuine affection. The Quidditch team was wildly admired, and it was a long-standing tradition that each member of the House Team had a kind of personal assistant for all sorts of jobs, like taking care of the brooms, fetching books from the library, mending the Quidditch robes and so on.

The boy entrusted with the honour to do so for Lucius was one Delbert Harper, and he was doing his job just fine, additionally he came from a good family. There was no actual reason to dispose of him, so Lucius played a nasty trick on him at the cost of his own broom. What the heck, he had wanted to get the new Comet 250 anyway. Harper was chased out of his office, and Lucius gave the spare post straight to his new protégé.

Severus Snape was flabbergasted. He had spent his first months in Hogwarts like a Pariah, and all of a sudden, he had ~~two~~ great patrons?! The great Lucius Malfoy, unrivalled hero of Slytherin House, who had everything in abundance that Severus himself was so totally without, and the incomparable Miss Black, who was the most impressive witch in the entire school in the entire universe, as far as Severus was concerned! He didn't know what he had done to deserve such luck.

Admittedly, he sometimes felt like a child of divorce, because his two great friends... Well. To stay in the imagery Miss Black must have been the one to file for the divorce and wanted nothing to do with Mr Malfoy. He, on the other hand, was eager to hear every tiny detail about her, demanding absolute secrecy, and showering Severus with good will in return. He was only twelve years old, but he had some imagination, and it was rather easy to guess that Mr Malfoy had quite a crush on Miss Black. Still, this was none of Severus' business, and he wouldn't have gambled with his friends' benevolence for the world. 'Tua quod nihil refert, ne cures,' Miss Black used to say, and right she was, as always. This wasn't simply submission on Severus' part. Miss Black, erm, *Narcissa* was really always right. She knew everything, she had read everything, and her judgement turned out to be right every time, too. As far as the boy could see, her only error in judgement referred to Lucius Malfoy, who was so much nicer than she'd give him credit for.

Not only was Severus allowed to take care of Lucius Malfoy's things, next he was introduced to their Head of House's little club, to which only selected students were admitted. Mr Malfoy just took him along, and indeed, he was quite warmly welcomed by Professor Slughorn, although it was obvious that he would never have been invited if it hadn't been for the Professor's favourite student.

"Look what the cat's brought in. Snape!" The voice was familiar; Severus didn't need to turn around to know who had called out.

"Slowly, slowly, Mr Black," Professor Slughorn chuckled good-humouredly. "Mr Snape, let me begin by welcoming you and introduce you to your fellows."

He indicated at a number of students, mostly older Slytherins, like Narcissa Black's older sister, who was in the same year as Lucius Malfoy. There was yet another sister, who had already graduated from school. Severus had never met her, but he had heard *a lot*. She was a legend in Slytherin House; it was said that she was as fierce as a dragon on the war path. However, he knew that *his* Miss Black should be here as well, the Professor was very fond of her, but she flatly refused to go. "I spend too much time with people I don't like already," she used to say, "I have no desire to waste my free time on them as well."

"Please welcome Severus Snape. He's a good lad, Mr Malfoy's help and very deft in potion-making. Listen well, Miss Evans, you two could found a study group together!"

Lily Evans dutifully nodded, gave Severus a smile and he nodded back. She was the only person he had known when coming to school the Evans' lived not too far away from Severus' own parents. She was very nice, she was... Well... He had hoped she'd be a Slytherin, too, a friend in this new environment, and even though he had known that it was highly unlikely, he had believed it possible. Lily Evans was a marvellous witch already in his eyes, and that was what Slytherin was all about, wasn't it? About greatness? About power? Or why else had *he* landed here, a son of a Muggle among all these purebloods?

He wondered if Mr Malfoy and Miss Black would approve of his Muggle-born Gryffindor friend. Surely they wouldn't. But one of the first principles young Severus had grasped in his short life so far was this one needn't tell everything. Omitting truth wasn't the same as lying he wouldn't dare to lie to his benevolent protectors. He was an appallingly bad liar anyhow. Instead, he simply wouldn't mention Lily. Senior students took scarce notice of first years anyhow, all the more when they came from other houses. And Severus didn't feel like well *sharing* his friendship with Lily either.

"Sir, my sister wishes me to offer excuses on her behalf," Andromeda Black said now. "She is preparing for a test. Ancient Runes, I believe."

Slughorn chuckled again. "Yes, yes, Miss Black is a very avid student. Take an example from her, lads."

Some of them rolled their eyes, others forced themselves to smile, only Sirius Black would sneer and hiss, "Come on, Andy. You needn't lie for her. Dear Cissy's just too full of herself to come!"

Andromeda sharply replied, "Leave her alone, Sirius!"

"Andy "

"You've *heard* me."

She received a well-meaning glance from Lucius Malfoy for her sister's defence, which she did not return. Yes, Severus thought to himself, Mr Malfoy did like Miss Black the absent one *very* much. Who could blame him?

Narcissa was fond of the child; he was a loner like herself and by far the cleverest wizard to walk around in this school. Strictly speaking, he was in no need for help with his homework either, but she wanted to do something for him and so they had started to do some extra work that was beyond his own level of classes. When she heard that Lucius Malfoy had dragged the poor boy to old Slughorn's club and how Sirius had behaved, she instantly decided that she'd for once accept the regular invitations and go, too. Severus needed a little backup Malfoy wouldn't help him anyway. In all probability, he only took him there to humiliate the poor kid!

Said kid had taken the surprising news with much more dignity than her Head of House. And how lucky that she couldn't witness Lucius Malfoy's exuberant face when Severus mentioned it, or she might have lost the last scraps of respect she harboured for him.

Severus' impression of being a child of divorce would have deepened that evening, if it hadn't been for his enormous pride and the struggle not to let it show too clearly. He was on his way to his Head of House's club-evening for selected students. Was he on his own? No! Was he accompanied by one of his great friends? Nope! He was accompanied by *both* of them! Walking right between them! Ha! He would enter that office together with the two coolest people in the whole school; beat that, Black!

Lucius was similarly pleased. He couldn't remember when Narcissa Black had last permitted him so close. That she didn't give him a single smile was but a minor drawback. All in due time. She looked magnificent though, as always. And Severus was a bright kid who was also well-instructed. He'd know what to do.

Professor Slughorn expressed his delight when the royal couple entered his study, especially welcoming Miss Black and almost completely ignoring Severus, but Narcissa would not have it. She smiled sweetly, and answering the question what had made her change her mind and attend the meeting, she said with a honeyed voice, "Because of Severus here. He positively enthused on the previous gathering and swore that I just *had* to come, sir."

"Let me tell you how glad I am that you'd interrupt your studies for the sake of our little gathering, Miss Black."

"Not at all, Professor. You are welcome," Narcissa said, deliberately gracious.

Andromeda stifled a giggle and stuffed her mouth with a pastry instead. She also silenced her cousin who was about to open his mouth by urging him to take a piece as well, and munching, she murmured, "Bite your tongue, cos. Or the pastry if you've got to."

He obeyed in so far that he kept his voice low, "I get sick of that regal attitude! Who does she think she is!"

"My little sister, so shut up."

"And the other two jerks?"

"Malfoy certainly *is* a jerk, but why don't you just leave the kid alone? I don't get it!"

"Malfoy's lapdog? Two of a kind!"

In the meantime, Lucius, Narcissa and their charge had settled in some very comfortable armchairs and been equipped with drinks Severus had done as Lucius had told him. Picking the most comfortable chair at first and then, when his two friends had taken their seats at his sides, he'd suddenly noticed that his own chair was *much* more comfortable than Miss Black's and urged her to trade places. Well done, kid!

Narcissa would have thought that Malfoy had contrived this little manoeuvre, had she believed Severus capable of such a scheme. Malfoy had this inner drive nay, *obsession* to make a pass at every girl coming his way. He had tried it with her, too, at the start of her second year, and as soon as she had consented to go to Hogsmeade with him yes, she had been so incredibly naïve he had pulled off the mask and shown his true face to render her the national laughing stock in front of all of his insipid mates. She didn't put it past him though that he'd make another attempt to test how silly she could be, and *no*, she wouldn't grant him another victory for his insatiable vanity.

Narcissa had been to only four or five of these meetings in the four years she was in Hogwarts, the last one more than a year ago, so she gazed around quite curiously now. Who were the rising stars of the wizarding community? Because Slughorn truly had an eye for this, she'd give him that. He recognised people who would make it far, be it for their talent, or other qualities likely to advance them.

Here were the members of her own family, invited because they were *Blacks* and thus prone to make it *very* far in life. The same was true for Lucius Malfoy and Frank Longbottom from Gryffindor, *old* blood, *old* money. Damocles Belby was the son of his father and a brilliant potioneer himself, Everett Bobbin from Ravenclaw would inherit the country's largest chain of apothecaries. Next to them, there was Bertram Higgs, recommending himself both by heritage and talent the only thing he basically sucked at was Quidditch. Tallulah Tatting, a seventh year from Hufflepuff, was the startlingly pretty granddaughter of Macaulay Tatting, the current manager of Twilfitt and Tatting oh, by the way, she had been going out for three weeks last year with Malfoy, too, of course. Who hadn't.

Those were the students she knew by sight and name much more interesting were the others. The most eye-catching was a girl in robes bearing the Gryffindor crest. Judging from her height, she was a first year, and she was uncommonly cute. Her hair was a blend of mahogany and red, but more intriguing yet were her eyes almond-shaped, impossibly green eyes. For a minute, Narcissa wondered whether the girl was here due to her blossoming beauty, or because of her talent. She forgot that Severus no longer sat next to her right side, slightly bowed over and whispered, "Who are the two girls, and the boy with the glasses?"

Lucius was surprised and elated to hear her addressing him, and most ready to reply in a low voice, "Gaspard Shingleton Ravenclaw, talent for charms, Althea Penrose Hufflepuff, niece of old Phoebus, and Lily Evans from Gryffindor, rising potions star."

She gave a start when realising who she was talking to, but what the heck. "Which one is the redhead?"

"Evans."

She nodded and went back to observe the unknown kids. Slughorn was relating some boring story, and she already regretted that she had come in the first place. So far, Sirius had behaved, but she didn't deceive herself whose merit this was. Maybe she should simply talk to Andy and ask her to ask Sirius to leave Severus alone in the future?

Her mind trailed off she constructed potions in her head when she had nothing better to do, it was a good training for memory when she was awoken again by a soft nudge from Malfoy. She realised that Slughorn seemed to be talking to her, and Malfoy muttered under his breath, "You supervising Potions Club "

"Bugger," she whispered just as flatly, but smiled at their teacher.

"What do you say, Miss Black?"

"I don't think I'm the right person for this sort of thing, sir."

"Nonsense! You'd be perfect! You're an ace in potion-making, and our younger talents, like Severus and Lily here, could benefit greatly from your guide and experience!"

"Sir, I'm not made for *guidance*, I assure you."

"She's also very busy with her studies, Professor. Magnificence is hard to achieve," Malfoy butted in. She was almost grateful, especially when seeing Slughorn's now pensive face.

"Yes... I see, yes... Well, perhaps you will allow that occasionally, some younger student can ask you and Mr Belby here for help with their homework ...?"

"Certainly, sir," Narcissa said, and gave an inaudible sigh of relief. Nobody except Severus would ~~tdare~~ dare to approach her.

The evening went along with useless chit-chat, although Narcissa did not mind it as badly as feared. Some of Slughorn's favourites were fairly smart after all, making sensible remarks, and even Lucius Malfoy wasn't exclusively the spoilt, silly brat that she had taken him for. Why would this guy waste his time with his moronic buddies and Quidditch if he was so clever? And eventually, she could also fulfil the purpose for which she had come.

Slughorn trailed off to look for a certain book, and the students began talking more casually. A plate with hors d'oeuvres was handed around, and just as Narcissa shook her head to decline and passed the plate on to Malfoy, she heard her cousin chortle.

"Good choice, Cissy. I wouldn't eat anything that the little grease ball's touched before either!"

Narcissa shot him an irritated look, taking one second to process his meaning. She jerked the plate back out of Malfoy's hands and picked the next best bite that looked as if it wasn't made of meat, shoving it into her mouth with a challenging glance. She chewed the distasteful snack, swallowed it, all the while glaring at her cousin, and said at last, "Seeing how unfortunate I am concerning my blood relations, cousin, I am indeed glad that I can at least choose who my *friends* are. Severus is worth ten of *your* kind."

"Only ten? I ought to try harder then!"

"Please, do so. Maybe you can do us all a favour and get yourself expelled after all?"

"What's happened, Cissily, that you are so wildly fawning over Malfoy's lapdog? Are you really that desperate?"

She rather felt than saw both Lucius and Severus twitching, and before they could say anything, she replied quietly, "Careful, cousin~~careful~~. You don't want to mess with me."

"True. I'd much prefer to have a bit more fun with your eeny weeny protégé." Sirius grinned haughtily. "I don't curse girls, you know."

She laughed. "Oh, as long as it stays in the family, you *really* shouldn't bother with such conventions, cousin. Come on, walk it like you talk it. Hm? Suddenly scared, now that your petty little friends aren't there to back you up?"

They glared at each other, Sirius angry, Narcissa disdainful, both forgetting about the initial reason for their little fight and focusing on their own feud of old. Slughorn was still standing in front of a bookshelf, obviously searching for the book he meant to give to Belby, but all the students watched the two combatants curiously. Sirius drew his wand with an expression of loathing, pushing down Andromeda's restraining hand.

"Go ahead, cousin, if you dare," Narcissa said coolly.

"Who do you think you are, Cissily?"

"It doesn't matter who I am. What counts is that I'm quicker than you." She smiled brightly, not bothering to take out her wand just yet. She was really good at duelling it was inevitable with a sister like Bella.

Andromeda stepped between them, scowling at both of them alternately. "Stop this shit at once, both of you! Are you out of your heads?"

Narcissa was smiling still. "What did I do, then?"

"Put away your wand, Sirius! Honestly, this is beneath you!"

He obeyed reluctantly, hissing, "One of these days, Cissily, one of these days!"

Slughorn returned with the book he had looked for, noticed the tense atmosphere and asked witlessly, "Gryffindor versus Slytherin, eh? There are still two more matches to go for Gryffindor, Mr Black, you still have the technical chance of making it."

Sirius gawked at him, incredulous at so much thickness. Narcissa suppressed a laugh, like most others, and couldn't help it but kindle the fire some more, cooing, "But it's only a technical chance, isn't it? You're not going to allow them to win, are you, Lucius?"

Lucius was surprised, and delighted with such a friendly address. "Absolutely not!"

"Since when do *you* have a clue about Quidditch, Cissily? You know how many balls are involved?" Sirius cried.

"I know enough to understand that our team is the best by far. Isn't that right?" She innocently gazed around, aware that the room was full of Slytherins, each one of them a Quidditch enthusiast. In this moment, Lucius loved her. Positively loved her. Sure, she simply meant to tease her unbearable cousin, but still. She had never before said anything remotely nice about him, or to him. Now she looked at him, smiling shark-like. "I have complete faith in our Captain to win this year, yet again."

She calculated that annoying her Quidditch-obsessed cousin would outweigh flattering Lucius Malfoy's vanity by far. The other present Slytherin students, except Andromeda who loathed him, applauded wildly, while Sirius adapted a greenish tinge.

Before dismissing them all, Slughorn elicited Narcissa's promise to come the next time, too, and she, Severus, Lucius and Damocles Belby left together. The latter received a clandestine nudge from his roommate to speak up. "Coming back to Slughorn's idea, Narcissa can I persuade you to come to one of our next potions club meetings?"

"Isn't it enough that I endure Slughorn's own club evenings?" she replied in a surly tone.

"But that's different! I should truly like to work with someone who knows their recipes, and I've heard great things about your proficiency!"

"And I have heard in turn that you need no help to be an excellent potioneer yourself, Belby. I'm not cut out to be a team player; you're better off on your own."

She thought this had been it, but she was mistaken. Only a few days later, she was approached by the girl with the startling eyes, whose name had slipped her mind for the moment. For a minute, she was irritated at some stranger, a Gryffindor even, addressing her, but then she realised with some surprise that the girl knew what she was talking about.

"Professor Slughorn has mentioned Memory Potions in our class, and from Severus I've heard that you possess Hector Dagworth-Granger's *Compendium on Dragon Blood*, which appears to cover the subject. I wonder if you would lend me the book?"

"What is it with you first years nowadays? You won't have it before your fourth year!"

"I simply like to experiment."

She shared nothing of Severus' inhibition or submissive air, in fact she was lively and self-confident, looking straight into Narcissa's eyes, smiling. She lent her the book, and a couple of others she'd ask for in the upcoming weeks, growing increasingly interested in the girl. If she truly understood what she was reading there

"You've got classes with that Evans girl, Severus, haven't you? Is she any good?"

"She's really good with potions. And charms," he muttered, not lifting his head to look over.

"Perhaps you should study with her then. Her lecture for Potions is extraordinary."

"She's already studying with Damocles Belby."

"Yes, so what? Join them! He's excellent. Total genius in potion-making. You can only profit from his knowledge."

"No, I'd rather not... I'm not you know... I don't fit in there..."

"For Merlin's sake, Severus, we really need to work on your self-esteem. The Evans girl hasn't only got a Mugglefather, but a complete *set* of Muggle parents, and do you see her hiding away because of that? And if Belby is practising with her, he doesn't appear to mind either!"

"It's not only that... She's really good, you see... I don't want to make a fool of myself..."

"You achieved an 'O' in your last test, didn't you?"

"But only because you've helped me."

She rolled her eyes and used the following evenings to make her little protégé fit for joining Belby and the Evans girl. He was good enough in her opinion, but with a little training, he was genuinely excellent, even more considering that he was merely a first year. Eventually, she even agreed to accompany him to his first meeting, as a bit of psychological backup. Belby was surprised, though not unpleasantly, to see her, and in return, Narcissa got a pleasant surprise that night finding how much she was enjoying herself. Belby did know what he was doing, the Evans girl was an amazing talent too, Severus performed well as always, and in the end, she thought she'd have to revise her opinion on clubs a certain kind of club, at least.

"And? Coming back next week?" Belby asked with a grin.

"I should see if the concoction turns out right, shouldn't I?"

They met every Thursday night at seven o'clock, with a special permission by Slughorn to trespass curfew if necessary. Quite incredulously, she registered that she was finally drawn into this whole school business, something she had successfully avoided for more than three years. Once a week she met with her Potions Club, every fortnight she attended Slughorn's meetings, and Severus talked her into watching the match between Slytherin and Ravenclaw it was his only wish for his birthday.

She liked Damocles, or 'Cle', as his mates dubbed him. He was a genius, no doubt about it, single-minded, inventive, creative, and they all benefited from his engagement. He in turn would admit that the 'kids' even Narcissa was two years his junior inspired him to further greatness by contributing brilliant ideas. Old Horace Slughorn was very satisfied with himself.

One of the rather charming aspects of Damocles was the fact that he made no whatsoever attempt to get off with her. Despite the fact that Narcissa wasn't fifteen yet, approximately five dozen boys had tried to ask her out so far, and it was getting severely on her nerves. Why couldn't they just leave her to her peace? Was that truly too much to ask? Were they keen on being humiliated, or did they truly believe that she'd make an exception for the one asking? That they were more special than their fellows?! However, Damocles wasn't like this. He treated her with respect and nothing else, seeing a potion expert in her, not a pretty girl.

She had no idea why Damocles was so unobtrusive, and he wouldn't have told her either. It wasn't as if he was oblivious of her sparkling beauty, or her outstanding intelligence. In fact, he found her more perfect the better he got to know her. Still, his own roommate and friend Lucius had such a terrible crush on her; he didn't have the heart to approach her in any other way than that of friendship. His mate was jealous enough as it was.

"Why do you forbid me to come?" Lucius asked, lurking. "There's something going on there, be honest!"

"Yes, there *is* something going on, namely serious potion-making, Luce! And that's also the exact reason why I *do not* ask you the two first years would put you in their pocket. Sorry, pal, but it's true! You haven't got the standard to "

"Perhaps I'd be less *substandard* if you allowed me to come!"

"These aren't extra lessons, Luce. Come on, you don't want to make a fool of yourself in front *other*."

"I got good marks in Potions!"

"I don't say you hadn't! But for once, Sluggo loves you, he'd never give you a bad mark, and then, you simply do what the book tells you. You haven't got the right sort of *spirit* for "

"Stop quibbling, mates," Graham said in his sonorous bass. "And why don't you let him go just once, Cle, it's *his* business after all."

Damocles turned his eyes to the ceiling and shook his head. "Luce, I'm your friend. For all I care, come as you like, but as your *friend*, I also seriously advise you not to."

After his initial outrage had dissipated, Lucius did realise that Damocles wasn't entirely wrong, and *no*, he had no taste to be humiliated in front of Narcissa. But it needn't be like that, right? He interviewed his roommate about the upcoming plans of their study group and for the first time in more than half a year, he actually went into the library. He also wrote home to have one of the servants send him a bunch of books and seriously began to study and catch up. Some first years, beating him! Ph!

This new commitment got in the way of some of his other hobbies. Being Captain of the team, he could not cut back on Quidditch practise. He had to attend the Deputy Headmaster's meetings for the Prefects, too. Having little intention to live a monk's life in celibacy, he had to share his remaining time among his respective girlfriends and his buddies. Neither took that very kindly. He and some of his closest friends had a club of their own, and since there were seven of them, they had come up with the name 'Sepulture Septuplet' corny, all right, but they had tried to find, and failed, a better word matching 'Septuplet'. Next to Lucius, there were Damocles 'Cle', Graham 'Golly', Marlon 'Crabs', Evan 'Rosie', Bertram 'Bertie', and Horatio 'Gibbs', and the lot of them had fun. Honestly, *fun*.

There was plenty of money between them, ample talent, and most of all, a hunger for adventure and challenge. They vied with each other, coming up with various stunts and pranks, collecting trophies, discovering ways out of the school, they had fantastic parties public ones in the Slytherin Common Room, clandestine parties in secret places only for themselves. Cle, for example, had made himself a name for actually managing to slip a Giggling Potion into the kitchens, spiking tea and coffee for all house tables, *and* the staff. Golly and Crabs, less clever than their friends but all the more mischievous, had set all the school's Niffers free, causing havoc at breakfast time because the little buggers had invaded the Great Hall and hurled themselves at every piece of shiny metal they would find, regardless whether it was jewellery, cutlery, or braces. Gibbs had transformed the central court yard into a snake pit, and Lucius had excelled himself by gaining two free days for all the students. He had invented a couple of spells to block every class room door, jam the corridors and confound the staircases.

They had given themselves rules, naturally, and albeit rule number one being complete secrecy, there were little doubts among students and teachers who was in and who wasn't. Narcissa knew it, too, and if she hadn't, she would have learnt it by her acquaintance with Damocles, because the other six regularly turned up to fetch their mate. Whenever she met Lucius Malfoy, he showered her with compliments, and one evening in late February, he even dared to attend one of their potions club meetings.

She sneered at him. "Wrong door, Malfoy. *This* is the potions club. For people who are apt *at* *potions*, you understand? That girl you're probably looking for must be in the room next door."

Damocles burst out cackling, but seeing his friend's scowl, he pretended to cough instead. Malfoy's face transformed as well; he smiled brightly at Narcissa and exclaimed, "The only girl I'm looking for is you, Black. Cle's told me about your latest work, and my father has made it very clear what will happen if my marks do not improve. Come on, give me a chance to prove to you that I'm not the moron that you take me for."

"Big talk, but that's your speciality, isn't it? Come on then. But I've got to warn you Lily here is a Gryffindor. Bear in mind that her entire House will laugh at you if you mess this up."

Even though she was only a first year, and Muggle-born to boot, little Lily Evans grinned and stepped forth, waving boldly. 'Good girl,' Narcissa thought gleefully. 'Stupid cow,' Lucius thought, but did not cease smiling. He was well prepared he would glory in Narcissa's presence, plus he could have an eye on Damocles and her. And he would show the little Mudblood her place.

Narcissa closely observed each of his moves, keen to discover a mistake. Sadly enough, she found none he was no ace, but he wasn't half as bad as she had expected either, and once again she asked herself why he wouldn't make more of himself. Some practise, some *interest* to begin with, and he could be great! Truly great!

"How am I doing, Black?"

"You should be more exact."

"I prefer to think on the grand scale."

"Story of your life, Malfoy!"

Tua quod... Don't mind businesses that aren't your own.

Staking The Territories

Chapter 8 of 21

Lucius and Narcissa have a little brush.

- Chapter Seven -

STAKING THE TERRITORIES

Quae modo pugnarunt, iungunt sua rostra columbae.

OVID Ars Amatoria

"And that's the next thing we're going to practise, dear. You're an appallingly bad liar!"

"Lying is for cowards, isn't it?"

She sniggered. "There are loads of things you've got to learn, Severus Snape. For a start: Cowardice isn't necessarily a bad thing. It is much preferred over foolhardiness, for instance. And there will come many situations when you don't want to let show what's really going on in your head. Take your feud with my horrible cousin, for example. You'd have so much more spare time if you didn't always blurt out that you've cursed him and spend your evenings in detentions."

"He'd give me away anyway, and I don't want to give him the satisfaction of seeing me degrade myself and lie!"

"I appreciate your self-respect, but that attitude won't take you anywhere, trust me. Listen closely, Severus, I believe I can teach you some very handy lessons." She winked at him. "Number One know your enemy. In the case of my cousin you probably already know some helpful things like "

"Like him being a total arsehole?"

"That much is obvious, isn't it. But please mind your language, at least when you're talking to me. Anyhow, he is a Gryffindor, and maybe you haven't been long enough in this school yet to understand, but those folks have something like a code of honour. Sirius is an awful person, but one thing he's not a traitor. It disagrees with *his* self-respect. He wouldn't incriminate you. So let us say old Slughorn is the one to interview you on the case what would you do?"

He shrugged. "I don't know."

"For a start you have to appear genuine, no matter who's asking you. No guilt written all over your face, no pride, no contentment. You must look perfectly unconcerned, and of course, you have no idea what they're talking about until *they* tell *you* what's happened. Unless it's absolutely obvious. Mind you, it's not believable when you of all persons are informed that Sirius was hit by a curse and you appear like you were *not* gleeful. It's all about the right measure. Got me so far?"

"Yes "

"Of course, this is all very obvious; you automatically do the same when you lie to your parents "

"I never do."

She hesitated and frowned. "I beg your pardon? Omnis homo mendax, Severus! What are you, some sort of saint?!"

"My mother... She..." He bit his lip and looked at his hands before raising his head again and adding in a more steady tone, "As for my father oh well. I've preferred

defiance so far, you see?"

"Defiance? Why? Because he's a Muggle?"

"Rather because he is a complete jerk excuse the term, but he really is. He doesn't *deserve* the effort."

"I see... Well, so it means you've got to start from scratch, that's all."

"I'm sorry, but... Do I really have to well learn this?"

She smiled slyly. "Mark my words, dear, but it can only be advantageous when it's *your* choice whether you tell someone the truth or not."

"True," a well-known voice said, and Narcissa was quite proud that she didn't give a start. She looked up, as calm as ever, and saw Lucius Malfoy standing before them, casually leaning against a shelf. "Listen to her, Severus."

She didn't want to be backed up by Lucius Malfoy of all persons, not him, but what could she do? "Eavesdropping, are you?"

"That's a harsh accusation. Actually, I happened to be searching for Severus here. And when I saw you and heard that you're trying to teach him how to lie, it was just too interesting."

"Was it," she said tersely, every fibre of her body willing him to leave. Didn't she see enough of him already! She couldn't stop him from attending the Potions Club meetings, but why she ought to endure him in her free time was beyond her.

"It was. I wonder what you mean by it though "

"Is there anything I can do for you?" Severus asked and got up, but Narcissa pulled him back. She didn't look at him though; rather, she glared at Lucius instead.

"You're not his servant, Severus!"

"Uh I am, in fact "

Lucius clearly tried to look as nice as he could, still he couldn't help but show his usual sneer. "You are not my *servant*, Severus, but my *aide* "

"Boils down to the same thing!" Narcissa intensified her scowl. He *must* eventually understand that he wasn't wanted here, right?!

He wasn't impressed, sadly, and simply continued in that habitually smug manner of his, "And not only my aide, but my friend."

"You've got a strange concept of friendship!"

"Look who's talking!"

"Do you chase your other friends down to the Quidditch Pitch in pouring rain, too? Only to clip some twigs on your broomstick?!"

"But that's my job," Severus muttered.

"Yes, and do you think it entirely sensible to be bossed around only because of *Quidditch*?"

"He can leave if he wishes, but it appears he doesn't want to. Unlike *you*, I don't try to control him and everything else around me."

"I do no such thing!"

Severus had got to his feet once more. "Please, Narcissa "

"*Sit down*, Severus!"

He exchanged some looks with his *great friend*, on his part helpless; on Malfoy's part well somehow indecipherable. "Speaking of bossing around, Miss Black! Tsk tsk tsk... However, Severus, I was looking for you to ask if you would be so kind and grease my leather gloves before the next training."

"Certainly!"

"Your homework is more important than greasing his gloves, Severus!"

"And I thought you had already finished, seeing that you were about to give him a lesson on the extracurricular subject of deception. I know you think nothing of Quidditch, so to *you* everything must be more important. But she is a genius, Severus. I think you'd do well to obey her "

"He needn't *obey* me! He can do as he pleases!"

"Can he really? He's got up two times already and you've urged him not to, and he has *obeyed*." He shot her a suggestive smile, and turned back to patronise the kid. "Which was very good of you, Severus; don't worry."

One side-glance at the boy sufficed to see how unhappy he was with the situation. She inwardly cursed Malfoy for bringing him into such a predicament, but that was just like him, wasn't it; he simply enjoyed giving others a hard time! But she wouldn't play his game, even if that meant that he got his way. She shut the book before her with a loud *clap*, gave Severus a gentle smile and said, "I think we're through anyway, dear. Run along, I know how you guys like Quidditch."

"Is that really all right by you?"

"Absolutely," she said and smiled yet more sweetly, only to glare at Malfoy the next second. "It's fine. See you tomorrow, same time?"

She had hoped that Lucius would vanish with him, but she was bitterly disappointed. He left his comfortable position by the shelf and strolled over to her table, glancing at the books before her.

"You are one busy bee, aren't you?"

"Can I help you with anything?" She was pleased with herself for giving her voice just the right amount of spin.

"You could, yes..."

He looked straight into her eyes, penetratingly really, but she wouldn't allow him to make her look away first. "And...? What would that be?"

He didn't answer and he didn't turn his gaze away; neither did she. Despite herself, she noticed the remarkable colour of his eyes; she had noticed it before, of course, it

was impossible to miss. Almost like silver, like a day in November shortly before the sun would come out but never before had she seen his eyes from so close, and for so long. Before she got entirely mesmerised, she arched a brow, inviting him to speak.

"Well... For a start I'd be truly interested in the subject you were just about to teach our mutual friend."

She gave a mocking laugh. "I believe you're already a proficient expert."

He raised his brows. "What makes you say that?"

"Oh please! Do you really mean to tell me that you cannot*lie*?"

"I'm not a novice like good Severus, admittedly. But I don't think I'm as good as you."

"Sounds like a compliment, feels like a slap." She gave a fake smile. "Well done, Malfoy. I think*that* is something I could learn from *you*."

"Actually, I'm just copying you."

"Aww, thanks, I feel so flattered."

"You can. Imitation is the highest level of admiration."

"You truly think you are a gift to human kind, don't you?"

"See? That's what I mean. On the surface you are all calmness and composure, with a seeming glint of politeness here and there. But underneath you are frothing with anger, and still you are very apt in concealing it."

"But I couldn't fool *you*, eh?" If she forced herself to smile any more like this, her face would become stuck, and for the rest of her life she'd roam the world looking like a total idiot!

"You look nice when you're smiling."

For a second, she thought he was taunting her, but either he was an*excellent* liar or he was serious, and both unsettled her. "Oh, you should see how nice I look if I'm smiling for *real*, Malfoy!"

He turned his eyes to the floor. "What would it take me to make you smile for real?"

"Leave?" she suggested dryly, seeing him smirk.

"Why am I bothering you so much?"

"Why do you bother me at all?"

"I would like to know you better."

She burst out laughing. "I bet you would. But let me tell you a secret I'm every bit as nasty as people say I am. There's nothing else to discover."

"I don't believe you."

"I thought I was such a good liar?"

"You do put on a brilliant show, but I know you better."

She snorted. "What would *I* have to do to make *you* leave, Malfoy?"

"Go out with me."

She shook her head in exasperation. "Oh, for heaven's sake, what do you take me for?!"

He looked very earnest. "I think you are a very, very pretty and even more intelligent girl "

"If you truly believed that I was*intelligent*, how could you seriously assume that I'd be so silly as to fall for this rubbish?"

"Will you go out with me?"

"No!" He gave her a long, intense look, but this time she did look away. She packed her books into her bag, rolled up some parchments and put them away too. "Anything else? Good, because *I* will leave now!"

She got up, shouldered her bag and marched away without looking back. He was right. She was fuming with rage. That guy had some nerve! Asking her out! Pht! And then, she let herself be chased away, from her very own territory! The library was *her* space! He never went into the library, he'd rather send Severus to get him the books he needed! *She* stayed away from the Quidditch Pitch, he could have it, as long as he didn't go into the library and

She stopped abruptly. What was she *thinking* there?! *Her* space, *his* territory, for goodness' sake! She prided herself on being a thoroughly rational, sensible person, and ten minutes' conversation with this idiot drove her utterly mad?! She took a deep breath, counted up to ten, checked herself and went on, calmer and as serenely as she could. Still, such insolence! Asking her out! *Her!* She couldn't possibly feel more insulted. Ranking her with those insipid little sluts he else went out with! And if he was only going out with them, she would not bother, but all *this guy* wanted from a girl was sex and another trophy, and she would not lower herself like that, never!

On her way to the dungeons, she passed her sister, who was holding hands in broad daylight with the Hufflepuff Prefect, Ted Something. Oh, Andy! Couldn't she at least be careful?! Anyone could see them! That concern wasn't merely rooted in Narcissa's sense of decency and her abhorrence of the public display of caresses, but the deplorable fact that Ted Something was Muggle-born. He was nice, according to Andromeda; that wasn't the point, but their parents would make such a fuss if they ever got wind of this! And did she really, *really* have to pick a *Hufflepuff*? A House praised for its utter mediocrity?!

She walked by and uttered under her breath, "Pull yourself together, Andy! Frankly, you need to get a grip!"

Andromeda gave a giggle and stepped a bit closer to her companion. "Why don't *you* just get a *life*, Cissy?!"

Quae... Pigeons that are fighting now, will be billing tomorrow.

Omnis... All men lie.

Crime And Punishment

Chapter 9 of 21

Lucius is frustrated and overreacts a little.

- Chapter Eight -

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

Sacrilegia minuta puniuntur, magna in triumphis feruntur.

SENECA – Epistulae Morales

He was unfamiliar with the whole concept of sadness. He had a faint acquaintance with frustration when things didn't go the way he wanted them to take, but mostly they did anyhow. Disappointment and depression were new for him and he had no clue how to handle them. And he *was* depressed, there could be no doubt about it.

So far, he had comforted himself with the notion that deep down, she might like him *little*, enough to allow him to make her like him a little more – damn it! He was *charming*! He could be! All those girls were crazy for him, so why couldn't *she* be?! But no, no, she wouldn't stand to be in his company for more than five minutes! She'd rather go to a nunnery than go out with him only once! She –

In his fury, he knocked over a pile of books, making the lunatic librarian throw a tantrum, but he wasn't in the mood to simply beg her pardon or leave. Instead, he yelled back at her, that it was her damn *job* to collect books and store them away, that it wasn't *this* fault in the first place that the entire place was a mess, topping it all by calling her an 'evil vulture'. He received three nights of detentions from Professor McGonagall for this, who had heard the argument – well, hardly anyone in the castle could have missed it, they had both been screaming at the top of their lungs – and rushed by.

"Have you taken leave of your senses, Mr Malfoy?!" Her lips were thinner than he had ever seen when she jerked head to indicate he should follow her to his Head of House.

"And if I have?!"

She drew her breath, doubtless to give him an exhausting lecture on manners and rules, but for now he was spared this because she had found another object for her anger. "Mr Tonks! Miss Black!" she snapped. "You, too, are *Prefects*! You ought to set younger students an example! And as for you, Miss Black – I am *very* surprised at you!"

Lucius suppressed a laugh; there stood Narcissa's big sister, and three seconds ago she had still been tightly entwined with her Hufflepuff Mudblood boyfriend. That sister at least knew how to have fun! Even if she had bad taste in choosing with *whom* to have it, but that was another story! McGonagall docked five points each from Hufflepuff and Slytherin, and another five from Slytherin because Andromeda had given a saucy reply – "We *are* giving a good example for cordiality among the Houses, Professor!" – but then his reprieve was over.

"Just because you are your father's son, Mr Malfoy, or because you are Captain of your House Team, does not entitle you to any privileges! Speaking like this to Madam Pince! You, a *Prefect*! I wouldn't have *believed* it if I hadn't heard you with my own two ears! I've never met with such insolence, and if you were *in* my House –"

"Which I am luckily not –"

"Oh, be still! I know that Professor Slughorn thinks very highly of you, but don't you believe you will get away this time!" She continued in this manner, and he simply did what he was used to – his father couldn't get through the day without at least one of those speeches – he completely ignored her and let his thoughts trail back to his real problems. Narcissa Black. How was she to be worked on? What should he *do*? He made a mental note to send her some flowers for a start. He didn't believe it'd *work* ~~that~~ was the crux of it, and he racked his brains what else he could try.

One good thing had come out of this – he smiled at the notion. For so long he had wondered how her eyes would look close up, and at last he had had the chance to inspect them! Good Lord! Her eyes were of the darkest blue on the outside, getting brighter closer to her pupils, and tiny sparkles of turquoise were sprinkled in. Had the world ever seen such eyes? Certainly not! Like a well reflecting heaven, like –

He was rudely disturbed in his reverie because McGonagall hammered on his Head of House's door. Predictably, old Slughorn wasn't exactly pleased with his favourite's performance, but also far from McGonagall's level of just outrage. He tried to soothe her, but she wouldn't calm down. "Such behaviour must have consequences, Horace!"

"Three nights of cauldron cleaning will surely do the job, Minerva."

"No, they will not, and you know it! I demand that he be banned from the next match; perhaps ~~that~~ would suffice to make an impression!"

Both the old Potions master and Lucius gasped. "*What?!*" Lucius burst out, goggling at her incredulously.

Old Sluggy stared, too, but then broke out in merry laughter. "That was a good one, Minerva, I give you that! Yes, you've given him a good fright there!"

"I was perfectly serious!"

Lucius protested heatedly, "That's not up to *you* to decide!"

"Seriously, Minerva! I know you must be sore from losing the Quidditch Cup *once again*, I must say, to Slytherin, but sabotaging the team in such a blatant way should be

out of the question!"

"I don't *care* for the Cup – not in *this* case, anyway! But you, as the Deputy Headmaster, cannot possibly allow any student to walk around and mortify staff members in such a way! And mere detentions are a joke for him!"

"No!" Lucius knew when it was the right time to fall down to his knees, and this was it. "Professor McGonagall – Madam – ~~know~~ I've behaved very badly, and I can only assure you that I do not take detentions as a joke! Make it a week if you will! A fortnight! I will do whatever you think is right, but *please!* You only want to punish *me*, and I surely deserve it, but please do not punish the whole team, I pray you!"

"Spare your smooth talking, Mr Malfoy! I have no wish to punish your *team*, but if I do, you've only got yourself to blame!"

Dishonest, but all the more eloquent repentance on Lucius' part, dextrous negotiating on Professor Slughorn's and most of all, a soft core underneath McGonagall's iron-hard case finally achieved a fair deal, or the best they could get out of it. A whole month of detentions – two weeks with Mr Filch, two with McGonagall herself – and a formal apology for Madam Pince. The punishment was ridiculous, compared with the offence, Lucius still found, but he would not complain, as long as he could play. There was one condition though – the next major offence and he'd be banned from the team for the rest of the year.

As soon as McGonagall had grudgingly left, Lucius inquired what exactly a 'major offence' was. Slughorn grinned slyly. "You will not insult staff members, and this includes Mr Ogg and Mr Filch. You will not curse anyone –"

"Oh, *come on!*"

"*No curses*, Mr Malfoy. I may turn a blind eye on jinxes and hexes though. And if I might give you a word of advice – try to avoid all other Heads of House; they could want to better the chances for their own House Team by taking you out."

Lucius nodded and trotted out, back to his dorm. To be honest – he was pretty certain that McGonagall, as well as Flitwick and Summerby, were above such underhanded tricks. That was rather Slughorn's domain. Still, he had to be careful; sometimes he tended to act a bit too rashly, or too strongly. He was more inclined to curse someone than endure cheek – or mediocre performances from his team-mates – and every now and then he would curse someone because he didn't like their faces, okay, okay. So he had to give up that habit. Term was about to end; he would get along without cursing anyone in the coming two months. Should be easy, shouldn't it?

Sacrilegia... Little crimes are punished, great ones celebrated.

The Restless Muse

Chapter 10 of 21

Narcissa feels haunted, but is confident she can do something about this hassle.

- Chapter Nine -

THE RESTLESS MUSE

Je t'adore à l'égal de la voûte nocturne,

Ô vase de tristesse, ô grande taciturne,

Et t'aime d'autant plus, belle, que tu me fuis,

Et que tu me parais, ornement de mes nuits,

Plus ironiquement accumuler les lieues

Qui séparent mes bras des immensités bleues.

Je m'avance à l'attaque, et je grimpe aux assauts,

Comme après un cadavre un chur de vermisseaux,

Et je chéris, ô bête implacable et cruelle!

Jusqu'à cette froideur par où tu m'es plus belle!

CHARLES BAUDELAIRE

She stared out of the half-opened window that let in the gentle breeze of the early May night, which in turn rustled the parchments on Narcissa's desk. The pale full moon stood low still and was reflected in one of the window panes, thus creating the vision of two silvery moons on the clear, cloudless sky. There were countless stars: lights on the black fabric, sparkling and deceptive she thought she'd only have to reach out to touch them so close they seemed. All she'd have to do was get up and go over to that window, climb onto the sill and *what*, she thought angrily. Step out and drop dead, because she'd fall from the fifth floor on a romantic whim?! She wasn't romantic to start with; she found the movement sentimental and ridiculous. 'Pull yourself together, fool!'

She was sitting in the library at her usual place, looking for a certain article in a book, but she couldn't find it. She flipped through the whole book page by page, but it was

all mixed up; an article on mistletoe followed another article on rosebuds, poppy seeds followed daisy petals, and still she couldn't find what she was searching for. She took the next book, finding that she had never even heard the title before.

Those weren't her books. But this was her place! How could anyone exchange the books on her table without her noticing this?! Or was this Severus' copy? It was about potions, so how come she had never heard the title?! This got her all the more curious, and she opened the book. The pictures were well strange. She didn't see what they had to do with the contents of the book or what exactly they were showing to begin with. Still, she liked them; they were colourful and rich in details that she didn't understand, but which appealed to her the more.

'*Abyssis abyssum invocat*' this was written underneath a mainly black picture, whereas 'black' did it no justice. She was a trained painter, yet she had never imagined so many shades of black. Dull like a tar pit, glossy like the pupils in the eye of an intelligent person, uncertain like a shadow in a new moon night, greyish like Severus' worn-down robes, glittering like opals, deep like the surface of the water of a small pond in the forest, unfathomable like the night sky, plush and velvety like the curtains in Bella's old bedroom, sweaty like the skin of the awful horse she had once been urged to ride, grainy like the beaches of Lanzarote

Abyssis abyssum invocat... She had been fluent in Latin since she was six, yet she couldn't remember where that quote was from, and even less could she see why it would be printed in a Potions book. She muttered the words as if that would help to make more sense and went on to leaf through the book. She found the recipe for Amortentia and some potion she had never heard of on the following page, Philialitiis. She eagerly scanned the ingredients, ever interested in new knowledge, especially in potions pomegranate, vine grapes, passion fruit what was this, a fruit salad?! Oh no, there came the digitalis and the dragon blood, poppy seeds, snake skin, bitter almonds, a good splash of Fire Whiskey and, amazingly, champagne...? Furthermore, ground oysters and a vampire fang. Apparently the grapes' only function was to make this ghastly mixture taste a little better!

Interesting it was nevertheless, so she read on. 'Squash the grapes with your fingers knead them and squeeze them... Slowly pour the dragon blood put the cauldron on the fire... Slowly heat the mixture to boiling point and stir it with your wand... Stir gently stir fiercely... Make sure the heat remains on maximum level stir anticlockwise add the poppy seeds and keep an close eye on them while they pop...'

"Interesting read?"

She gave a start and looked up. Oh no. Since when did *he* regularly hang around in the library, eh? He displayed his habitual sneer no teeth, the right corner of his mouth slightly curled upwards, the dazzlingly grey eyes sparkling mischievously. He threw a half-glance at the book before her and said in a low voice, "Philialitiis, eh? Is that entirely proper for a decent young lady such as yourself...?"

"Beat it, Malfoy!"

"This is a public place, Narcissa. I happen to be waiting for this " He beckoned at the book before her. "I'll just stay here until you've finished."

She pushed it away. "There you go, you can have it. It's not mine anyway."

"Thank you. I'll wait for the others, too, though."

He stepped closer and she could smell his cologne. Everything about him seemed to be made of silk: his robes, his tie, his ~~hair~~ *hair* blast it, it was entirely inappropriate to do as much as *notice* this! She forced her mind to draw away from these superficialities and suddenly saw the light. "You've taken away my books, haven't you?"

"Have I now? Why should I do such a thing?"

"Because you want to annoy me!"

"If that *had* been my attention, I would have failed completely. You appeared quite content when I got here."

"That's not the point!"

"What *is* the point?"

"Just leave me in peace, Malfoy!"

He did show his teeth now, grinning broadly. "Am I robbing you of your peace then?"

"Go away!"

"But why? I'm doing nothing. Go on and read your book."

"I don't want to!"

"So what *do* you want?"

"I want you "

"You want me?" He stepped right to her table.

"Don't you dare go twisting my words! I want you *to leave*!"

He bent forward until his tie touched the open page before her, his face directly before her own. She wanted to draw back, jump up, get away, but she couldn't, she was completely immobile had he stupefied her without her notice?! She couldn't even draw her *gaze* from him, staring right into that supremely arrogant face, taking in those amazing eyes, the smooth, even features, the sleek, silver strands; she smelled his scent that was both pleasant and infuriating, and she racked her brains what spell he might have put on her, but that scent bedazzled her too much to grasp a clear thought.

She heard her own voice which seemed to come from a far away place and sounded utterly unfamiliar, pleading, begging almost. "Please go away..."

"You don't want me to go away."

"Yes, I do!"

"No, Narcissa, you don't." He smiled, slowly stretching out his hand she shivered, but she still couldn't move, couldn't speak, or protest and by some evil spell she suddenly *wanted* him to touch her, could hardly *wait* for him to stroke her skin. She saw his slender fingers reach out for her, in slow-motion, she strained for him to hurry up, and finally, *at last!* He brushed a strand of hair from her temple. His fingers were icy and hot at the same time; the spot where he had touched her was burning and tickling, she felt the small hairs on her arms stand up straight.

Out of nowhere her guardian angel appeared to rescue her, in the unlikely form of little Severus Snape. She suddenly heard his voice, calling for 'Miss Black', and she was so relieved to hear him coming closer, she wasn't even scornful that he addressed her in that formal way. Lucius straightened up and stepped back, sneering again and appraising her closely.

"Miss Black!" Severus turned around the corner and his jaw dropped. "Oh Lord oh I'm so sorry, I don't want to disturb oh my "

He turned on his heels; Narcissa couldn't find her voice, but Lucius spoke up instead. "Why don't you stay, Severus?"

"Yes! Stay! Keep that nasty man from from whatever it was that he was about to do before you came!" A thousand words and pleas rushed through Narcissa's brain, but she couldn't form a single useful sentence. Naturally obeying his great friend, Severus stopped, but decidedly averted his face. Lucius Malfoy told him to have a look, but the boy shook his head vigorously.

"Miss Black," he coughed. "Miss Black, why are you uh..."

Of course, he was surprised to see her here with *that guy* of all persons, and finally, she found her voice again. "It's fine, Severus! Come here. Sit down with me."

The head shake got more frantic yet, and he still wouldn't look at her. "Miss Black... Uhm... Perhaps you haven't noticed or perhaps this is on purpose, but nonetheless "

"What? Haven't noticed *what?*"

"But Miss Black!" He gesticulated, faintly fluttering his hand in her general direction. "Miss Black, you are you are erm showing a bit more skin than usually "

What the heck was the weird child talking about?! She looked down and gave a scream of shock. She was *naked*! Well, not *completely* naked; she was still wearing her school robes, but unbuttoned, and nothing, *nothing* underneath! She was on the verge of fainting yet energetic enough to explode. "You bastard! I'll *kill* you, Malfoy! I will curse you! I will rip you into pieces; you are scum! You are worse than scum, you are you are *awww*! How could you do that?! Are you really so desperate?!"

"Ho, ho! I didn't do that, honey!"

She grabbed her lapels and pulled her robes over her bare chest, livid with fury. "Of course you did!"

He gave a laugh. "No, I'm afraid I did not. You did that all by yourself, Narcissa!"

"Not for my life!"

She faintly registered that Severus ran away, and Lucius took another step back, slowly letting his eyes wander from her waist up to her face, with *relish*. "You are a very beautiful creature, Narcissa! I suppose that's why nobody told you earlier that you well, I guess you've simply forgotten to get entirely dressed in the morning. You appeared at breakfast like this, you know?"

"*What?*"

"I must say I was delighted with your forgetfulness," he said in a low voice and came closer again, slowly, cautiously. "Such a gorgeous body... Such beautiful skin... I wonder how it would feel under my fingers..."

"Don't..." Her voice was hoarse; she stared at him like a rabbit would stare at a snake.

"Don't? Come on, Narcissa. I know you want me. As a matter of fact I know that I am the only one you've ever wanted..." She meant to ask him how he could be so abominably full of himself, but she couldn't; she could merely look at him. His voice had dropped so low, it was barely audible, but he went on relentlessly, "You dream of being touched. You tremble at the idea of how my fingers would roam your flesh how my tongue would trail down your neck you wonder if it is true what the other girls say you want to try it out yourself..."

If she couldn't look away, she could at least close her eyes. Suddenly she felt the coldness of the chilly room why hadn't she felt it all day icy shivers ran down her spine, she got goose flesh. She knew he was very near now because the scent got more and more intense. Would he touch her? Would he kiss her? She hadn't the faintest clue how to kiss! He would think her a totally daft cow!

"Thou art more lovely than the darling buds of May..." She had always found this to be one of the cheesiest lines *ever*, but it sounded seductive from *him*, and he went on in this manner, "Unthrifty loveliness, why dost thou spend upon thyself thy beauty's legacy? Thine eyes I love, and they, as pitying me, knowing thy heart torments me with disdain, have put on black, and loving mourners be, looking with pretty ruth upon my pain..."

She completely forgot that they were in the library, that Madam Pince could turn around the next corner, that *anybody* could appear any moment now. She also forgot that she couldn't stand him. She even forgot to clasp her robes. All she could focus on were these eyes, these perplexing silvery eyes... She faintly heard that he was still talking "If thy soul check thee that I come so near, swear to thy blind soul that I was thy will, and will, thy soul knows, is admitted there..." but she couldn't grasp the meaning; her head was spinning, and her heart was beating like mad.

She couldn't say what happened next, but all of a sudden, she was lying in his arms on the table, his hands all over her. Something was bursting inside her; she pressed her lips on his, oblivious of the fact that she still had no idea how to kiss a boy. He was pleased enough with her, wasn't he, groaning her name, swearing that she was the only one for him. She let her fingers glide through his silky hair, down, down, stroking over his athletic body, willing him to do the same with her, and he did. He understood her.

He kissed her neck, savagely pulling on her open robes and grabbing her, stroking her, pressing her close; she felt like dying. If this was death, it was heaven; she clawed his long hair, keeping him exactly there, exactly like that. Lucius Lucius *Lucius*

She was sitting bolt upright in her bed, breathing hard, and clasping her throat. *Oh Lord!* What what awkwardly clear memories rushed before her inner eye, each making her squirm. Oh for heaven's sake! Thanks Merlin that she jinxed her four poster bed soundproof each night before she went to sleep, what if she had made some sort of sound during this this this *nightmare*!

She pulled her covers up to her chin, after squinting down to make sure that she was completely dressed *Of course* she was! This was *ridiculous*! She was furious with herself, her own subconscious, for this was *all* it was, a nasty, nasty trick that her subconscious had played her, without a doubt caused by that most impertinent person! His image flashed through her mind, making her tremble once more and this time for real. She shook herself. This must not be. It was absolutely unacceptable.

One could well say that Narcissa was a control freak, as far as she, her poise, was concerned. This included her dreams. She would *not* tolerate such slips! Her desire for total control suggested that she wouldn't consider any possible implications either. She did not *want* to want Lucius Malfoy, so she didn't. That was all there was to say about it. It was preposterous anyway. *Lucius Malfoy!* Pht!

She wasn't blind, all right. So he was extremely good-looking, but what was that to her! Nothing! She *didn't* care for superficial things like silky hair, an athletic build, or dazzling eyes. She appreciated noble features because she had a sense for *aesthetic*, but Lucius Malfoy wasn't the only boy in school with a good face, he wasn't! Just as well she appreciated Solomon Goldstein, Ben Harper or Thornton Mortlake. Or even her unbearable cousin Sirius, who was an idiot, but at least a handsome idiot. Beauty was a variety of *art*; it didn't impress her in *any* other way!

He was insufferable! He was haughty, lazy and vain! He had nothing but Quidditch and girls in his head! He believed himself to be the hottest thing that had ever hit the planet and that he could have everything, by whatever means. Did he want to get off with her? Probably. He'd think he had wasted his time if he hadn't had every single girl

in school before his graduation! She was too good for such a guy! *Much* too good! And also too proud, by no means inclined to be number sixty-seven on his hit list.

All right. She would not deny it. There had been a time, *yes*, when she had fancied him a little bit. Okay, more than just *abit*. But she had been *twelve* then! That didn't count! In her first year in school, she had still been a little *desperate*, she hadn't settled in, she had hated anyone and anything, and Andy hadn't been enough to make her get over the absence of their parents, the only people in the world that she valued without too many conditions. She had been easy prey, simply looking for someone to distract her from her loneliness, and there he had been, that handsome senior, who had always pretended to be so nice around her. She had preferred thinking of him to all the things that had been troubling her; it was as simple as that!

But he had shown his true colours soon enough. She still couldn't say what she had done wrong; she believed that she hadn't let her crush show. Nevertheless he had noticed it and decided to expose her in front of his mates. She had never been so mortified in all her life! He had driven her over the edge; she had used language that she normally wouldn't have taken in her mouth for anything. She *wouldn't* use swear words, she *treasured* her countenance, and he had made her lose it completely! But that was *then*, she had been a very little girl then, and she wasn't going to let it happen *again*.

She gave him the goby at breakfast table after this terrible night; she couldn't help it but *hear* him though. He was talking animatedly to his friends about the match next Saturday, discussing some sort of manoeuvre. Graham Goyle, one of his moronic buddies, cried, "But it all comes to nothing if you're not allowed to play, Malf!"

"Don't you rack your big head, Golly. I *will* play and "

"Are you quite sure?" Ben Harper butted in. "Because I can replace you if you will."

"I'd rather replace myself with a sack of Hippogriff dung, Harper, *if* I didn't play myself, which I will do, of course. Don't make such a fuss!"

"Uhm no offence, Malfoy, but do you seriously believe you get through a single week without cursing anyone...?"

"Shut up, Derrick."

"Come on, Malfoy, we need to be prepared for all possible cases! What do we do if you *don't* play?"

Narcissa had overheard it all, at first thinking that he might be ill or injured, so Madam Pomfrey could prohibit him to play. Then she realised that this was unlikely. He appeared to have cursed someone, and if he cursed someone else, he'd be banned from playing. Now that wasn't like old Slughorn, was it? It was Lucius Malfoy's hobby to put nasty spells on people, and Slughorn had never done much about it, after all he was a Quidditch star, and his father financed the team, the school choir, the drama club and who knew what else. Enough, anyway, to keep his wayward son out of trouble.

A ray of light on such a black morning, she thought gleefully. Lucius Malfoy had got himself into real trouble, ha! Served him right! He had it coming! She couldn't bridle her curiosity, and when she met little Severus in the library, she plucked up courage and asked him what had happened, to add some fuel to her spite. It turned out that Malfoy had had a severe clash with Madam Pince, and that must have happened right after she had left the library the day before. Good! So not only she had been vexed! Some more balance for the scales of justice in the world!

Lucius himself knew nothing of all this, of course. He had no idea that his lovely Narcissa had heard of his latest faux-pas, and naturally, he was perfectly ignorant of the sort of dreams that would haunt her at night. *Had* he known anything about *this*, his happiness would have been complete, but as things were, he felt nothing but downcast. He, too, had had a little chat with Severus and inquired why on earth Narcissa would hate him so much, or rather: what he'd have to do to make her hate him a little less.

Severus had been thoroughly embarrassed by the topic, but a little persistence had done the job. The answers had been so obvious, he wanted to slap himself for even asking. According to Severus, Narcissa would criticise his laziness concerning anything like education. *She* thought that *he* thought that Rodin was a sort of black pudding and Ulan Bator a Balkan politician. Oh well. He knew that Ulan Bator was the capital of some far-away country, though he had never heard the word name...? 'Rodin' before... He got the gist, okay. He could do something about this easily.

Her other objection was his long row of girlfriends. Severus had at once crushed his hopes that this might be due to jealousy. She found it bad style, apparently. Lucius wasn't disheartened so quickly nevertheless. She minded? She would get her will! He had long got bored with those fatuous chicks anyway. And perhaps Narcissa would look at him with a more friendly eye then! And once she no longer rejected him so fiercely, she might be coaxed into some sort of date, and *then* he could prove her that he wasn't just some uninformed oaf, and for heaven's sake, in *that* case she couldn't be completely immune to his looks and charms, could she?!

He would not be discouraged; that wasn't his way. And feeling so crestfallen wasn't like him either; *he'd* things, he didn't simply wait for them to happen by chance. Consequently, he marched into the library after his last class, despite Madam Pince who clearly still had a grudge on him. He decided to start with an anthology about French Poetry. Severus had mentioned that she was very fond of this crap. Madam Pince eyed him grimly, but what the heck!

'Ma pauvre muse, hélas! Qu'as-tu donc ce matin?

Tes yeux creux sont peuplés de visions nocturnes,

Et je vois tour à tour réfléchis sur ton teint

La folie et l'horreur, froides et taciturnes.'

'Alas, poor Muse, what ails you so today?

Your hollow eyes with midnight visions burn,

And turn about, in your complexion play

Madness and horror, cold and taciturn.'

This was something about a *muse*, right? Haunted by nightmares and they didn't flatter her complexion? And Narcissa *diked* this?! He flipped through the book; maybe he had just had a bad start. 'There you go', he thought, '*Galanteries*'. That sounded more like it.

'À la très chère, à la très belle...' He stuck his tongue in his cheek and arched a brow. With verses like *that*, he could persuade even Chloe to come back to him! These sly French blokes, they knew how to do it, eh? Sure, it was the corniest thing he had ever heard, but he'd bet a hundred galleons that it'd work still! Admittedly, for Narcissa, he'd need more than that, but he would keep this stuff in mind for the less gifted chicks...

He also knew that she was fluent in French, and he wasn't. Perhaps he should give it a try with English poetry for a start. Under Madam Pince's stern observation, he brought this book back and fetched another. The names in the table of contents clearly indicated that half of the authors were Muggles, but he wouldn't give up because of that. Narcissa was fond of this he would read it and that was that.

For two whole hours, he brooded over that dusty tome, less interested than assiduous. But two hours must suffice. He was going to take his NEWTs next year, and he might be a lazy dog, but he wasn't stupid. He didn't pretend to work hard, but he did do enough to come through just fine, so he got up to put back those cheesy poets and fetch a couple of Transfiguration books instead.

On his way he tried to dodge Madam Pince and made a small detour when he came across the very reason why he had come here in the first place. He was slightly

startled, but Narcissa seemed downright shocked; her cheeks turned paper-white and her eyes wide. It was never too late, he told himself, to make a good impression, so he put on his best smile, but before he could open his mouth, she already snapped at him.

"What are you doing here?! Are you pursuing me or something?!"

"What? Listen, this is a public place and "

She looked as if he had slapped her and cried, "Oh,*shut up!*"

He made a soothing gesture, both because *hereally* didn't want to quarrel with her and because he couldn't afford another brawl with Madam Pince in his situation. Narcissa glanced at the books in his arms and furrowed her brow contemptuously. "What's *this*? What would *you* know about *poetry*, Malfoy?!"

He straightened his back. This was the opportune moment to exercise his newly-gained knowledge. "Oh, you know, just a bit of light reading. 'Ma pauvre muse, hélas! Qu'as-tu donc ce matin? Tes yeux creux sont peuplés de visions nocturnes uh, hang on et je vois tour à tour réfléchis sur ton teint la folie et l'horreur, froides et taciturnes.' I want to polish my French, you see?"

He had thought this would impress her; his pronunciation hadn't been so bad, right? But instead she stared at him as if he was a dragon. Her hand flew to her lapels and gathered her robes over her chest. "You *you* "

"Oh, come on, Narcissa. Why are you so constantly offended as soon as I open my mouth?"

She made no reply; he could literally see how she was working on her countenance, but he didn't see what he had done wrong this time, for goodness' sake! She was always so composed he had seen her cool and serene while fierce insults were hurled at her, boys who wanted to ask her out had made complete fools of themselves in front of her, and her face had shown no reaction, but one crappy poem would give her a heart attack?!

"Malfoy," she said flatly. "You will stay away from me. You get me? Stay. Away."

"What's your sodding problem?"

"Listen. This is what you will do now you keep your mouth shut, turn around and walk away. You will stay away from me, at least twenty feet, and you will not address me in any possible way "

"And why should I do that? You're not entitled to boss me around!"

"No... Not *entitled* perhaps. But capable." She had regained her composure and smirked icily. She gave him a pointed glance, then looked over to the next bookshelf. "I tell you what I will do. I will knock over this shelf, and perhaps set a couple of books on fire. I will scream at the top of my lungs, and when Madam Pince rushes over, I will tell her all the *horrible* things you said about her and that you've made all that mess."

He crossed his arms and sneered. She went on, "As an effect, you'll be banned from the Quidditch team. Such a shame someone else will be the Captain and lead the team to the Cup. But you'll be sitting in the stands and applauding; that's not so bad either." She crossed her arms, too. "Unless, of course, you will give me your word to keep away from me. It's easy. When you spot me somewhere, you simply take a little detour. I'm easily avoided, believe me."

He gave a laugh. "Are you trying to blackmail me?"

"Yes. I'm a top student, no teacher has ever complained about me, and I haven't got a single bad mark on my record. Who do you think is more credible, you or I?"

"I hadn't thought it possible that I could ever have underestimated you, and still you are capable of surprising me..." He smiled, looking almost enraptured. "What if I gave you that promise now, but wouldn't stick to my word?"

"In *that* case, I'd make sure that you be expelled from Hogwarts."

"I'm rich; I don't need to finish school."

"But you care for your image. I can slander you; I can ruin your reputation."

"Let me get that straight. It is so extremely important to you that I keep out of your sight that you'd be willing to do this all? Set sacrosanct books on fire? Have me thrown off the team? Pursue my expulsion?"

"If you will put it like that."

He saw that she was absolutely serious and briefly considered his options. He knew what he wanted. "All right. Knock it over. Start screaming. Have me expelled from the team. I don't give a damn. But in return, go out with me."

She laughed incredulously. "Why on earth are you so desperate to go out with me? I don't get it! I won't sleep with you, Malfoy. I *wiil*ot. *Never*. Can't you get that in your head?"

"That's not what I'm talking about. I merely want to have a date with you. No sex. Only talking and a nice dinner."

"Yeah, sure! For Merlin's sake, I hate those cows, but I still*hear* what they're saying. I *know* your way. And trust me, no one, especially not you, can treat*me* like that."

"My dearest Narcissa. Now you will listen to *me* for a minute. Yes, I've behaved shamefully towards a whole lot of girls. Yes, I had no further interest in any of them, apart from having sex with them. I cannot and will not deny the truth of all that. But that isn't what I want from you. I *know* that you're not like that. Your uniqueness is one of the reasons I value you so much. I cannot claim that I wouldn't like to you know because you are utterly beautiful and sexy. But I know that it won't happen, and that's fine. I just want to get to know you."

She shook her head, laughing in exasperation. "But/ don't want to get to know *you*!"

"Why don't you give me a chance? One single chance, that's all I'm asking for!"

"I'm getting tired of this. If you don't take me seriously there you go." She rolled her eyes and took her wand out. "Last chance, Malfoy. If I were you, I'd take it."

"Go ahead. The only chance I want is with you."

She put her threat in action, pulling down four shelves in total and yelling like mad. He observed her in silence and was astonished at his own calm. In fact, he was almost happy. Yes, he wouldn't be the Captain of his own team; he would sit in the audience when they'd win the Cup after all. Yesterday, it had still been so terribly important to him to stay on the team. But now it no longer counted. He had suddenly realised that she did *not* hate him. He was no expert at psychology, but he understood enough to know that she wouldn't have made all this fuss if he were nothing to her.

Madam Pince came, half stumped, half furious. Narcissa threw him one long quizzical look as if to say, 'You can still prevent this', and he smiled in return.

"Madam Pince, I suggest we go and see my Head of House. I have said some awful things about you, Miss Black here defended you, we began to argue and then I well overreacted a little bit."

Je t'adore... From: Charles Baudelaire, 'Je t'adore à l'égal de la voûte nocturne'. English translation by: Jacques LeClercq, NY, 1958 :

I worship you, O proud and taciturn,
As I do night's high vault; O sorrow's urn,
I love you all the more because you flee
And seem, gem of my nights, ironically
To multiply the weary leagues that sunder
My arms from all infinity's blue wonder.
I skirmish and I climb to the attack,
I, a worms' chorus on a corpse's back,
O fierce cruel beast, I cherish to the full
The very chill that makes you beautiful.

Abyssis... The abyss calls out for the abyss.

Thou art more lovely... Inspired by: William Shakespeare, 'Sonnet No. XVIII'.

Unthrifty loveliness... From: William Shakespeare, 'Sonnet No. IV'.

Thine eyes I love... From: William Shakespeare, 'Sonnet No. CXXXII'.

If thy soul... From: William Shakespeare, 'Sonnet No. CXXXVI'.

Ma pauvre muse/Alas, poor muse... From: Charles Baudelaire, 'La Muse Malade'. English translation by: Roy Campbell, NY, 1952.

À la très chère... From: Charles Baudelaire, 'Hymne'. To the dearest, to the most beautiful.

Resigned

Chapter 11 of 21

Narcissa surrenders and cannot account for it.

- Chapter Ten -

RESIGNED

Saepe dat una dies, quod totus denegat annus.

WALTHER – Proverbia Sententiaeque

Poor old Slughorn hadn't believed his own bad luck. He had been forced to ban his favourite student – and Senior Prefect – and, what was certainly worst, *Captain* from the team, the best player! Lucius hadn't defended himself; as a matter of fact, he had hardly listened. His mind was more pleasantly engaged; he kept gazing over at Narcissa, his stomach doing one back-flip after the other, while she was determined to pointedly look anywhere but at him. That was okay. In fact, it was brilliant. She could have been gloating, but instead she seemed to be nothing if not embarrassed.

He didn't know what terrible headaches he caused Professor Slughorn, who had to write to Abraxas Malfoy. But even if he had known it, he wouldn't have cared the slightest bit. All he cared about was that enchanting girl over there. If he had been in love with her before, he now was madly in love, at least. The fierceness, the determination she had shown betrayed a capacity for genuine passion underneath that icy exterior, thrilling him all the more.

They were dismissed at last, and he hurried to follow her. "Go out with me, Narcissa."

She stopped in her tracks and whirled around. "What is *wrong* with you?"

"Nothing. I've just given up my only hobby, and I did it gladly. Now you can no longer demand that I stay away from you."

She sneered. "Can't I?"

"Why are you so scared of me?"

"I am *not* scared of you!"

"Great! Then you can go out with me."

"Which part of *no* is so hard to understand for you?"

"You've done all that only to get rid of me. You must have a reason."

"Yes, I have indeed! I can't stand you!"

"Oh, you don't like anyone, but only for me do you make such an effort."

She gave a small, reluctant laugh. "Because you are more persistent than the rest!"

"Come on. In five minutes, I'll have to face my team and make them understand that they'll get a new Captain, in the last two months of the season –"

"You could have avoided that easily enough."

"You made me choose between Quidditch and you, and I can't manage without you."

"Oh *please*, just stop prattling, Malfoy!"

He gave her his most heartfelt smile. "Come on, Narcissa. You've said it yourself – I'm persistent. I won't stop asking you, no matter how often you say 'no'. If nothing else, do yourself a favour and take a short-cut."

She groaned and closed her eyes, lightly shaking her head. "And if I agreed to go out with you *once*, exactly *one* time, under the condition that you'll leave me alone after that?"

"Deal!" He was beaming at her.

"I can't believe I'm doing this." She hadn't stopped shaking her head, sighed once more and turned around to march back to Slughorn's office. She contemplated her decision – going out with Lucius Malfoy – how could that have happened? How could she sink so low? Good Lord.

She knocked, and the Professor asked her to come in. She explained what had happened – omitting all details relating to the true cause – smiled her sweetest smile, pretended repentance, promised to come to his next party, and got away without further consequences.

That had been for several reasons on the Deputy Headmaster's part. First – this was the first time ever that the youngest Miss Black had put a toe over the line. As much trouble as he had had with the eldest, so perfectly behaved was Narcissa. The next but much more profound point was his immense relief. Slughorn would not have to inform Malfoy senior, giving him no reason to withdraw his money, which practically ran half of the school. He was also more than grateful that Malfoy junior could remain Team Captain – he was fond of the cup on his desk, and there was nobody comparable in talent to replace the boy. The only problem would be Minerva McGonagall, but he would manage. He'd rather challenge his colleague than Abraxas Malfoy.

Very, very slowly, and feeling utterly beaten down, Narcissa trotted back to the dungeons. Had she just agreed to go out with Lucius Malfoy? She was going to be the national laughing stock! This aspect didn't bother her. What was worse – her self-respect was beaten. She had promised herself to never go out with him, all the more since... Heat crept into her face, remembering the previous night's dream.

And what was that poetry book supposed to mean? She had wanted to sink into the ground when he had quoted that particular piece, as if he had read her thoughts, as if he had known that she had just had a sleepless night because of him. Was he a Legilimens? She gave it a thought, but concluded that this was highly unlikely. He was too lazy to voluntarily learn something so demanding. Sheer luck had made him find a line that would knock her out cold!

She crossed the common room and passed the object of her nightmares, who was just about to justify himself in front of his team-mates. In passing, she said as casually as she could, "Professor Slughorn sends his regards, Malfoy. He wishes me to inform you that there has been an unfortunate misunderstanding. You're still Captain, you won't be banned, and *you* can wipe off that smug grin, Harper."

From the corner of her eye, she saw Lucius Malfoy shoot up and head for her; she tried to reach the girls' dormitories before he could reach her, but since she forbade herself to run and he had no such scruples, he caught up with her ten feet before her sanctuary that boys couldn't enter. She took a deep breath and looked at him. "What is it?"

"You've talked to Slughorn then?"

"No. He's just so impressed with your Chaser qualities, he can't do without you."

He winked at her and smiled. "Sure. Thank you nevertheless."

"For what?"

"For being the bearer of good news, if you don't want to be credited with anything else."

"Is that all? Because I need to go."

"That would be all – for now."

Narcissa turned around and escaped, thus missing her *date's* enthralled face staring after her. Lucius' mind was blank, a clean slate; he was almost dizzy with elation. She had said 'yes' – at last! Yes! *Yes!* Narcissa – *his Narcissa* – had finally agreed to go out with him! She had even put things right with Sluggo – she needn't have done that! Out of the sheer goodness of her heart, she had spared him! Oh Narcissa, lovely, gracious, wonderful Narcissa! He could hardly grasp his own luck!

Saepe... Frequently, a single hour grants what has been denied the whole year.

Playing With The Boys

Chapter 12 of 21

Lucius is throwing a party.

- Chapter Eleven -

PLAYING WITH THE BOYS

Prima creterra ad sitim pertinet, secunda ad hilaritatem, tertia ad voluptatem, quarta ad insaniam!

APULEIUS Florida

Abraxas Malfoy had left on his business trip with gripes and something bordering on a migraine. His good-for-nothing son wouldn't even deny that he'd seize the opportunity for a party, and all Abraxas could do was admonish and threaten the boy if any of the invaluable artefacts or pieces of furniture suffered damage, be it oh-so-small, Lucius was going to spend the rest of the summer holidays in a Romanian monastery, without his wand, with a dragon guarding the door to his minuscule cell. The boy had merrily giggled at that announcement, and Abraxas had left for the South African diamond mine he meant to acquire, taking a large bottle of anti-gastritis potion.

Lucius didn't simply want to throw a party he had ulterior motives. Marlon Crabbe had miraculously managed to finish Hogwarts, so the Sepulture Septuplet had a vacancy to fill, and it hadn't taken much persuasion to make the other guys agree on the replacement he had in mind, even though the chosen candidate was a girl, and not just any girl, mind you, but *she*. Graham hadn't minded at all; he'd agree with everything Lucius wanted anyhow and liked her in the first place. Evan and Horatio, being the Benjamins of the group, hadn't had much to say, while Damocles and Bertie were quite delighted with the idea for aesthetic reasons.

Only Narcissa hadn't been interviewed regarding whether she even wanted to join, which made Lucius more than just a little nervous. She was known for her stubbornness, and for never having joined *any* group at all. Although the Sepulture Septuplet was a very exclusive club that many students would have died to join, it was quite possible that Narcissa might feel less honoured than molested by the offer, which would be grievous and humbling for him. She was their only choice his only choice. And since he had no mind that they'd be known as the Sepulture Sextuplet... Oh well, he'd just have to convince her, right?

At least she had agreed to come after he had told her that he'd regard their deal for a date done if she came. He had thought long about this; he had mulled over plan after plan in his head. The one perfect date, where to take her, what to do, how to dispel her doubts and mistrust... In the end, he had chickened out, kind of. And also, he thought that *this* scheme might yield a more lasting success, in the long term.

He prayed that the party might soften her up a little. He could only hope, after organising everything to the best of his ability and not being picky about the guests for a change. He had told all of his friends to bring whomever they liked, which was a clever move. Narcissa wouldn't have admitted that she wanted to go, preferring to claim she merely advanced her protégé Severus, who hadn't protested. He was only a second year not even that he'd be a second year in September, and Lucius Malfoy and his mates were the coolest kids in all England, and *he*, Severus Snape, whose own father was nothing but a shabby Muggle, would go to a party at the famous Malfoy Manor, personally invited by Narcissa Black, who was the epitome of 'cool'... He couldn't believe in his own luck, honestly.

"Wow! Look at it! *Look at it!*" The boy couldn't close his mouth, completely awed. Every window of the vast Manor was lit by candles, fairies illuminated the trees and bushes, in the distance there were a couple of bonfires blazing. In case somebody blind and deaf and completely silly was wondering where the party was, there were real gnomes holding up signs. Myriads of glow-worms were forming sparkling ornaments, peacocks strutted around, and there were two giraffes with a rope drawn between their heads and a house-elf balancing on the rope, juggling with burning pins.

"This is it's unbelievable, isn't it?" Severus whispered.

Yes. Admittedly. Unlike Severus, she wasn't too impressed by the party decorations, but the *building*, the estate as such. Boy! It wasn't as though she had never seen a stately manor before, the country boasted hundreds of these places, and she had visited all the interesting ones, even if they were owned by Muggles. *This*, however goodness, it was breathtaking! After passing a gate house thrice the size of the house of Severus' parents, adorned with the imperial code of arms a lily entwined by a snake and a dragon they had walked through a park-like garden for more than ten minutes until the Manor itself was in sight.

The closer they had come, the more Narcissa had gaped. It was *huge* for a start, showing all kinds of styles in the various extensions and remodelling. There was an ancient weir tower with a moat, adjoining a Gothic abbey that was connected to an Elizabethan manor, which in turn abutted a Palladian edifice and a neo-classicist mansion, the unmistakable traces of the Great everywhere, surrounded by absolutely mind-boggling gardens. This house one could not possibly call it *house* though and its gardens were the most magnificent thing she had ever seen, but she wouldn't want to admit her enthusiasm, even though it was hard not to gape.

"Get a grip, Severus!" she cried more harshly than necessary.

"Don't you think it's unbelievable?"

"If a guy like Malfoy's throwing a party, it's supposed to look like this, Severus!"

"The giraffes!"

"I bet he's hiding a bunch of elephants somewhere, and of course penguins to serve the drinks."

"Really?" He gazed around intently.

"No, *not* really, this was a joke, for heaven's sake! You know how waiters always tend to resemble penguins...? Oh, never mind now."

They had arrived on the terraces, where fifty people, give or take, were already sipping their drinks, which were mixed by a rather gargantuan spider. With so many arms and eyes to spot waving guests, he was rather quick, too. Narcissa tilted her head. "Okay, so now *this* I did not foresee, I give you that."

She would have been disappointed if they hadn't been welcomed by the host himself immediately after their arrival, and she wasn't let down. Next thing she knew Lucius was with them, smiling merrily and putting his arms around their shoulders, buddy-style. "Hey, kids, welcome to the show! You're enjoying yourselves?"

Narcissa beckoned at the bar. "I'm not sure how easy-going I can be in the vicinity of a gigantic predator."

"I thought you liked spiders?"

"I do, I'm just not used to have my drinks done by one."

"If it is of any comfort to you, this is really just a bartender from Bangkok who happens to be an Animagus. Best Bloody Marys in the Northern Hemisphere. He's not going

to eat you, even though you smell so good, Black!"

She pushed his arm away, but didn't seem too offended otherwise. "Indicating that you're standing too close, Malfoy."

"Come on; let me get you a drink, hon."

"You know that I'll never be *that* drunk, right?"

"Worth a try! What about you, Snape? Want a beer? A cocktail?"

"I'll have what she takes, sir."

"Cut out that sir crap, Snape! You're not one of the house-elves!"

"Leave him alone, Malfoy, and bring us two glasses of old champagne, if you have it."

"I sure have back in a minute, sweetheart!"

He left and Severus whispered, "I've never had a glass of champagne in my whole life..."

"Of course not! How old are you, not yet thirteen? Your mum's very good not to let you drink. Speaking of her when do you have to be back home?"

Even in the vague light, she could tell that he was blushing. "Oh! No special time... My mum was actually so uhm distraught when I left, I dare say she hardly noticed."

"Well, in that case I guess you'll be back by ten, because I have to be home then. Unless I can convince one of the guys to take you back later."

"Take him?" Lucius returned with some glasses and Narcissa explained the situation to him. He grinned slyly. "Oh, that's all taken care of. *You* can stay here, pal, and *you*" He glanced at Narcissa. "I'll take you home myself."

She sneered. "That is such a kind offer, but I think I will decline nonetheless. I can Apparate home on my own."

"Of course you can, but it wouldn't work out that way."

"It wouldn't?"

"No. Look, I foresaw that your good parents would expect your return at such an ungodly hour, so there's a cauldron full of Polyjuice Potion waiting to be honoured by one of your admirable hairs, and Marlon's sister has actually volunteered to drink it and impersonate you until you *truly* want to go. That's when I will bring you home; we'll mount my broom in front of your house, fly up to your room and you two change places again."

"You must be kidding!"

"Absolutely not, my dear! You're the reason why I'm giving this party in the first place despite the fact that I'll have to spend the next six weeks in a monastery. You're the guest of honour. I can't let you go at ten. Impossible!"

Narcissa tried to hide the fact that she did feel more than just slightly flattered. "I bet your present girlfriend will be *delighted* to hear you say so!"

"If I had had what you call a 'present girlfriend', I would of course have dumped her yesterday."

"See, Malfoy, that's the reason why it's never going to be 'us'. I don't approve of your dumping rate."

He laughed and winked at her. "You'd prefer me dating someone else while hooking up with you?"

She chuckled, too. "You and I will never 'hook up', as you call it."

"Why, am I not your type?"

"Most certainly you are not."

"Have another drink, Narcissa!"

She didn't know why she let herself be talked into such madness, but one hour later, at a quarter to ten, she was standing in her parents' hallway again, knocking on the parlour door. She made a bit of small talk, said good night, then went up to her room, opened the window, let Sherilyn Crabbe in and slipped out herself. Malfoy was hovering in front of the window and helped her to climb on the broom. He had to pull himself together to pilot his broom safely to the ground because feeling Narcissa's presence so close, sitting right behind him and clinging to his waist was confounding him profoundly. Not two minutes later, they were back in the splendid gardens of Malfoy Manor, and Lucius forced himself to appear relaxed again.

Narcissa, not used to flying and decidedly unsympathetic to the concept, was swaying slightly and grabbed for his arm once more to steady herself. He would have supported her, but she instantly shrank back again and put on a bit of a scowl. "I swear, if I find out that she's been sniffing through my stuff, I'll hold *you* directly responsible, Malfoy!"

"Why, is your diary full of you pining for me?"

"Do you expect an answer to your insolence?"

"What if I offered to stop making passes at you?"

"Well, I'd be extremely pleased! I thought we had agreed on so much to begin with!"

"Come, let me get you a drink and I'll tell you what we'll do."

The spider mixed some concoction of champagne, vodka, cranberry and pineapple juice; they toasted and he led her away from the crowd, which had quadrupled by now and was soundly partying. She told him once more that he wouldn't be so lucky, but he laughed and assured her that this wasn't what he had in mind at the moment. They were joined by Marlon and Graham, Damocles and Bertram, Evan and Horatio, giving her a notion that something very mischievous was to follow, and all of them went inside, past some house-elves guarding the second floor. Narcissa had been a little anxious she didn't trust those guys but her concerns were dispelled by Graham's genial expression.

"You really needn't worry, you know," he said under his breath and looked so candid that she had to smile. She couldn't have said why, but she was somewhat fond of the boy, although he was lacking everything that she normally required in a person. He was slow and dim-witted, his head was full of Quidditch, silly pranks and not much else, but there was an honest humility in him that must disarm her habitual contempt. It had taken her some time to acknowledge this; at first, she had thought he was just another of Lucius Malfoy's devoted mates.

She gave him a little smile. "Because you'll be looking after me, right?"

"I know that you can look after yourself. You're going to like this, I'm sure."

"What are you two whispering there?" Lucius gave Graham a strict look. "Secrecy Statute number one, Golly!"

"He only said that I can relax, Malfoy!"

IN BIBLIOTHECIS IMMORTALES ANIMAE LOQUUNTUR was written in intricate letters above an exquisitely carved door, in front of which the other boys had come to a halt, glancing at their leader and suppressing suggestive grins. Narcissa didn't perceive most of this; her curiosity was sparked off and kindled by the idea how the library of such a place might be like.

They entered and, despite herself, Narcissa goggled. This was heaven it had to be she had never seen such a beautiful sight! The library consisted of a suite of rooms; all the walls were covered with book shelves up to the twenty-five foot ceiling, made of mahogany and engraved crystal. They walked through the first three rooms, then got into a hall-like place with a huge cupola of tinted glass, where a group of very comfortable-looking armchairs were assembled, and then they all settled down and each grabbed one of the glasses of Firewhisky that were hovering in the air above their seats.

"I have to admit it, Malfoy this is this is fabulous!"

He beckoned at the portrait of a wizard with a smug, cunning face in Renaissance robes, who arched a critical brow at them. "Pay him the compliments, the library was his design."

"You've got a nerve, boy; I give you that. Abraxas will have your wand for bringing strangers here," the portrait said with unveiled glee.

"Probably, but one must set priorities, as he keeps on telling me." He turned back to Narcissa. "However, it might have slipped your notice, but our dear Crabs will not return to Hogwarts this autumn."

The other boys applauded mockingly, and Marlon feigned some solemn bows like an actor on stage. Narcissa grinned. "Well done, Marlon."

"Yes, we were all surprised," Lucius continued. "As flattering as this is to Crabs' unsuspected capacities, it leaves the rest of us in a somewhat awkward position. We are short a buddy, if you want to call it that. Now you might say that the school is full of possible candidates, but you couldn't be more wrong. We have the highest standards; we cannot accept just any rake that comes our way. Bertie, please!"

"Thank you, Luce. As before-mentioned, the Sepulture Septuplet sets high standards. We expect a certain class for a start, a talent for curses, hexes and jinxes, a sense of humour and a bent for mischievous schemes. We want a personal style, taste doesn't hurt, determination and nerve are a must, and the capability for extreme secrecy. Until recently, we requested our members to be male, but we are willing to go with the times."

"You're so modern, boys," Narcissa exclaimed, finally having a presentiment what this was all about.

"We have broken one of our most important maxims by bringing you here," Damocles said in fake earnestness, "and thereby officially revealing the identities of our members "

"No offence, boys, but everyone knows who's in and who's not!"

"It was suggested we might Obliviate you after this "

"You'd neither dare nor manage," she said with a challenging smile.

"And you are lucky to already have a patron in our midst who downright rejects tampering with your admirable brains, who's by the way also the one who recommended you for the vacant position, so you needn't worry," Damocles went on with a grin. Narcissa shot Lucius an incredulous, yet amused glance, while he made an innocent face. "To cut a long story short we want you. You are more than welcome "

"desired, more like "

"to join our jolly club. You possess every quality we want in abundance," Damocles continued. "You are frightfully clever and talented, you have exactly the sort of humour we're looking for, and let's face it, also the looks to make *us* look even better."

"Being modest, are you?"

Lucius grinned ironically. "I flatter myself that I know you a little bit, so I have foreseen that your first impulse would be to decline outright. You are one proud girl another reason why you're so desirable for this position and the whole school knows that you wouldn't want to join any society for your life. So let me do a little advertising here. The Sepulture Septuplet is single-handedly the most exclusive club in all Hogwarts not that this was going to impress you, I merely want to explain why you want to change your mind. So, there is hardly a student in the entire school and certainly not in Slytherin who wouldn't want to be in your place right now. And why is this so, you ask? Because we're having *fun*, dear. You know very well how dull Hogwarts is, especially since Dumbledore's taken the reins. You are bored to tears, don't you *deny that*. And we have the means to change this. We can entertain you in a way that you haven't fathomed yet. I strongly suspect that you've believed so far that the only real *fun* in life could be found in books obviously I have chosen this place to meet with some calculation. Beyond the pleasures we have to offer by becoming one of us, this library should be a unique selling point to you. It contains two million books, and I can grant you free access to it "

The portrait laughed spitefully. "Can you, boy?"

Lucius shot him a swift, withering glance and proceeded, "Name the book you want and I can get it for you, and as long as my father isn't at home, you can rummage through the books as much as you like. I'll have one of the servants draw up a catalogue for you, if you like "

"You've never offered that to any of us! Has he, pals?" Evan asked.

"For one, you take as much interest in books as in sewing your own robes, Rosie, and then, you haven't got a figure like hers to inspire me to risk my personal health for you."

"I'm allowed in the library," Damocles said calmly. "Even by Abraxas himself."

"If it wasn't for his sacrosanct bloodline, he'd extradite me for good to that godforsaken monastery and adopt you, pal."

"She enjoys books even more than I do, so perhaps he'll permit her here officially as well."

"No frigging way. He's a terrible misogynist, second only to the pope no intention to offend your mother, Black. Anyhow, where was I? Ah, among the many privileges we can offer you is this library, and I expect you to particularly appreciate something else. As you already know, we've been so far guys-only, so it is only natural that every sort of flirtation among members is totally out of bounds. Join us, become one of the mates, and I can guarantee I will never make a pass at you again."

He winked at her and looked expectantly, so did the others, and Narcissa felt compelled to speak up. "Am I supposed to commit myself straightaway?"

"Say yes, darling!"

"Yeah, be our number seven, princess!"

"Join the club and have the time of your life, honey!"

"You cannot let us down, precious, we've such high hopes in you!"

"Quit your drab existence and discover the meaning of fun, sweetheart!"

They had spoken in turns and now it was up to Graham, who didn't look half as complacent as his friends, but gave her a genuinely pleading glance. "Come on, Narcissa, it'd be so great with you around. You wouldn't regret it, I promise."

"Hold on for a minute, guys! Don't you think I should know a bit more before finalising any decision? You've mentioned some Secrecy Statute what's that about, for instance? What's expected of me? Can I resign if I don't like it? What "

All right, so she had sort of suspected their agenda since she had seen with whom she had left that party; nevertheless, she was flummoxed by their proposal and astonished at herself for being not quite as negatory as she ought to be about the idea as such. The Sepulture Septuplet had a Secrecy Statute? Well, Narcissa Black had Treasured Tenets, and *her* number one was 'Never team up with anyone under any circumstances!' What was more: she thought these guys were true idiots not necessarily unintelligent, like Lucius, Bertram and Damocles, not necessarily unkind, like Graham but all in all childish and up to no good and... She was cross with herself for even *considering* their suggestion for a single minute! There was nothing in there for her! Okay, okay the library. That was tempting, sure. But Malfoy had a weakness for her, hadn't he; perhaps she could persuade him to let her use the library anyway? Could he be vindictive enough to decline?

While the boys explained more to her, she tried to make up a list with the pro and cons in her head. Being in cahoots with those jackasses a definite con. Getting into this marvellous library pro. Having something to do in Hogwarts a pro, too, kind of. Malfoy's word that he'd let her alone in the future pro, *if* he kept it. Doing the maths, she wasn't happy to find two and a half pros and only one con perhaps she should count each of the boys individually on the jackass side.

"So what's it going to be, petal?" Lucius asked, dropping his usual self-confident sneer.

"I have to answer straight away? I can't sleep on it?"

"If your answer was more favourable then, we*could* be talked into giving you more time, but it wouldn't be half as much fun."

"Excuse me?"

"I don't know if I can talk the zoo into lending us those giraffes longer "

"If they make difficulties, we can simply steal them again!"

"Shh, Gibbs, don't scare her. We'll only involve you in crimes if you want to, Black," Bertram Higgs said soothingly.

"For a start, anyway," Horatio mumbled.

"The giraffes ought to be mandatory."

"Why's that, Bertie?"

"She's the first newbie we've ever accepted. It ought to be huge. Giraffes are the least!"

"What?" Narcissa gazed around. "Am I supposed to balance on that rope or what? First you try to talk me into your little club, and then you seriously expect me to agree to something like this?!"

"Nothing will happen to you," Marlon said, speaking up for the first time. "I'll watch over you."

"No offence, Crabbe, but you're not exactly the kind of safeguard I'd pick!"

"Where's your adventurous spirit, Black? You've heard rule number two trust your mates!"

The whiskey tumblers had been magically refilling themselves the whole time, and Narcissa blamed *them* that she gave in at last. She said yes, ignoring every ounce of common sense inside her, and they got to their feet again, the boys beaming, Narcissa with a wry expression. Lucius turned to Damocles and said, "Show us to the exit, Cle, if you please."

"You're so drunk you can't find the exit, Malfoy?!"

"Au contraire, ma chère! You'll soon find out that this library is well protected thanks to old Alexandrias there, the founder. There is only one exit, and it keeps on changing each time one enters. Cle has worked out a system, and I'm sure so will you once you've got acquainted with the place, but I myself have never figured it out."

She thought he was joking, but Damocles tried three doors that only led to more, formerly unseen rooms full of books she felt slightly delirious about it before finally finding the right one.

"Are you remotely aware what a treasure this is, Malfoy?" she asked, almost breathless with genuine enthusiasm.

"My father keeps on preaching it at me. Maybe that's the reason why I've never come to fully appreciate it."

"A library to get lost in... One could read one's whole life without coming to an end..."

"You're a little bit tipsy, Narcissa, aren't you? I've never seen you so sentimental!"

"I'm in awe, Malfoy, I will not deny it! And I cannot grasp what an ignorant lout you are that you don't take any interest in it at all!"

"Nah, that's not true. I do take interest this library spares me the annoyance of dealing with the one in Hogwarts. I simply write to our butler to send the books I need; that's so much easier than waiting for the borrowed books in school, handling the old hag there. I can take out any book I like to any place I like... I *am* aware that it's brilliant."

Whatever she had to do next, it was worth it to befriend Malfoy, she had no more doubts. They evaded the party crowd and took another way out in fact, Lucius had chosen this way to show off before sweet Narcissa and parade some of the precious objects of art, the famous paintings, the full unrivalled splendour of the Manor. He had vowed to leave her alone, okay, but that didn't decrease his wish to impress her, and he still believed that he'd find a loophole in their agreement.

Malfoy Manor was ridiculously huge, and so were the boundaries surrounding it. The eight kids crossed the moat and headed for the shrubbery, crossed it and went on to the fringes of the forest on the northern side. No fires were lit here, only the full moon and the light from their wands showed them their way, and Narcissa felt suddenly nervous. The boys had fallen silent, and she hadn't even protested when Lucius had offered her his arm. After some more minutes, they got to a clearing on a bank, and she smirked when her eyes got used to the darkness over there were the giraffes.

Lucius unceremoniously let go of her arm she faintly noticed that it was strange to have him no longer making a pass at her at every occasion and he muttered some

incantations, igniting a dozen fires around them. He conjured seven golden goblets for each of the boys, then ushered Narcissa to stand in front of Marlon, they made a circle and raised the goblets.

"My dear friends, we've drunk together uncountable times, but tonight we have assembled not only for drink but for celebrations," Lucius said, mocking the earnest tone of vicars and news speakers. "It is sad for us all to say goodbye to our valued friend, our daring partner in crime, who will pass on to a higher level of education, knowledge and wisdom. Vince mero curas et, quicquid forte remordet, comprime deque animo nubila pelle tuo! Cheers to you, Crabs, and the fabulous times we've had!"

Everyone except Narcissa had a goblet and drank from it, then passed it on to their neighbour, only Marlon passed his on to her, and Lucius went on, "Yet we needn't mourn our loss for we have found the most excellent replacement. So let us also drink to her possibly the smartest of us all, and certainly the lightest here's to you, Cissa!"

"To you!"

She hesitantly sipped; this was some potion, no alcohol, though she didn't recognise the taste. It wasn't bad though, only a little bitter, and in the next moment, she felt a surge of adrenaline rush through her veins, which wasn't unpleasant either. All her doubts fell away immediately; she felt adventurous and easy, almost a bit quirky.

Marlon muttered quietly, "You needn't drink it all, Narcissa. It's pretty strong."

"Is it well dangerous?"

"It will knock you off your feet, but not in a bad way," Lucius said. "You needn't drink it though. That's up to you."

"Of course she'll drink it! She's supposed to be one of us now!" Horatio cried.

Lucius gave him a withering glance and hissed, "Leave her alone, Gibbs! She'll do what she wants!"

"It's all right, Lucius. I'll drink it. I like it, as a matter of fact." And she emptied the goblet with three big sips. For a few seconds, she thought she'd get a heart attack, but before she had time to panic, the feeling ceased and was replaced by sheer elation. Right now, she felt she could conquer the world. "In vino veritas, guys!"

The three of them who actually understood the joke laughed, and Bertram continued, "Will you be true to your mates?"

"Yes!"

"Will you stick to the sacrosanct Secrecy Statute?"

"Yes!"

Originally, the boys had planned some very solemn vows, but Narcissa had made it clear that they shouldn't push it too far with her. She was lucky to have negotiated the conditions *before* drinking that stuff, because right now, she would have been up to pretty much anything. They officially welcomed her with another toast, and then the giraffes came into play. Evan and Graham led them into the clearing, the rope was still in place, and Lucius pointed his wand at Narcissa. "You trust your mates, Cissa?"

"I must, right?"

He laughed and levitated her, slowly and gracefully, up to the rope. She found her balance with outstretched arms, and could eventually take a look around. God, this was so beautiful! The boys had diminished the fires on the ground for a better effect, the moon and the stars seemed so close that she thought she could touch them if only she stretched a little more. She could see the forest around her, leading to a park over there was a laurel maze; there were the magnificent gardens, and the palatial buildings forming Malfoy Manor as such. She could see the party guests and scurrying house-elves, tiny like insects in every other moment, she would have ridiculed such stale clichés, but the drink, the situation, overwhelmed her critical sense. She noticed that Lucius had undone the spell stabilising her, but when someone on the terraces shot firecrackers into the sky and the giraffes gave a start, she lost her balance and fell. Marlon hadn't lied; he caught her at once with a spell and let her slowly hover down to the ground again.

"Silly beasts," Lucius ranted and kicked the giraffe next to him against its leg. The animal didn't wince, but retaliated at once and kicked him back, sending him to the ground. He brandished his wand at it, but Narcissa stepped between them and helped him up.

"Leave her alone, Lucius. She couldn't help it, she got scared."

He would have glared at the animal if it hadn't been for Narcissa's enchanting smile. "And? Did you like it?"

"Great sight, yeah! The giraffes were somewhat unnecessary though."

"But they added a nice touch, didn't they?"

"They sure did," she muttered and shot him another radiant smile. Realising what she was doing, she looked away and exclaimed in a firm voice, "Come on, let's do something! And you must give me the recipe for that potion, Damocles. Fabulous mix, honestly. Come, come, don't be so lazy! So what are we going to do? Oh dear, I forgot the kid he must be bored out of his mind doesn't know anyone, does he send someone to look after the kid, Lucius and now move your lazy bottoms, guys!"

Lucius and Damocles smirked about her enthusiasm, knowing full well what had got into her. They had debated if they should even offer her that potion, Damocles' own invention. It was strictly illegal, half of the ingredients were banned, and the inventor had had scruples about giving it to the girl. Lucius had succeeded though, he always did, and in this special case, no one had any intention to mess with him anyway. They all knew what Narcissa Black meant to him, they all felt that it was partly their fault that Narcissa rejected him so thoroughly, and they had given in to his suggestion to have her join them because she was a talented, glamorous girl, sure, but chiefly because it was *she*, the girl whose name Lucius would always speak in italics. And if he wanted to bedazzle her with that potion oh well, he'd watch over her under all circumstances, no worries.

When she had been standing on that rope, Gibbs and Bertie had made jokes if they could glimpse under her skirt, receiving a harsh reprimand. Lucius himself had just been gazing up to her, bewitched by the vision. Her blonde hair had beautifully contrasted the otherwise dark silhouette. Her dress robes had floated around her, making her look so utterly beautiful that it'd taken his breath. Thank Merlin that Crabs had kept his attention, because Lucius had been far too distraught to catch her when the giraffes broke out; he had been shocked and angry that something could have happened to her and that he was robbed of this unearthly sight.

The potion put her in the mood to party and that was what they did. They went back to the party for a while, drank more, decided to take a short trip to the bartender's resident bar in Bangkok, went for a swim in the Indian Ocean, after which Lucius yearningly envied Graham, for he was allowed to dry Narcissa's robes with his wand, and returned to Malfoy Manor when the sun had already risen. There were still bunches of people everywhere, dancing, drinking, snogging, vomiting and sleeping, and a miserable looking house-elf rushed to his master.

"Master Lucius," he sobbed and clenched his loincloth. "Strangers have broken into Master Abraxas' wine cellar the precious fairy goblet's damaged someone's relieved himself on the Persian rug in the Golden Parlour couldn't find you, Master oh, sir, Master Abraxas's going to be so outraged! Several portraits slashed the amber cabinet's been pushed over..."

He wouldn't find an end to the litany of destruction, following Lucius along, stumbling and cowering. His master had shown a face of amusement at first, but the longer the aggrieved elf kept complaining, the angrier he got until he kicked the servant out of his way. "Get off me, Izzy! Come on, guys, help me clean up, will you Cissa, please have another drink, we'll be right back, and I'll take you home then."

She was giggling and sauntered over to the bar, trying very hard to walk straight. "Brilliant place you've got yourself there, Phan," she mumbled in the general direction of

the spider. "Excellent great music fabulous drinks hey! Did you happen to see a weird kid? Five foot two, I'd venture black hair, oddly-cut robes rather shy? And give me one of those funny mixtures!"

To her great surprise, the bartender transformed into his human shape, turning out to be a handsome Asian, who gave her a radiant grin and a drink. "You're the girlfriend of the bloke who threw the party?"

"What? Oh, no! No, no, no! Not my girlfriend his boyfriend oh, you know! Absolutely not."

"Good!" His smile got even broader.

"Yeah. Whatever so did you see the kid? I feel kind of responsible for him."

"Your little brother?"

"Nah... I just brought him here, and then I kind of forgot him... Terrible, isn't it?*'m terrible!*"

He leaned over to her. "Oh, no... You could never *beterrible*. A little *naughty* maybe?"

"Only tonight. My first time being naughty, you could say..." With some delay, she realised that she was actually talking to that man in a rather misleading fashion. Just because she had discarded some of her major principles tonight, that didn't mean that she'd need to break with all of them! She stepped back, snatched her glass and turned around. "Excuse me. I got to find the bloke who isn't my boyfriend and the one who isn't my brother "

She went into the house, instinctively following the traces of chaos and the occasional screams. She found Graham and Bertram in a smaller parlour, doing repair spells. Behind her, three college boys ran down the corridor and out of the house, and looking over her shoulder, she saw that they had been badly cursed. One of them was limping and bleeding, his fellow had tentacles growing out of every visible piece of skin, and the last one had the head of a giant ant.

"Luce's upstairs, kicking out some people, if you're looking for him," Bertram said casually, inspecting the shattered pieces of an antique vase.

She wanted to appear disinterested in Lucius, so she asked, "And the others?"

"Some idiots got stuck in the library and Cle's trying to get 'em out. I think Evan's *accompanying* some unwanted guests out, too, and I have not a clue what the rest're doing. Merlin, this is going to be the last time you or any of us see Luce his father will go *berserk* if he comes home. He'll just kill him!"

"Ah, it won't be that bad, I'm sure."

"You clearly haven't met Malfoy senior. *Baaad* temper, that one!"

Some more rampaging kids came her way when she went on looking for her ticket home, finding him in his father's study. Two portraits were dressing him down at once, though he didn't seem to be listening, instead tidying the place up.

"You useless idiot," the left portrait ranted, "you silly son of that Teutonic bitch! How dare you lead strangers into your forefathers' house! How dare you let them into your father's study!"

"Not even *you* are allowed in here!" The right one scowled down at him, wildly gesticulating. "Shhh! Out! Get out!"

"I believe one of them was a Mudblood even, Hector!"

"He surely looked like one! Hey, you wayward dog, there! Listen to us when we're talking to you!"

"You know he *never* listens, Hector! That's his specialty!"

"I swear, this is all his awful mother's fault, Cesar!"

"Just a minute, Cissa," Lucius said when he noticed her, giving her a weak smile and beckoning at the pictures. "And please *excuse them*."

"Another stranger! Ha! Oh boy, wait until your father hears that you've brought one of your sluts into his study!"

Instead of an answer, Lucius brandished his wand, slashing the left portrait, whose inhabitant could duck away just so. "*Leave her* out of this!"

"I'll I'll just go yes. I'll wait for you downstairs."

"No, I'll come with you straight away. I needn't do this crap anyhow I'm in trouble either way."

"Nothing that could not be repaired, right?"

"Exactly! The old man will throw a tantrum for the sake of it. *Heenjoys* flipping, you know? And those two oafs in there will be delighted to fill him in on the tiniest details."

She felt strangely sympathetic, and somewhat timidly patted his shoulder. "By the way... did you come across Severus? I feel a bit guilty for having abandoned him like that."

It turned out that the kid had simply laid down to sleep and that Lucius had already seen to it that he'd be taken home that was where Marlon had gone to. Lucius was amazingly good-humoured in the face of destruction and involuntary hermitage in some Third World country behind the Iron Curtain, she thought, asking him about it and seeing him grin.

"You've been having fun, haven't you?"

"Yes "

"See, then everything's fine. I knew how this would turn out. It's always, always like that each party's the same in that way. And this one was supposed to be special and celebrate our newest buddy that's you, Cissa so it's totally worth it."

"You're crazy!"

"Now I'd usually reply that I'm crazy for you, but given tonight's events and oaths, I'm at a loss for quick repartee."

"Just think of me like you think of Marlon. I'm his substitute after all."

"Can you grow a huge belly for that?"

"I'll do my best."

"Of course, we'll have to obey to the Secrecy Statute, so when we're back in school with other students around us, I've got to act the usual way around you until you're sufficiently fat."

"Hey! I thought we had a deal!"

"And I stand by that. In such a case, you simply need to remember that it's a mere act."

"But it's always been nothing but an act!"

He suppressed a woeful smile. "See? You're halfway there."

Prima... The first goblet is for the thirst, the second for the merriment, the third one for lust, the forth for madness!

In bibliothecis... In the libraries, immortal spirits have their say. From: Pliny the Elder, Naturalis Historia

Vince... Vanquish your sorrows with wine, defy what torments you and banish the clouds from your heart.

In vino... In wine there's wildness.

What A Man Can Do

Chapter 13 of 21

Lucius doesn't succeed with his beloved, but it's not for a lack of trying.

- Chapter Twelve -

WHAT A MAN CAN DO

I'm going to take my time. I have all the time in the world to make you mine. It is written in the stars above. The gods decree you'll be right here by my side, right next to me. You can run, but you cannot hide. Don't say you want me, don't say you need me, don't say you love me, it's understood. Don't say you're happy out there without me, I know you can't be 'cause it's no good.

DEPECHE MODE

Lucius had survived the stay in Romania. So had the dragon that he had cursed with the wand he had stolen from one of the monks – he was probably the first delinquent who had managed to be thrown out two weeks before his scheduled release. Abraxas had fumed with anger and threatened to make his son spend the remainder of his summer holidays in the dungeons of Malfoy Manor, but had given up at last. The boy was a hopeless case in his father's eyes anyway.

Narcissa hadn't yet come to regret her decision to join up the Sepulture Septuplet – even though she didn't stop mocking the silly name, just like her new *buddies*'. As her first and so to speak initial act, she had jinxed the Sorting Hat – it had consequently lost its voice, desperately trying to cry out to which houses the students ought to go, but not succeeding. One can't lip-read from a piece of talking headgear. She was more than just a little proud that even Dumbledore himself had needed two and a half hours to fix the hat again, and that both Lucius and Damocles had recommended her most warmly had been another source of secret joy. These guys knew their jinxes after all, didn't they?

The school year meandered along like every other, if not quite as unpleasantly from Narcissa's point of view as the previous four. For one, she had Severus' company. He fulfilled every hope she had put in him. His hexes had always been excellent, but she had to credit Lucius Malfoy for further refining the boy's skills in that quarter. Severus' potions were worthy of a fourth year, at least – actually, half of Narcissa's own classmates from the fifth year couldn't have matched him. He eagerly picked up on any book recommendation Narcissa made and also developed a bit more self-confidence, standing up to his ill-willed roommates with seeming indifference. *Seeming* indifference, but she trusted he would in time master *true* indifference as well.

Fortunately, most Slytherins left him alone nowadays. His curses were famous despite his tender age, and that the great Lucius Malfoy had him under his wing made the members of *their* House refrain from most too overt hostilities. No Slytherin voluntarily got in the way of *him*. The members of the other Houses – or more precisely, certain members of Gryffindor House – were, deplorably, not to be impressed by either of the two boys. Sirius Black had his own Septuplet – well, a quartet, anyhow – and for some reason completely beyond Narcissa's grasp, their favourite pastime was making little Severus' life hell. They mocked and taunted him whenever they met, they challenged him to fight, and even if he managed to take down one of them (she was proud of him that he nearly *always* managed to curse at least one of the little rats in the end), the other three weren't above overwhelming him by sheer number.

Oh yes, Narcissa had strongly disliked her cousin before he had ever set a foot into Hogwarts. But eighteen months into his school time, she positively despised him, more vividly than she had ever thought possible. They were a truly nasty lot. Vain and full of themselves, skulking through the castle with that sort of swagger as if they had just vanquished an entire goblin rebel squad! But the very worst of all was the abominable condescension with which they treated other students. Narcissa didn't care for any of them, but she did care for Severus, who was their favourite target.

She knew full well that she was considered to be supremely arrogant, too, and she didn't mind it. But ~~she~~ only dished out scathing remarks if pressed, if people didn't leave her alone! Sirius and his little gang of miscreants on the other hand would tease other children because they were just standing there, because they belonged to the wrong House, because they had a squint, or a leer, because their robes were worn-down or their hairdo stupid, because someone was a lousy Quidditch player or supported the wrong team. Sirius always in the foreground with his inevitable buddy whatshisname, the other two slightly more silent in the background, delivering the cheers and giggles. Tedious, loathsome, vile little boys, ph! And she was related by blood to the worst of them!

"I can teach him a lesson he never forgets," Lucius offered her time and time again, and she knew that he could. Knowing him a little better by now, she knew that he had a

formidable knowledge of the Dark Arts already, even though he had never received any proper training. "Just tell me."

"You'd get expelled in a heartbeat."

"I remember a time when that seemed more than palatable to you."

And that was always the moment when she laughed. "Yes. But now you're *abuddy*, are you not?"

"I could teach him the sort of lesson I wouldn't get expelled for, just a few weeks of detentions with Filch."

"Believe it or not, Lucius, but *that* lesson I can teach him myself."

"And why don't you do it if the little cockroach annoys you so much?"

"Because I wouldn't do Severus any favour with it. Because Sirius and his nasty chums would only torment him the worse, and because it'd be a humiliation for him to have someone else defend him as if he couldn't do that himself."

"He clearly can't."

"He can't because it's four against one. It's nothing libellous in losing when you're thus outnumbered."

"We could easily outnumber *them* in turn, if you want. One word from you, Cissa "

"I don't curse second years, and mind you, neither should you. So unsportsmanlike!"

His lips twisted to that trademark curl that always managed to annoy her as much as intrigue her. When he directed it at her, it was far more friendly though to be quite honest, she had come to like that little curl quite a lot. "*Unsportsmanlike?*"

"It's like setting a Doberman on a turtle, Lucius! I won't lower myself to be on a level with my wretched cousin and his irksome little friends. And if you want me to hold the tiniest bit of respect for you, you'll steer clear of them, too. I've worked hard to knock some self-esteem into Severus' head; I won't stand-by watching you taking that away from him again by acting like his nanny!"

Lucius didn't say that he had strong doubts whether the constant humiliation the kid suffered through by being cursed in every possible and impossible way was likely to heighten, or even maintain his *self-esteem*, but he would never openly disagree with Narcissa. He was too grateful that she was talking to him nowadays, that she bore with his presence and gave him an occasional smile or praise. Little Snape was all right, but he wasn't worth losing darling Narcissa's good graces. She was more obstinate than he had reckoned with anyhow. Salazar knew, Lucius had tried every trick in the book to get off with her, sod his pledge to leave her alone. The better he got to know her, the more impossible it was for him to get her out of his head.

Sending her flowers she had laughed, and used the two hundred roses for a spell, entertaining the other students at breakfast by transforming them into rotten tomatoes, harassing Gryffindor table. He had *stopped* seeing any other girl no reaction at all, none whatsoever, not even the *tiniest* remark on her part. He had *started* dating three girls a week, even the ugliest of her dorm mates, to make her jealous her only reaction was unveiled, contemptuous ridicule. He read poetry books, spell books for heaven's sake, he had even read some of the Muggle authors she had praised so warmly but apart from a benevolent smirk, her impression hadn't gone any further than 'See? I knew you weren't unintelligent, Lucius!'

What could a man *do*? He had paid her every compliment ever uttered under the sun and all of them *all of them*, had been absolutely heartfelt and sincere! And did she ever do as much as *listen*? Oh, she did listen, but only to twist and turn the words against him in scorn, or simply retort, 'Good one, Malfoy. Finally a remark that you haven't got out of *Ten Fail-Safe Ways To Charm Witches!*'

The more she withstood his advances, the more desirable she was to him. He had always thought she was plain perfect, but little had he known how right this appraisal had been. Since he had gotten to know her for real... Ironically, he frequently *forgot* how badly he wanted her, how he craved to touch this delectable body, find out if her skin felt only half as silky as it looked... Listening to her let him forget to wonder how it would feel to kiss those rosy lips. Watching her spell work made him forget to roam her body with his eyes. And the dreams at night when he was shagging no, never *shagging*; not *Narcissa*, to her he *made love* in his dreams these dreams, however, had been incrementally supplanted by images where he just held her hand and listened to her and trembled like an aspen leaf simply because she'd give him one of those indescribable smiles.

He had stopped going to the potions club nights; he did need his time to prepare for his NEWTs, and incidentally, Narcissa had anyway offered to study with him for the exams instead. Share her with Cle, Severus and the bold little Gryffindor, or have her all for himself it wasn't exactly hard to choose, was it! The potions club was flourishing, with or without Lucius partaking. Professor Slughorn couldn't have been any prouder. He credited himself for being the one introducing these four prodigious students; just as he was ready to take all the credit for the youngest Miss Black's slight defrosting and young Snape's impressive performance. In retrospect, he would claim in all earnestness that he had *immediately* recognised the boy's destiny for greatness; in *his* head it was a matter of truth that *he* had been the one to recommend Snape to Malfoy junior in the first place.

"Please, wait a moment, Mr Snape," old Slughorn cried after class; Severus had just mastered a particularly difficult soothing potion at the first attempt. "I've got a book that you might want to take a look at."

The boy obeyed, grateful, and marvelled at the five-hundred year old tome in his hands while maundering out of the classroom at last. He willed himself not to give a start when hearing the all-too-familiar voices behind his back, cackling, and kept on staring at the open pages.

"Now here's an eager beaver, don't you think, Sirius?"

"What's this, Snivellus? Looking for a beautifying potion?"

"No beautifying potion could help him with *that* mug, pal!"

Severus inhaled deeply like Narcissa had advised him to do, turned around and glared at the foursome. "Is that all you can come up with, Potter? You've been more inventive before."

"Sorry, swotter, it's just that your ugly face distracts me so much," Potter snarled with a sneer.

"Anything else? Come on, you can do better, can't you?"

Black giggled. "Yes, James, you *can* do better!"

The end of this was that, after some more banter, they all snatched their wands. Severus aimed his new-learned Twitcher Hex so well that Potter not only lost grip of his wand, but with the same jerky move slapped his bosom buddy Black on the pristine cheek. All right, so next thing, Severus found himself on the floor with a leg-lock curse that Lupin had cast on him. Who could say what would have happened next if Professor Slughorn hadn't been alarmed by the noise from outside, snatching Potter and Lupin by the nape of their necks and dragging them upstairs to see their own Head of House, with Pettigrew and Black who had his best mate's fingers imprinted in glowing red on the cheek still in their tow. Severus stayed where he was, knowing full well what was expected of him Professor Slughorn would give him the same punishment

that Lupin, Potter and Black were in for, but he'd never do that in front of the other House's students. In turn for such benevolence, it was an unwritten Slytherin law that the student in question co-operated by not fleeing the scene of the crime, for example.

"Severus, Severus," Slughorn wheezed and swabbed his forehead when returning and leading the boy to his office. "You're one intelligent lad when will you get it into your head that you cannot *win* when outnumbered four to one?"

"It's all just a matter of the more powerful spell, innit?"

The teacher gave him a sharp, inquisitive glance. "What do you mean?"

The boy looked bewildered. "Well, like I said numbers should be no problem if you have the right spell to neutralise them. Isn't that right?"

"Oh!" Slughorn laughed, sounding relieved. "Yes, of course. *Neutralise* them, yes. Well, you just keep on learning from your friends Miss Black and Mr Malfoy; it can only do you good."

"Yes, sir."

"I'll expect you seven o'clock here in my office, Severus. Bring your dragon-hide gloves; you're going to stock up our tar beetle provisions."

"Yes, sir."

There was some justice in this world after all, Severus found out after dinner. He met Lily in the corridor, who chuckling gleefully reported that Potter, Black and Lupin had got themselves detentions with Mr Filch, the disgruntled caretaker, and were in for a night of polishing the flagstone floors without magic. His own punishment was a piece of cake compared to this, and he thought that was only fair. *He* hadn't started this brawl, after all!

"Why don't you try to get along with them?" Lily asked.

"Why don't you ask *them* to just leave me alone?" he asked back.

She grinned and patted his shoulder. "Because *you* are smart and reasonable. Talking to Black and Potter I may as well try talking to a brick wall!"

She strode away with that remark, up the stairs to Gryffindor Tower, and Severus watched after her, feeling strangely elated. He was woken from his silent reverie by another hand on his shoulder, and turning around, he looked into the piercing grey eyes of his patron.

"I heard you were looking for an appropriate spell to take down four attackers at once, kiddo?" He curled his lips into a conniving smirk. "Miss Black won't have me be your nanny, but I do believe there are a couple of things I can show you still!"

Severus smiled back at him. "That that'd be fabulous!"

"Meet me in the common room once you're through with your detention, and I'll see what I can do."

He winked at the younger boy, and this one gave a laugh, before recomposing his features into a more serious mode. "Is this something I'd rather *not* mention to Nar- Miss Black?"

Lucius sighed and twisted his face. "Let me put it this way perhaps don't tell her for now, and if you are successful in using it without getting yourself into more trouble... Well, in *that* case I'd be disappointed if you *did not* let it slip, my dear boy."

Incidentally it worked. He learnt a jinx, similar to a Shield Charm, that would sweep any number of people in a certain vicinity off their feet. He took a week of practising, and the great moment came; Black made a disparaging remark about Severus' hair, and after sending them all to the ground indiscriminately, Severus raised his chin, mocked Potter's stupid gesture of ruffling his hair, and turned on his heels to walk away with his head up high without a further comment.

"I am so proud of you," Narcissa commended him with a wide smile. "So proud, Severus! I'm always the one to say, 'Don't pick up a fight if you can avoid it,' but they had it coming. Boy, they had!"

"Actually, it was Lucius showing me..."

She cast him an arch glance. "Yes, that's what I supposed. And why shouldn't he prove every now and then that his intellectual range goes beyond catching and throwing a Quaffle? Every monkey could do the same."

"I know it isn't my place, Narcissa, but... He really isn't stupid, you know?"

She gave a dry laugh. "Course I know, Severus. That's why I find it so unnerving that he wastes it all on useless nonsense. Look at yourself, look at little Lily Evans you two are superior to him in many respects, and you're five years his junior!" Seeing him blush, she added, "You *are*, Severus, never forget that. You are very special, and I find it admirable that you are willing to improve still. That's another thing I want you to always remember you can achieve anything you want, if only you set all your capacities in it. *Anything*, you hear me?"

"You are very gracious, but I..."

"It says a lot for you that you wouldn't see it that way, dear. That is, after all, what distinguishes you from a bloke like Malfoy *He* always thinks the best of himself. Even in his worst moments, he's inclined to see the opposite."

He shook his head. "Honestly, Narcissa, he's not half as bad as you I mean he's not bad *at all*. He is really nice, you know? Without him and you, of course I'd still be you know... And "

Narcissa felt awkward about the boy's embarrassment, so she cried lightly, "Nonsense, Severus, *nonsense!* Maybe Lucius and I made things a little easier. *Maybe*. Because real talent, and brains, cannot but prevail in the end, and you've got both. *Now*, you might get the impression that fancy, expensive clothes count, or handsome faces, or who your parents are, but that's really not true. It's the *magic* that it all comes down to, and you got plenty of *that*. I truly thought you knew that yourself!"

"Well, yes I mean, I hope it's like that."

"See?" She was satisfied and shot him a warm smile. "I don't understand what we're even arguing about."

"I merely meant... You must not always be so hard on Lucius, he really tries to "

She didn't let him finish, her expression suddenly sour again. "Lucius, Lucius! What *does* he try, after all! He's got everything, *everything* on a silver tray *silver?! Make that platinum!* He's got the talent, and the brains, and for what end does he use them! To entertain his mates, to play Quidditch, to seduce every stupid chick he comes across, and *if* he invents a spell, it's something that's of no use *for anything* good! I mean it, Severus if you want to follow someone's example, don't let it be Lucius Malfoy's! That's a cul-de-sac, can't you see that?"

"I think he *is* good," Severus murmured timidly but nonetheless stubbornly, not daring to meet her gaze, but feeling obliged to defend the boy who had done so much for him.

"You really do?"

"Yeah! He isn't evil, he couldn't be..."

Surprisingly, she broke out in merry laughter and patted his back. "Of course not! Oh my! I didn't mean to say he ~~was~~*evil*, Severus!"

"You didn't?" He was confused.

"I *said* that he's *up to no good*, Severus! There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamed of in your philosophy!" Seeing that he got even more puzzled, she thought she had to elaborate on the point. "Life isn't about *good* and *evil*. As a matter of fact, there *is* no such thing. It's they don't *exist* for real! They're nothing but a human concept to explain the world, you see?"

He didn't, she could tell by his expression, and tried again. "Look... The entire idea is really archaic old *overcome*, you understand? It was made up to coax people into a certain type of behaviour. There's good behaviour, and bad meaning: appropriate, or inappropriate, for the respective person and situation. And what's considered so always depends on time, place, the persons involved... It's all a mere matter of perspective. Different people, different times, different societies they all had their very own idea of good and evil, and little consistency between them, if any at all. You comprehend this, don't you?"

He nodded pensively, and she patted his back once again. "I knew you would," she said fondly, proud as usual of her clever little friend.

There are more things in heaven and earth. From: William Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act I, scene 5.

A Plain Silver Band

Chapter 14 of 21

Narcissa is intrigued by a certain ring.

- Chapter Thirteen -

A PLAIN SILVER BAND

N-nothing important. That is, I heard a good deal about a ring, and a dark lord, and something about the end of the world, but please, sir, don't hurt me. Don't turn me into anything... unnatural.

J.R.R. TOLKIEN

"That doesn't work, does it?" Narcissa pointed at a sentence in Severus' homework. He showed the spell in question to her, and once again, she marvelled at him. He was only a second year, for god's sake!

Only a few more weeks to go until the holidays... She had a calendar to cross out the days more than two months of peace lay before her, what a blessing! If only she had known then what she was in for... On the other hand, she couldn't have prevented it either, so one might say that she was lucky not to know in advance and fret and ruin the little hope she had. The origin of all the disaster ahead was in fact a rather happy event, or it would have been happy, had the circumstances been different. Because later that evening, Andy came over to her sister's armchair in the Common Room, asking her for a private word in an empty classroom nearby.

While striding over there, Andy was beaming madly, and as soon as they had shut the door behind themselves, she cried out, "There you are, Cissy! Oh, I couldn't wait to tell you I wanted you to be the first one to hear it!"

"You haven't got a sneak view at the questions of your NEWTs yet, have you?"

"Oh, forget about that, dear me! Is that all you can think of? Studying and results, tsk!" Saying thus, she raised her left hand and brandished it in Narcissa's face, who winced back.

"What did I do to be slapped now?!"

"I'm not *slapping* you, silly girl! *Look!*"

Look *where*? Andy kept waving her hand, and at last, Narcissa spotted a slim, plain ring of silver that she thought to be new. She raised her brows and groaned, "Yeah, so what? You've got nicer ones!"

"To be sure, I have not!"

"But it's boring! Did you find that in a Christmas cracker?"

Andy put on a sulk and pressed her lips tightly. "That's an engagement ring, you daft cow! They *look* like that!"

The message took some seconds to sink in. Engagement ring engagement engagement meant wanting to get married marrying *whom* marrying Ted, obviously... She nodded. "Aha "

"Isn't it wonderful? Oh, Cissy! I could sing and dance all day long, it was *soromantic*!"

Narcissa had no sense for *romance* and smirked. "Awww. Did he fall down to his knees or something?"

"As a matter of fact, he did," Andy said tersely. "And spare me your sarcasm, will you?"

"No, I'm very happy for you. He's a nice fellow, I'm sure. I'm just not into that whole falling-to-one's-knees business, you know..." It wasn't as if Narcissa hadn't seen this coming, still she felt not entirely prepared when gazing at her elder sister's hand now. Nothing impressive when one knew her other jewellery, but Andromeda beamed at it as if it was the Ring of the Nibelungs itself. "Dear," she tried tentatively, "I'm not certain that our parents will approve of "

"Do you have to throw water over every good thing, Cissy?"

"Not at all. All I meant to say is that your felicity may come a little early."

"And why should that be? I'm *engaged*! How could I not be happy?"

"By remembering that your fiancé is likely never to be invited to our house."

Andromeda's face darkened considerably, and she hissed, "Curse them if they don't approve!"

"Andy!"

"No! I'm *in love*, Ted loves me too, we're going to marry if my own parents can't be happy for me, they can bugger off!"

"Andy! You mustn't speak like that! So uh whatdo Papa and Maman say?"

"I haven't told them yet didn't you listen? *You* are the very first one to hear!"

Narcissa frowned and bit her lip. "Well, in *that* case you shouldn't print the invitations yet, should you? After Papa's died of a cardiac arrest, you can't get married within the mourning period!"

"Oh, he'll get over it. For Christ's sake, in which century are they living, anyhow?"

"You remember what happened with Aunt Cedrella, do you?"

"I'm their bloody *daughter*, what are they supposed to do?"

"Disown you never talk to you again curse you try and kill Ted," Narcissa suggested off the cuff, finding the whole idea less and less favourable. Their father was after all pretty old, his views were old-fashioned and his heart weak. Surely Andy didn't want to kill him, right?

"Oh, don't be so melodramatic, Cissy! Kill Ted, right! And spend the rest of his old age in Azkaban or what?"

"He might still prefer that from having a daughter marry a Muggle-born *Hufflepuff* "

"Oh, rubbish! He'll throw a tantrum or ten and will get used to the idea then. No probs," Andy growled, not sounding very convinced herself. "I thought I'd tell them when they come here for my graduation ceremony."

Narcissa gave a feeble laugh. "So while you're holding your laureate speech, our mother will cry her eyes out and everyone will assume she is moved by the occasion?"

"Something like that, yeah "

"Good luck, Andy, I don't think it'll go all that smoothly. And don't count on Bella being your bridesmaid. It'd be such an embarrassment if the bridesmaid scratched the bride's eyes out!"

Andromeda sniggered, but it didn't sound amused. "But you, you will stick up for me, right?"

"Sure. But what good will it possibly do?"

"You're their little favourite, Cissy! They do listen to *you*!"

"Oh, get real, Andy! Maman will listen to me when it's about choosing a wallpaper design, and Papa will listen to me when I play the piano and that's it! You don't seriously believe that anything *I* could say about *you* marrying a *Muggle-born* will make any difference!"

Lost in thought, she returned to the dormitory that night, her insides cringing with dark premonitions. Their parents ~~not~~ having a fit was as unlikely as having Christmas and Pentecost the same weekend. The only question was how *bad* that fit would be. Andromeda wasn't the first one in the family to marry 'beneath' her; there was quite a list of aunts and uncles that no one ever mentioned because they had married Muggles or even supported the wrong political party.

Andy was right in one respect ~~shewas~~ their daughter, and Mr and Mrs Black were very attached to their children. They wouldn't just cast her out, would they? Narcissa realised she had never given this matter much thought after learning about her sister's relationship to a Muggle-born. She had sensed that their parents would not be *pleased* and had consequently avoided betraying the secret, but that was all. Ted wasn't Andy's first boyfriend. Narcissa had simply assumed that, like his predecessors, he wouldn't last. Andy was right in another respect, too Narcissa was their parents' favourite, perhaps because she was the youngest of the three, perhaps because she was the most compliant. She had never refused any of their demands and wishes, had eagerly practised the piano and the harp and voluntarily learnt just about anything that they considered suitable for a 'young lady'.

But, just as a matter of interest, what would happen if *she* ever chose to marry a Muggle-born? Would all her accomplishments make up for such a choice? Not that she had anyone in mind if one had asked for *her* opinion, matrimony was out of the question. She took no interest in boys; they were all such terrible idiots, and who was the greater idiot the idiot, or the idiot getting married to one? Anyway...

"Who's put a fly in *your* potion?" Martha asked nosily when she entered the dorm.

"Mind your own recipes," Narcissa retorted without the tiniest bit of humour, threw herself onto her bed and jinxed the curtains shut.

She felt like the burden of carrying this secret was more than she could bear. Suddenly, she faced something far more serious than her usual annoyance about Perpetua's snoring, Martha's nosiness, Yaxley's insolent come-ons, or the fact that she was hopelessly bored with her classes. She was fond of Andy, she didn't want to lose her. Neither did she want her parents to be upset, nor... Good Lord, in times like these! What was Andy *thinking*? If one could believe some of the rumours (which weren't *all* completely made-up!), they were facing another war, and this time, it wouldn't just be some rebellious goblins disturbing the peace...

In one of her rare letters, Bella had called it a 'wake-up call for the wizarding community.' Narcissa had overheard Evan telling Lucius that Mr Rosier was a high-ranking

member of this new, secret society that everyone whispered about, but she had assumed that Evan had simply been bragging like usually. Even Mr Black, normally not prone to believe just anything, had mentioned something like this when she had been home for Easter. What had he said? Narcissa racked her brains she hadn't listened too closely then, she found politics boring. 'I'm not saying I agree with his agenda, but that wizard has some right ideas, and the people will fall for it.' Something like that...

'That wizard' was some warlock who had only recently returned to England; no one really knew who he was and a whole lot of legends were linked to his true origin. Some said he was the last descendant of Salazar Slytherin himself, probably because his stated objective was getting rid of the non-pure elements in the wizards' community. Others made him appear like some sort of perverted Jesus figure, the fatherless saviour coming to save them all. What was seemingly true however was that he had gathered enough followers to found some kind of 'Dark Order' Dark because they all were devoted to the Dark Arts, which had got a bad name among wizards in the last hundred years.

Narcissa had never quite understood that distinction. The Dark Arts what was that, anyway? It was a certain brand of magic, more dangerous than the normal stuff, but then again, also the common spells could cause great damage if applied in the wrong way or with ill will. She found them mildly interesting, simply because she was bored out of her mind in this school, and the Dark Arts would at least have been some sort of challenge. But their Headmaster wouldn't have it; he didn't even allow most books in the library that dealt with them. Even now, facing a threat like that Dark Order, people still recoiled, instead of just learning Dark spells themselves. Which was stupid. Know your enemy, know his weapons. 'If you know both yourself and your enemy, you will come out of one hundred battles with one hundred victories. If you only know yourself, but not your opponent, you win one and lose the next.' How would they conceive a war with so much less effective means?

And that war was to come; perhaps it had truly started already. People were missing, others had been found dead for no obvious reason. These people had one thing in common they were either of Muggle origin, or somehow connected to Muggles, or openly supported Muggles and Muggle-borns. Narcissa wondered whether anyone had bothered to research how many plain Muggles had in fact perished so far.

She didn't care much; there had always been wars and there would always be. Not that she approved of this fact, but what use was it to fret about things that one could not influence anyway? It had nothing to do with her, she had thought; *she* was no Muggle after all, she was no Muggle-born, and she hardly knew anyone who could be considered to be in danger. Until now. Her older sister was about to become Mrs Muggle-born, which put her into peril, just like her soon-to-be husband and every possible offspring of that relation. Hadn't Andy thought of that? Couldn't she see the corner into which she was manoeuvring herself? Did she want to be the next one found dead?

Lying on her bed, Narcissa got another notion what about little Severus? *He* had a Muggle father, too did that put him in danger as well? No one right in their mind who had witnessed even just some of his spell work could believe him to be any less worthy than all the purebloods around, some of whom were so moronic that they rather resembled trolls than human beings. The same was true for Andy and her new *fiancé*, but did these Dark Order folks make such subtle distinctions?

'If you only know yourself...' From: Sun Tze, 'The Art Of War'.

An Invitation To Dance

Chapter 15 of 21

Barnabas the Barmy makes a grand entrance.

- Chapter Fourteen -

AN INVITATION TO DANCE

Coyness is nice, and coyness can stop you from saying all the things in life you'd like to... So, if there's something you'd like to try... If there's something you'd like to try ASK ME I won't say "no" HOW COULD I? Ask me, ask me, ask me!

THE SMITHS

Narcissa was sitting in the library, brooding over her preparations for her upcoming OWL exams, when she suddenly thought she had perceived a faint scrap of music and automatically looked up and around, but there was nothing to be seen. Of course. She must have been distracted. She returned to read, but there it was again, a little more distinct this time. She gazed around but couldn't locate the origin, so she assumed that some student down in the castle must have turned on their music box really loud. That would have been a sufficient explanation, but in that moment she spotted a book on the shelf right in front of her, which was jiggling. She rubbed her eyes and looked again, but no this was *no fata morgana* that book was jiggling indeed, and quite in pace with the music that grew louder and louder, until the book fell off the shelf, just that it didn't *fall*; it took off gracefully to float in mid-air, opening and no way starting to rustle to the beat, as if it were dancing. And it wasn't only this one book. More and more books did the same, jiggling, rustling, wiggling hovering and dancing along to the waltz that rang loudly through the galleries by now.

She didn't *believe* this, honestly, and her jaw finally dropped when she saw the statue of Barnabas the Barmy scuttling along, tap-dancing, right before her eyes. She peeked around, finding that thousands and tens of thousands of books were dancing everywhere now, and somewhere in the distance Madam Pince was going berserk, trying to chase them, shouting, but incapable of drowning out the beautiful song. Barnabas had unravelled a few yards of his bronze bandages and did a fancy ballet impression using them as ribbons, finally turning to Narcissa with a deep bow and an outstretched hand, as if asking her to dance with him. She chuckled, shaking her head, and the statue continued to dance by himself. The ridiculousness of his performance mingled with the utter beauty and elegance of the book ballet; Narcissa pressed a hand to her mouth to keep herself from bursting out laughing, gazing around to see who had brought this about. She had a name in mind, but no one showed up.

She finally found out about it at dinner when Bertram asked with a wide grin, "Did you hear about that library incident, Cissa?"

"I happened to be sitting right in the middle, thank you very much," she replied dryly.

"In the *middle*, uh? Well, you needn't thank *me*, for sure!"

"Sure thing, Higgs. I wouldn't have suspected you of being so imaginative either."

"Imaginative, you say?" Lucius put on his best grin, too.

"The choreography was elegant, and the tap-dancing statue added a refreshing sprinkle of humour. The one responsible must have considerable taste "

He was beaming, literally. "You think so?"

" and hardly an ounce of brains to spare."

He licked his bottom lip and scrutinised her with a strange glance. "And why would that be?"

"Because Madam Pince got old McGonagall, and she's bound to sniff them out, and boy, they'll be in trouble!"

"But what would life be without a bit of trouble?"

"Oh, well... Imagine you're a student who's let's say for the sake of an example who's about to graduate in less than five weeks, and all of a sudden, boom, you're no longer allowed to enter the library, because you've pulled an undeniably admirable stunt in there. Doing the math, it's not worth it."

"I'd say it depends."

"Would you?"

"Oh, I would, yes. Let's say your exemplary student never sets foot in the library anyway. However, that student does take great delight in seeing gorgeous girls making pretty faces with pleasure at a good stunt. For *this* sort of student it'd be totally worth it."

"See? That's why McGonagall will have such a walk in the park tackling the culprit. There aren't that many graduating students who never go into the library."

"Could be a younger student, too."

"How many sixth years or younger attend this school who'd even be capable of performing such a piece of magic?"

"I'd know at least two."

"Oh yes?"

"You for one are a fifth year, and little Severus is a second year, but I'm sure he could do it."

"You know I'm rather fond of the kid, but no way could he levitate and conduct thirty thousand books in a Waltz at this point. Besides both he and I have ample respect for books and libraries and would never do something like that only to well, what did you say was the reward?"

He gave her a very intense look. "Seeing an incredibly gorgeous girl look even more stunning because she finds her favourite things in the world do a little dance for her."

His silvery eyes were piercing her, making her feel slightly dizzy, but she wouldn't let it show. "Aha! Favourite things in the world, you say... That narrows the circle of suspects. Now we only need to find that girl who's got a thing for Barnabas the Barmy, and the lad who wants to get off with her. Should be easy enough."

"Yeah, Barnabas gave it a nice touch, didn't he? Gee, I'd say that's a hell of a way to be invited to the big graduation ball!"

"You think that's what it was? A subtle invitation to go to a dance?"

"Subtle? I don't know. I'm no expert at *subtlety*, as you keep on assuring me..."

"If I said so, I must have been right, I assume."

Gibbon started to giggle hysterically. "Do us all a favour and get a room, you two, pu-leeeeaase!"

"Don't look at *me*, buddy, *she's* the snag to this scheme," Lucius said smartly, smiling at Narcissa.

"Snag or snack, Luce?"

"Both unfortunately. Come on, Cissa, you see the audience's expectations! We mustn't let them down. Let's get through with it." He winked at her. "We can go to my place; all my dorm mates will be here for the next half an hour."

Narcissa raised her eyes to the ceiling, exasperated. "Half an hour isn't enough time, Malfoy."

Howls and cheers all around, and Lucius put on his most self-confident face. "Finally! And don't you worry; they'll stay away all night and sleep in the common room if I tell them to!"

"I second that," Bertram rejoiced.

Narcissa sneered at him. "Why, that's so sweet of you guys, because I'd like to give your friend some sound curses, and it'd be such a shame if you got back early and relieved him."

"You think you could take me on, Narcissa?"

"I'm a hundred percent sure that this is far more likely than you taking me, Malfoy."

"Whoo-hoo, Black! Embarked on the train of dirty thoughts at last!" Bertram cackled.

"Get up, Malfoy, and let's give it a try. Whoever's quicker will receive a real treat tonight!"

He watched her closely, hesitating. "You haven't guarded your virginity for so long to gamble it away like this!"

She got up and sneered. "I'm not *gambling*, coward. I *know* I'll take you down in a heartbeat." She marched off and out, wondering if he'd dare to come, and indeed, he had caught up with her by the time she walked down the stairs.

"You're serious, Narcissa?"

"Of course I am serious. I'll hex you like you've never been hexed before."

"Can we just exchange a consonant there?"

She ignored the comment, but couldn't suppress a grin. "And the best is I cannot lose."

"You cannot?"

"In addition to the fact that I'm quicker than you, you wouldn't do anything to me anyway, even if you did manage to stun me by shooting me in the back."

"Are you crazy? Dear girl, I've wanted to hook up with you *foæges*. You cannot expect reserve from *my* side!"

"No, as a matter of fact I can and I do, because one of your most prominent flaws is your vanity. You are far too vain to take advantage of a girl who couldn't defend herself. You want them craving you."

"But you *are* craving me, Cissa."

He winked at her and she battered with her lashes in turn. "Oh, absolutely. Each and every night in your dreams!"

"So you're basically telling me that there is absolutely nothing for me to win in this? And for that I've skipped my kidney pie?" He pretended to be scandalised, making her laugh. They had crossed the Slytherin common room and the corridor leading to his room. He took his time to shut the dorm door and put a spell on it, then very slowly turned around, his wand pointing at the floor.

"So what are you waiting for, Malfoy?"

"You don't seriously want to duel with me now."

"I most certainly do. Because once I've cursed you, you might kindly abandon your habit of filthy innuendoes in front of your buddies. Since we were speaking of 'worth it!'"

"But I don't want to curse you! You you're a girl!"

"Allow me to quote good Horatio *pu-leeeeaase!*"

"Seriously, Narcissa, not only you're a girl, but *The* girl and I "

"Spare your breath for your spell work. One two three *Incarcerous!*"

She caught him slightly off-guard, so he jumped sideways and ducked behind Graham's bed. *Confundo!*

She blocked the jinx and retaliated cleverly by aiming at a bookshelf over the spot where Lucius was cowering; naturally, Graham stored no books there, so a framed poster of the Hackney Harriers fell down and hit him over the head. He muttered some swear words, crawled around the corner, managed a successful leg-lock curse that sent her to the floor, but he triumphed too early and was squarely hit by her following full Body-Bind Curse. Nope, this had not been much of a challenge she had learnt duelling because she had been compelled to defend herself against The Best against her oldest sister, and Bella had never held back like Malfoy there. She removed the Leg-Lock, got to her feet and approached him, towering high above him.

"I told you I'd get you, *honey*. Have a good time down there, contemplating your mischievous ways... Oh, I have something else for you to contemplate you remember the exemplary student we were discussing? The one with the crush on the Barnabas aficionado? I think he could have succeeded with his invitation, if he stopped being a complete prat around the girl in question. Yes, I believe she would have agreed to accompany him to that ball... Nighty night, Lucius!"

Meet The Parents

Chapter 16 of 21

Narcissa encounters her future father-in-law for the first time and while it isn't a very charming experience, it's nothing compared to Andromeda's fiancé meeting his.

- Chapter Fifteen -

MEET THE PARENTS

Ames parentum, si aequus est, aliter feras.

PUBLILIUS SYRUS Sententiae

June arrived and with it the OWL exams, the NEWTs for the seventh years. Narcissa felt fairly well-prepared; she would undoubtedly be the best student in her year, but she couldn't say if she could reach her self-declared aim and get more points than this legendary boy. Her big idol a student in the nineteen-forties, who had achieved 1245 points in his OWLs, 45 points more than technically, even theoretically, possible. For her own encouragement, she had once more read in the old annual. The name of the boy had been Tom Riddle, indicating that his father was either a Muggle or a Muggle-born 'Riddle' was no name of any ever so unimportant wizard family. So she had at least one advantage, having grown up with magic from the very first breath she had taken. A *riddle* he was indeed, because after these supernova-esque performances in both his OWLs and NEWTs, he seemed to have simply disappeared. Maybe he had emigrated, maybe he was dead but no Tom Riddle had excelled outside of Hogwarts, Narcissa had checked it half a dozen times.

The boy looked exceptionally handsome on the photo, dark wavy hair, piercing eyes, and his jacket flashed the Head Boy badge. She scanned the article an orphan, Slytherin Prefect irrespective of his pedigree, Head Boy, 12 OWLs and NEWTs each, most brilliant student as far as the records went back. 'Chapeau', she thought to herself. Handsome, clever, single-minded he reminded her of someone else...

Oh no. *No*. For once, she would *not* think of Lucius Malfoy! This was becoming ridiculous! How fortunate that the school was about to end so soon; he'd graduate and then he'd be out of her sight, and this nonsense would end at last!

Lucius Malfoy, the object of her unwanted daydreaming, thought he was fairly well prepared for his exams, too he would pass them, without brilliance, but well enough not to be ashamed. He had lead his team to win the Quidditch Cup the fifth time in a row, with him being Captain the last four times, which would have been a sufficient reason for sheer felicity, hadn't it been for his greatest achievement. What was the sordid Cup, compared to the fact that he had gained *her* the most gorgeous girl's consent to attend his graduation ball with him!

Indeed, without quite knowing how it had come about, Narcissa had agreed to go to that ball with Lucius Malfoy. She calmed herself by thinking that she had only done that in order to tease Andromeda, who hated him, though she couldn't dispel her remaining doubts. Being her parents' daughter meant that she had been to more balls than she could bear anyway she had never enjoyed them, being forced to socialise with people she disliked. But she would have been forced to go to this one either way because of her sister, so why shouldn't she accompany a good-looking, charming boy?

She hadn't told anyone, and had asked him for the same discretion, secretly enjoying how a dozen girls made fools of themselves to entice him to ask ~~them~~. As it seemed, he would go on his own his mates couldn't *believe* it but he claimed to be too busy with his exams to bother for asking anyone. During the two weeks of the actual examinations, he saw far too little of his adored for his liking, but he consoled himself with the prospect of that very last night he'd ever spend in Hogwarts, determined to try and get a kiss from this sweetest of all witches. He knew that he was a good kisser if he could make her kiss him, she would enjoy it, and if she enjoyed kissing him, she might not be so reluctant to see him again during the holidays, and if she

And then came the big day. All exams were done, the solemn parchments were bestowed on the graduates, and their parents had arrived and fetched their daughters' festive evening robes. Ignorant of her sister's plans, Andromeda had helped Narcissa to do her hair and don her robes, cracking jokes how flattered she was that her little Cissy should make such an effort only to celebrate her graduation. Narcissa smirked in silence and appraised her own reflection in the mirror, slightly amazed. No, not just slightly thoroughly astonished, more like. It was strange. She had been aware of the fact that she was pretty, and being her mother's daughter, she had worn stylish robes on every possible and impossible occasion, but she had never really cared; when she had spotted her own reflection on such evenings, she had merely thought, 'Oh, dear, what a waste of time to spruce yourself up like a wedding cake'.

This time, however, she tried to look through someone else's eyes, through *his* eyes. She did look good, didn't she...? Looking *now*, she was genuinely surprised. She was looking *really* good! She had asked her mother to bring her light blue robes and her pearls, and for the first time really, she realised that she had a great figure in this. It underlined her small waist, her appealing décolleté, it matched her eyes; Lucius Malfoy must be blind and gay if he didn't like it!

"My little Cissy," Andromeda said, beaming proudly. "I know you're doing me a favour to come tonight. And I reckon I'll need you as my backup."

Narcissa wondered whether this was the opportune moment to inform her sister that they wouldn't be sitting at the same table, but before she had opened her mouth, Andromeda went on, "I'm going to tell them, you know?"

"Tell them what exactly?"

"Tell them that I'm engaged, of course!"

Narcissa stared at her in incredulity. "Are you out of your mind? Tell *your* parents on the very eve of your graduation ball that you want to marry a *Muggle-born* from *Hufflepuff*?!"

Andromeda turned pale underneath her make-up charms, plucking her purple robes and smoothing some creases underneath her chest. The robes were the slightest bit too tight, but it was too late to do something about it. "I've *got* to tell them sooner or later anyway, and they'll be much softer in front of four hundred witnesses!"

"Andy," Narcissa said in a moment of sincere concern, "Papa might not scream as loudly as he would otherwise if he's in front of strangers, but he will resent you the stronger for bringing him into such a predicament!"

"My engagement is no predicament!"

"No, but if you confront Papa with it in the Great Hall during a public occasion, he will find it a humiliation, and that lowers your chances exceedingly!"

Andy's expression was pensive, then she shrugged. "Always one step ahead, Cissy... But leave it all to me, and stick up for me in the opportune moment."

Narcissa thought that they had decidedly different ideas about the *opportune* moment, and since she wouldn't be there for a start, and also because she wanted to avoid a scene in the common room later, she said, "I won't be sitting at your table, Andy."

"Of course you will! You're family!"

"But I have been asked out by someone else. Someone with a table of their own "

Andy was briefly perplexed and groaned then, "No no God, Cissy, tell me you haven't not with that total jerk!"

"Lucius Malfoy has asked me out, and I have accepted, Andy, and that's the end of the discussion."

"Cissy! You can't! You *mustn't*! He "

"Oh, get off it, Andy."

Her sister shook her head vigorously. "Listen to me, Cissy! Listen! I long stopped counting how many girls I had to comfort because he used them and let them down then! He's good at pretending to be all suave and charming, but in fact, he's nothing but a cad! He "

"He isn't the big bad wolf, and I'm not Little Red Riding Hood. There's no call for worrying about *me* tonight, Andy. I'll do what I can for you because *you'll* be the one in need of rescue."

"Be sensible, Cissy! Where's your cleverness when you truly need it! That idiot has taken advantage of more girls than I would count, and you're too good for that! You're much too good for him, Cissy!" Andromeda's cheeks had flushed with anxiety. "You're listen, you know I love you I may have faltered in showing it to you, but you are very, very important to me. You're a wonderful person, Cissy, but *he* doesn't care for such subtleties! He only wants you because you're pretty and because you're the one thing that no one can have! He wants you as a trophy, that's all; he wants to show off with you, make his stupid pals envious; he only uses you!"

"I know all that, Andy. But the trophy thing works both ways. *I'll* be the one wildly envied tonight by all your fatuous classmates. Now come on, Ted must be waiting for you, and so are our parents. You don't want Papa to get his first fit while Dumbledore is still opening the banquet."

When she realised that her warnings and protests were useless, Andromeda left, but not without a whole lot of admonitions. Narcissa waited five more minutes and walked over to the common room, too. Lucius had sat in an armchair and waited, jumping to his feet when he saw her, with a look bordering on awe. He opened and shut his mouth a few times, finally gasping, "Can I say just one thing?"

"Sure," she replied, wondering where her voice had gone.

"Wow!" He watched her up and down. "Wow! You you you'd be gorgeous in a rice sack, Narcissa, but *this* is oh Merlin!"

She remembered Andy's warning and murmured, "Your friends will hopefully approve of your choice of a partner likewise."

"They will definitely, but who cares?! Sod them! In fact, I'm not entirely comfortable with having to share your sight with them!"

Reassured, she smiled and asked, a trifle coyly, "I suppose that means you are all right with the robes then?"

"All right? No! I'm *delighted!*"

She ignored the other students in the room and their stares. That was just what she had expected she hadn't made a secret of her partner for nothing. Lucius stepped up, made a deep bow, took her hand and blew a kiss on the back of her hand. He produced a little nosegay of cream-coloured Angel's Tears and pinned it on her dress she caught her breath when he accidentally grazed her bosom to fasten the flower clip. She felt a little dizzy and got unreasonably nervous, but he took her arm, tucked it under his own, and they floated out and upstairs before she could think much further. She didn't register all the open mouths they met; all she could focus on was willing her heart to beat not quite so hard, but Lucius did notice them, and knowing her disposition, her discomfort with being stared at, he bent towards her and whispered in her ear, "I'll curse any of them for looking at you in this fashion, if you want me to."

'If you want me to...' She had no clue what he was talking about; she was much too nervous to listen, or indeed, do anything much but trying to keep her cool countenance. Feeling his breath tickling the sensitive skin of her neck, she closed her eyes for a moment. "I give you permission to do whatever you like," she breathed despite herself, hoping that this was the right answer to whatever he had said.

"You cannot imagine how much I have craved to hear you say those words, though I had hoped they'd come in some other context."

She gave a little start and blushed. "Why, what did you ask me then?"

"You didn't listen?"

He sounded disappointed and she hurried to say, "I was a bit distracted, but you must not take that amiss, please! I'm just awfully nervous! All these people I hate these public functions..."

"You look enchanting, you *are* enchanting, and I'll take care of all the rest."

'He's good at pretending to be all suave and charming,' Andy had said Narcissa supposed her sister was right, but she nevertheless didn't entirely manage to resist his charms. "You are good with compliments, aren't you?"

"I swear to God, I've never meant anything half as sincerely as anything I've ever said to you."

"I bet you've always been successful with this line."

"My *success* tonight is that *you* are here with me. And perhaps you'll appreciate my honest compliments some more after you've met my father's utterly rude bluntness. He hasn't uttered a single nice thing in the past eighteen years since I've known him. I daresay he wasn't much friendlier before that either."

This change of topic allowed her to reassemble some of her wits and she laughed heartily. "The proper thing to say now would be to claim that he cannot be that bad, but after all I've heard about him, I will spare my breath, eh?" She shot him a conspiratorial grin. "But if it calms you I'm accustomed to ignore the harshest insults and smile still. I don't think your father could say anything to offend me."

Uncharacteristically sombre, he replied, "I'm afraid you'll sing a different tune soon."

They had reached their destination and entered the Great Hall, which was ridiculously decorated by this year's decoration committee, but Narcissa noticed this only marginally. Lucius looked around, spotting their table and his father, and whispered in a tone bordering on resignation, "There we go. I want you to know that I'm already sorry for whatever it is he will say "

They stopped at their table; Lucius made a small, stiff bow to his father and said coolly, "Father? May I present Miss Black to you? Miss Black this is my father, Mr Abraxas Malfoy."

The old wizard greatly resembled his son, the same sharp features, the same aquiline nose. He looked her up and down, sneered and said carelessly, "I doubt any of us will have to memorise names. We won't meet again, will we?"

Lucius sharply drew his breath, but Narcissa smiled all the more sweetly. "Surely you must be right, sir. I'm pleased to meet you nonetheless."

"Black, Black are you one of old Cygnus' daughters?"

"I am indeed, sir. But it really is of no importance, since we won't meet again, eh?"

He looked amused and made no further remark until they had taken their seats. Just now, Narcissa noticed the incredulous looks of the other people at their table that Yaxley idiot, his parents, his latest girlfriend and his pretty sisters Gladys and Venus, both of whom had graduated already and both of whom had been going out with Lucius for a while, then. She coldly beckoned to them and was acutely aware of what they must be thinking of her. Like Lucius' father, they knew how futile this temporary companionship truly was.

Abraxas Malfoy still appraised her with his brows knitted critically, but far more intriguing for Narcissa was that she had spotted her family at a table nearby, or rather say, only Amandine Black was sitting there, their father was standing in front of Andromeda and her boyfriend uhm *fiancé*. They seemed to be arguing, Cygnus Black's face was deep red, Andromeda gesticulated wildly, and her mother's expression was somewhere between pain and shock.

'Oh, Andy,' she thought, absent-mindedly shaking her head and sighing to herself. What had her sister thought, eh? That their parents would embrace Ted with open arms? Had she truly believed that tonight would be the perfect occasion to introduce her Muggle-born Hufflepuff fiancé and say, 'Mama, Papa, I know your attitude, but I also know that you'll be nothing but happy for my sake because I'm engaged to marry'?! Knowing Andy, this had probably been her exact words, unfortunately.

Lucius followed her gaze and spoke so quietly that only she could hear him, "Looks like trouble."

"It does."

"Are you worried?"

Was she? This wasn't her business, but Andy's. If she wanted it the tough way there you go. "Not really. They're ruining their own evening, not mine."

More and more students arrived; in ten minutes, the ball would officially begin. Lucius poured her some wine and they had a toast, but despite her professions of indifference, Narcissa couldn't drag her gaze away from her family. By now, Amandine had clapped her hands to her eyes, Cygnus was pulling on his middle daughter's arm as she struggled with him, and the awkward fiancé appeared to be trying to mediate, but only worsened his future father-in-law's wrath.

Mr Malfoy senior demanded her attention again, swiftly dispelling Narcissa's concerns by remarking, "I suppose the young lady over there is one of your sisters?"

Narcissa smirked. "Oh, well she was and she is, but she might not be tomorrow."

The entire Yaxley family giggled spitefully, but Abraxas Malfoy merely smiled. "Quick at repartee, Miss Black. So tell me you seem to be rather smart; so how come you are here with this loose fish that claims to be my son?"

"Thank you, Father," Lucius snapped pointedly.

Narcissa would privately admit that she had underestimated old Mr Malfoy's temper, and also she began to think that she shouldn't have come in the first place. Her presence was needed elsewhere so much more direly, and also... No matter what she would do or say, it would give a reason to someone for gleeful misinterpretation. She had no mind to ignore the old wizard's gibes and let herself be reduced to one of Lucius' silly cows, but if she protested, she would give a false impression, too. In front of the Yaxleys, she wanted to appear neither interested in the 'loose fish', nor helpless, and that her own family was getting worked up merely thirty feet away wasn't prone to make her less uneasy either.

She pulled herself together and addressed Abraxas, "Sir, I don't mean to be disrespectful, but I hope you will understand that I desire to discuss neither my intelligence nor my decision to be here tonight. I'm sure everyone who knows me would inform you that I am taciturn and ill-humoured, so it might be best if I said nothing further at all."

He roared with laughter and crudely patted his son's arm in something that might be supposed to indicate approval. Lucius smiled stiffly and ground his teeth; it was obvious that he wished himself miles away, too, if for entirely different reasons. This was the first time she had ever come to see him like this, in a state of vulnerability, lacking all his self-confident poise and desperately clinging to some last scraps of dignity and self-possession. To her own astonishment, she found it most appealing *she*, who usually set so much store by attitude and self-control, was endeared by her friend's loss of aplomb facing his autocratic father.

She gave him her best, sincerest, and possibly most encouraging smile, trying to communicate her sympathy without words and thinking she succeeded. Yes, there they were, both compromised by their families' undignified behaviours they understood each other indeed.

Catching Narcissa's warm gaze, Lucius relaxed a little and smiled back at her likewise. He was positively enthralled by the expression of her deep blue eyes, which could scowl so scornfully, but which betrayed her true warmth, the profound capacity of understanding that was so far beyond her actual age and her sharp, dissecting intelligence that could see the humour even in an absurd situation such as this. He was overwhelmed by the intensity of his feelings for her, so much that the only thing keeping him from gliding from his chair to fall on his knees before her and declare himself, was his knowledge of her mortification if he brought her into such a predicament.

He contemplated whether he could dare to at least take her hand, which was so close to his own on the table that they nearly touched. He shoved it over to hers, inch by inch, straining to be as unobtrusive as possible, and when he was finally there, this light touch sent shivers down his spine. She turned her head to give him another smile, but in this moment, her other hand was roughly grabbed, and she found her mother standing behind her, looking awfully upset.

"Fiona, Maxwell " She waved at the Yaxleys, forcing herself to smile, and addressed the two Malfoys next. "Good evening, Mr Malfoy Mr Malfoy "

"Enchantée, Madame!" Lucius jumped up to make a bow.

"Yes, yes... Ma chère," she flatly murmured to her daughter, "I am so sorry to disturb you, but your father 'as decided zat we will leave now!"

"Now?"

"Yes, *now*. Please!"

Narcissa looked over, seeing how her father coerced Andromeda to follow him out of the Great Hall. "Maman," she muttered imploringly, "je comprends l'anicroche, mais "

"On doit se dépêcher, Narcisse! Ton Papa il demande ce que tu viens avec moi, tout de suite! "

Lucius stood up. "Madame Black, please allow me to take your daughter home after the ball. I assure you I'll take care of her safety and she'll be back by whatever time you fix!"

"C'est pas possible, Monsieur Malfoy, excusez-moi. Narcisse, vite!"

Of course Narcissa obeyed, beckoning at the rest of the party. "Well, the greatest pleasures are short. Good evening to you. Look, Mr Malfoy, you were right to presume that there is no need to recall the past ten minutes. Good evening to you, too." She gave Lucius a last apologetic glance. "Good night, Lucius. Thank you very much for everything. It was brief, but delightful."

She rushed to follow her mother, who waited in the corridor and grabbed Narcissa's arm. "Youknew zis, Narcisse?!"

"About the engagement? She told me only recently!"

"You knew she was seeing zat boy! I would not 'ave believed it possible!"

They hurried out of the school, along the sweep way towards the gates; Narcissa protested that all her luggage was still in her dorm, but Mrs Black merely snapped that they'd send for it in the morning. Once they had left the boundaries, she stopped and squeezed her daughter's arm even tighter.

"I can Disapparate myself, Maman!"

"You will stay right by my side, ma petite!"

She resolutely grabbed Narcissa's arm and, in the next second, they stood before the family mansion, but Mrs Black made no halt and pulled her on. Mr Black and Andromeda were standing in the hallway shouting at each other. Narcissa had never seen her father so angry; usually, he was a serene elderly gentleman, and even when Bella had provoked him to become angry, he hadn't lost it as completely as now. His face was as purple as Andromeda's dress robes, the veins on his temples fit to burst, he spit while screaming.

Ames... Love your father if he is just, otherwise endure him.

Je comprends... I understand the predicament, but

On doit... We must hurry, Narcissa! Your father demands that you come with me at once!

C'est pas... That's not possible, Mr Malfoy, excuse me. Narcissa, quick!

Cygnus Cynical

Chapter 17 of 21

Cygnus Black thinks that all of his children have taken leave of their senses.

- Chapter Sixteen -

CYGNUS CYNICAL

Accidents will occur in the best regulated families.

CHARLES DICKENS *David Copperfield*

"... dare to humiliate your mother and me!"

"You did that all by yourself, Papa. Nobody else cared!"

"Don't you be fresh with me, Andromeda! You are disrespectful!"

"I'm not disrespectful! You're behaving like some medieval monk, that's all!"

"Andy!" Narcissa groaned, shooting her sister an imploring glance and finally managing to free her arm from her mother's claws.

"Engaging yourself to a *Muggle-born*! Have you no pride at all!"

"Oh, I'm extremely proud, actually!" Andromeda's eyes gleamed dangerously. "I'm proud to be the fiancée of such a clever, talented, kind wizard!"

"Clever?! I thought he's a Hufflepuff?" Cygnus snorted with disdain. She jerked up her hand, flashing her plain ring right in her father's face, who pushed it away and spit, "Disgrace! Outrageous disgrace! Desecration! One thousand three hundred years of "

"Oh, cut it out, Papa! I don't give a damn about your sacrosanct*dynasty* shit, you hear me?!"

Narcissa groaned once more. "Andy! In Merlin's name, tone it down!"

"*You* shut up, Cissy! *You* keep your prissy mouth right shut! Going out with the greatest jerk to walk this earth*you* have no place to talk!"

Amandine Black merely whimpered, fiercely shaking her head. Narcissa laughed derisively. *I* accompanied someone to some ball! I don't see any engagement rings on *my* hand, likely enough because I still have my five senses together!"

Cygnus whirled around and pointed at her. "And *that's* another thing we will talk about in due time! How*could* you, Narcissa! How could you agree to go out with*that* boy of all persons! Have you no shame!"

Before Narcissa could reply, Andy had given a raucous laughter. "But why! Isn't that what you're all about, Papa? I thought a Black girl couldn't do any better than get off with two thousand years of pureblood inbreeding! You ought to be so proud with her choice!"

"I'm *not* getting off with him! I "

"Are all of my daughters completely out of their heads?! Bellatrix getting off with this ridiculous buffoon Lestrangle, who couldn't find his own arse unless someone kicked it "

Amandine gasped, but he went on relentlessly. "My little flower who could have made her pick among *every* young man in the entire wizarding world chooses to humiliate herself and me, her father, by associating herself with the most irresponsible, debauched Lothario she could have found and if she searched the entire continent, and you " He stabbed his finger at Andromeda. "*You* top it all by throwing yourself into the arms of a *Hufflepuff*, and if that wasn't enough, a *Mudblood* "

Amandine winced back and cried, "Cygnus, tranquillise-toi!"

"No, I will *not*!" Cygnus barked and returned to glare at Andromeda. "*Your* suitor is even more inappropriate than *her* companion, and what does my wayward daughter do? Engage herself to marry him! Ha! How silly can you be, Andromeda! How blind! *Of course* he wants to marry you! He is nothing, he's got nothing! Couldn't do any better than catch a Black, could he? But not with me, Missy, not with my money!"

Amandine put her hand on her husband's arm. "Chéri "

"Neminem pecunia divitem fecit! Non bene pro toto libertas venditur auro!" Andromeda wore a triumphant expression.

Cygnus sneered and countered in the same coin. "Si qua voles apte nubere, nube pari!"

"Nescit amor priscis cedere imaginibus. Nec tibi nobilitas poterit succurrere amanti!"

Cygnus snorted, addressing his wife, "Can you believe the nerve of this girl? Such sheer stupidity?! He's out to get her goddamned dowry, but she delights to call *it* *love*!"

"Cygnus!" Amandine minded strong language, even in a moment like this, which was funny, Narcissa found, because the French had the world's best assortment of swear words, as far as she could tell. In this situation though, she had no mind to mull over manners. She felt sorry for her parents, just as for Andromeda, although in the case of the latter, she also strongly disapproved of her behaviour towards their parents.

"Money, that's all you can think of," Andromeda hissed. "Is it so hard to believe that a guy should care *forme*, as a person?! That someone could want to marry me without thinking of money, or family lines, or the rest of this crap?!"

"Oh, you're pretty enough to be sure, silly as a chicken, but pretty! That's a nice bonus for such a fortune seeker, getting himself a pretty, stupid broad that's loaded with gold! But mark my words, daughter; he isn't going to see a single Knut of my money!"

"You can keep your *money*, old man!"

He giggled hysterically, waved his hand and whirled around once more, pointing at Narcissa now and glaring. "And *you*, young Miss! I'm particularly disappointed with *you*, Narcissa! Light of my eyes, and you deceive me! You've been in the secret! You've been in league with them! It would have been your duty to inform your parents about this utter disgrace!"

Before Narcissa could think of an answer, Andromeda cried out in contempt, "Has your little spy failed you? Your little darling, eh? Dear, dear Cissy, always so good, always so obedient!"

Narcissa couldn't believe her own ears. She had kept her silence to do her sister a favour, and this was her reward?! "I thought it was up to *you* to tell them!"

"Associates in crime!" Cygnus shrieked. "My own daughters betray me!"

"Get off it! Nobody has *betrayed* you!"

"Tainting my dearest girl, Andromeda! Are you proud of yourself?"

"Exceedingly! I hadn't believed your *dearest girl* could possess something like a backbone!"

"Cygnus, Andromeda," Mrs Black tried once more, clasping her handkerchief before her breast. "We can sort this out, entendez! I 'ave a suggestion to make. We will 'ow do you say put this on ice, eh? This 'ole engagement. Andromeda will start 'er college in September like planned "

"College? She's too dumb for that, obviously!"

They kept on screaming and insulting each other; more and more, Narcissa believed that this must be a nightmare. It couldn't be real. *It mustn't* be real. Both her father and Andromeda kept on attacking each other as well as Narcissa, who found it increasingly difficult to keep her composure. She understood that they were very upset, but she saw no justification for putting the blame on *her*, to let off steam at her expense, and she was scandalised with both of them.

Poor Amandine tried to soothe all parties, but except for Narcissa, no one seemed to hear her. Those two had taken each other's hands and squeezed them for comfort, and after more than two hours, Amandine seized her chance when both combatants made a quick break to get some air, and proposed a compromise. Andromeda was supposed to refrain from seeing her fiancé for one year, to find out whether their feelings for each other would last and stand up to that test. In return, her parents would promise to accept her decision after that period, whatever it would be.

Narcissa felt a rush of relief this was the first sensible idea since they had entered the house. Cygnus just stared at his wife in speechless incredulity. Andromeda faltered, her scarlet cheeks turning paper-white, and she briefly looked to the floor. "No, Maman. That won't be possible."

"But *why*?" Narcissa and Amandine cried simultaneously.

Andromeda had one hand on her temple and one on her belly, gave a groan and murmured, "I cannot *not* see Ted for so long. And trust me, you don't want me to either."

"Now she's finally lost her last bit of sanity," Cygnus snapped. "Your mother offers you a unique chance for reconciliation, and you decline?! You expect us to believe that this was more than just some petty puppy love and then you "

"I will marry Ted as soon as possible. I must. You wouldn't want it any other way." She raised her gaze, took a deep breath and went on, "A new son-in-law isn't the only thing you'll get, Maman. You'll also be a grandmother."

For a whole minute, there was deep silence. Cygnus opened and shut his mouth but no sound would come, his wife had clasped her throat and choked in shock, and Narcissa... Narcissa had closed her eyes, processing the news more speedily than their parents and seeing all the awful consequences in merciless clarity. Andromeda was pregnant it couldn't be any worse. In this moment, it wasn't even so important anymore that the child's father was no pureblood. She had violated the number one unspoken rule. Her father would *never* accept *any* man who had been caught meddling with one of his daughters before a ring *wedding* ring! was on her finger. Sure, Bellatrix had had her share of fun before getting married, too, but she had been clever enough to conceal that from their parents. Nisi caste, saltem caute! And Amandine was a devout Catholic, did that need any further explanation?

Andy had undermined the little chance she had had to prompt their parents to accept Ted Tonks. It was all over. Their father would never forgive either of them; she would be cast out of the family with all consequences, no money, no acknowledgement of either husband or child...

She looked over to her sister, who clearly expected *some* sign of sympathy, but Narcissa could merely shake her head. Oh Andy.... She was unspeakably sad; she didn't want to lose Andy her favourite sister the only person in the world that came close to a real confidante. As if all this wasn't tragic enough, the pendulum of their bad luck swung back to strike with full force Amandine collapsed with a last, meek whimper and fell to the floor.

Everything after that horrible second seemed to be in a haze; Narcissa could hardly recall mere fractions of this night after her mother's seizure. She had screamed and her father had screamed some servant had been sent to fetch a Healer half a dozen of them had fussed over Amandine trying to revive her. At some point, after Healer Smethwyk had announced that Amandine had sustained a cardiac arrest but would probably survive, Narcissa had seen Andy drag two bags along the hallway; she had stopped, embraced her little sister and said goodbye.

"Don't go, Andy! We can sort this out, we can "

"It's over, Cissy. You know that as well as I."

"You cannot go *now*, Andy!" Narcissa jerked her head, indicating upstairs, where their mother was lying, closer to death than to life. "Andy, if you *grow*, they'll never forgive you, and frankly, I don't think *I* could "

"They'll never forgive me either way. I'll be a mother soon, Cissy; I've got a responsibility, and I'll do what's right by me and my child and its father. I've got to do what I've got to do." Seeing Narcissa's incredulous outrage, she went on with an attempt on humour, "I'm sorry that I've spoilt your chances for ever going out again, but seeing with *whom* you'd be meddling, I dare say you ought to thank me in the long run. Tell Maman I love her. And send me an owl how she's doing. We'll keep in touch."

Narcissa cried mutely, not noticing the tears. The fear for her mother's life the shock of Andy's pregnancy the pain of seeing her walk out the door, knowing she would never set her foot again in this house and not least her father's voiceless wrath. He was heartily attached to his wife and children, suffering as much as everyone else, and unluckily, Narcissa was the only one left to vent his anger and despair on.

Never before had he been furious with her, not even disappointed. She had always been his darling child, and she had no clue how to deal with this unprecedented anger. If only he had shouted at her! But still, he wouldn't raise his voice when addressing his 'little flower', as he had always called her until this night. His reproaches were bitter and cynical; he hissed at her, full of contempt and deepest disappointment, putting the full amount of blame on her. She could have prevented all this. If she had told them as she ought to have about Andromeda's unsuitable suitor, they would have taken the proper measures to stop that unholy affair, and Andromeda would not have gotten pregnant, and ultimately, their mother wouldn't be lying on her sickbed now, paper-white and half-dead...

In her *head*, Narcissa knew that none of this was *her* fault, but the frights of the night, her father's coldness and all the rest made her feel so nauseated that she couldn't grasp a rational thought. Not only did Cygnus put a large portion of blame on her for Andromeda's lapse, he also read her the riot act for 'lapsing' herself, as proven in his eyes by her choice of a partner for this damned ball.

She tried to defend herself, tried to explain, make him see that there was nothing~~nothing~~ to reproach her for, that she and Lucius were only~~friends~~ hadn't he always said she should mingle more with other people and that this friendship was perfectly innocent, but he would not have it. Perhaps she would have seen it like he, if she had been in his place. He had heard not only Andromeda's accounts of her classmate's many conquests he had heard the mortified rants of many a father, too, whose daughter had been meddled with by that young man and then dumped like some used handkerchief. Oh, he believed in Narcissa's virtue he knew his child too well to assume otherwise, even after his other child's deplorable downfall, but Narcissa was different than that, had always been. What he could not grasp was that his prudent, canny darling daughter should have played with fire like this, that her smartness and her pride had not prevented her from choosing *that boy* as a friend and companion, that she should have degraded herself so much to be seen in public with him with everyone else simply assuming that she, too, had fallen like so many, many girls before her had. Narcissa, remembering the knowing sneers of the Yaxley sisters, was too sorely aware that her father's reasoning was true to maintain the nerve of trying to convince him otherwise.

The sun had long risen before she was eventually sent to her room, with the clear announcement that she wasn't to leave it again until the end of the holidays, not for meals, not for the piano, and certainly not for sheer entertainment either. She didn't care. The only thing that mattered now was that her mother would be well again; she'd gladly stay in this room for the rest of her entire life, if she could only undo this previous night, if her mother would walk in now, rosy and lively and serene as ever, if Andy came back and told them it had all been nothing but a terrible joke...

By chance, she spotted her reflection in the mirror and sneered contemptuously. Fourteen hours earlier, she had enthused about some silly dress robes, had been happy with trifles like her hairdo, had taken pleasure in going out with a notorious scoundrel to flatter her own vanity. She was every bit as silly as those stupid girls she always scorned, just as superficial, just as mindless!

The first to go was the silly little nosegay; she ripped it off her dress and hurled it on the floor. Then she undressed, throwing the precious silk garments into the fireplace, and set them on fire with her wand. Then she lay down on her bed, stared at the ceiling and willed herself to sleep, which, of course, wasn't successful. Her mind was racing over the same issues, over and over again, and the next time she looked at the clock, it was already past eleven o'clock. She got up again and rang for a servant, wanting to hear how her mother was.

"Miss Narcissa," the elf squeaked unhappily. "My good Miss Narcissa, Elsy is so, so sorry!"

"Skip that part and tell me about my mother, Elsy!"

"The Mistress isn't well, Miss Narcissa. Oh! *Oh!* Not at all well!"

Some convoluted explanations later, Narcissa at least knew that Amandine had been treated with sedatives and was still sleeping, bless her. Declining to be brought a breakfast tray, the girl locked herself in again, dully staring out of the window, but without seeing the garden, or anything in it. She didn't know how long she had been sitting there, when she was disturbed in her misery. Elsy had knocked, announcing a visitor.

Tranquillise-toi! Calm yourself!

Neminem... Money has never made anyone rich. All the world's gold does not offset liberty.

Si qua... If you want to marry happily, choose a man equalling you!

Nescit... Love won't be governed by the portraits of the ancestors. If you're in love, your noble background won't help you!

Nisi... Not chaste, but cautious.

I would like to thank everybody who was so kind to leave a review for me! Thank you so much, especially **notsosaintly** (who's also so patient and sweet to put up with my alien concept of commas!), **rhiannon113**, **HermioneJeanSnape**, **jadevert** and **LoveFenrir**! Thank you so, so, so much!

Lucius Gets The Kick

Chapter 18 of 21

Indeed, he gets a kick - out, that is.

- Chapter Seventeen -

LUCIUS GETS THE KICK

But heaven knows I'm miserable now. "You've been in the house too long," she said, and I, naturally, fled. In my life, why do I give valuable time to people who don't care if I live or die?

THE SMITHS

He had meant no harm. As a matter of fact, he had thought it to be an act of courtesy and a sign of affection to call on her that morning. He was in no way prepared for the reception, and the habitual discretion of the serving house-elves was no help in that respect either. He had no idea about Andromeda's engagement, or pregnancy, or exile, or Mrs Black's cardiac arrest when entering his adored Narcissa's room in awe and thrilled anticipation, with a big smile on his face.

"Good morning, Narc—"

"What do *you* want here! Out! Get out!"

This was the first time that he was perplexed, and many more were to come yet. "I beg your pardon for intruding, but I wished to inquire after you. You —"

Narcissa was tired, exhausted and desperate, and if her own father had abused her to get that weight from his chest, she didn't think it unfair to use that insolent person to ease her own worries now. He had a thick skin; he could take it much better than she had! For three hours, she had been compelled to listen to her father's outraged ranting about the 'debauched cad that she hadn't been ashamed of to associate herself with!', and seeing that 'scoundrel' standing there now, smiling at her expectantly, she would have liked to curse the living daylight out of him.

"What do you want, Malfoy? How dare you come here! I couldn't prevent you from molesting me in school, but this is ~~my~~*home*! You have no place here!"

He faintly registered that she was looking pale and rather unhealthy, but his mind was too much engaged with the sudden change of mood. Last night, she had been charming and easy-going; she had appeared to like him to a certain degree. He didn't understand what had happened since then — had he misinterpreted her behaviour so completely or —

"I apologise if you find my visit inappropriate, Narcis—"

"*Miss Black* for you! In my own house I want to be addressed by my proper title!"

"That's fine by me!"

In all truth, he had never been dressed down the way Narcissa did in the following ten minutes by any of his ex-girlfriends, who admittedly had had sufficient reason to be mad at him. What had he done now to Narcissa to make her so venomous and hostile?! She hurled all sorts of reproaches and allegations at him, leaving him no chance to defend himself, and while still yelling that a 'smooth scoundrel' like him was the last man on earth whom she would allow to misuse her, she rang for a couple of servants to have him thrown out.

He left without protest, frog-marched by some ridiculous house-elves, but in the hallway, her father suddenly stepped in their way, looking even fiercer than his daughter.

"You," he spat, gesturing him to follow, and slamming the door to his study. "*You!* You will stay away from my child, young man, or I swear, I will make you regret the day you were born!"

"Sir, I —"

"I know you! I know what you are! I know how you treat innocent girls, what you do to them! But mark my words; you won't succeed with my Narcissa! ~~How~~*How dare* you enter my house! I might have failed in the past to protect my daughters from villains like you, but that won't happen again, and certainly not under my own roof!"

"I merely came to inquire after her well-being, sir!"

"Silence! Don't you talk back to me! I know your kind, Mr Malfoy, and even though I'm an old man, you want to know that you better not mess with me! My daughter has no interest whatsoever in you, don't you get that?! You're not in her league; *she* knows that, so why don't you just leave her in peace!"

"Sir, please let me just say —"

No, Mr Black did *not* let him say just anything. Like his daughter before, he heaped threats upon reproaches, hardly catching his breath, culminating in a fulminating, "And if I ever see you within a hundred feet of my daughter, I will make you pay, and all your father's wealth won't help you then! Out! *OUT!*"

Lucius obeyed numbly. His head was spinning. Not even his own father had ever managed to yell at him for one and a half hours straight, and so totally without reason. He hadn't done *anything* to Narcissa Black, and what was more, he hadn't the least *intention* of taking advantage of her in any way!

He felt something like remorse. His father had often warned that his bad behaviour would one day fall back on him, and even though he was perfectly indifferent towards all those girls he had been with, he was sorry now. The only one he had ever *really* wanted — she wanted to have nothing to do with him because of those useless affairs.

He returned to Malfoy Manor, groaning when meeting Abraxas, who showed a malicious grin and snarled, "You've gotten up very early for your own standards, sonny."

"Not now, Father. Not now! I'm not in the mood to quarrel with you!"

"Quarrel? Oh my! There I go, for once wanting to congratulate you, and you presume I wanted to *quarrel*?"

Lucius sniggered mirthlessly. "Spare your scorn, Father. I know my results don't meet your expectations, but I've done well enough, I'll start College in autumn and you'll get your will, as always."

"So tense, sonny? I know you didn't get it last night, but I wouldn't have thought that you're *so* needy!"

"Oh, *shut up*, Father!"

He meant to walk past, but stopped in his tracks when Abraxas continued regardless, "I was quite impressed with that girl. What have you done with her? Did you jinx her?"

"What?!"

"She appeared a very good girl, and witty to boot. Such a girl wouldn't deliberately go out with someone like you."

Lucius took a deep breath and looked his father in the eye. "Too right, Father. She won't go out with *someone like me*, and as you've already stated so tastefully last night — you won't meet her again, and neither will I."

"Oh, so that's where you're coming from at this time of day? She's ditched you?" Abraxas laughed merrily. "I'd say it's a pity, because that one was worth a hearty damn. But on the whole it serves you right. You were overdue to swallow a dose of your own medicine."

Lucius' hand was in his pocket, fumbling with his wand, but he fought down the urge to curse Abraxas. He didn't have a nerve for that much; he just wanted to be alone with a bottle of Ogden's Firewhisky.

Heartbroken

Chapter 19 of 21

Lucius is suffering, but so is Narcissa despite herself.

- Chapter Eighteen -

Heartbroken

He was in agony trying to think of a way of "declaring himself" to her. He was constantly torn between the fear of offending her and shame at his own cowardice; he shed tears of despair and frustrated desire.

GUSTAVE FLAUBERT *Madame Bovary*

The summer of 1972 was memorable for many features, like the unusual heat, or the beginning of the comet-like career of the Hobgoblins. The Holyhead Harpies won the Federation Cup after a thrilling season, Harold Marjoribanks became Minister for Magic, England missed qualifying for the European Championship in the deciding match against Andorra, and Cygnus Black funded a foundation for the benefit of orphaned children to finance their magical education.

There was much applause for such a charitable act, though mockers claimed he had only done so to distract from the fact that his second daughter had run away and got married to a Muggle-born. In fact, Cygnus had used the money he would have given as her dowry in an act of vindictiveness. He had refused to attend Andromeda's wedding and had likewise forbidden his wife and other children to go not that Bellatrix would have been tempted, but Narcissa would have liked to. The plan to go to France on holiday had been cancelled; Narcissa had been locked up for three weeks, but let out again as soon as her mother had recovered.

Another trip was cancelled Lucius Malfoy did *not* join his mates Cle and Bertie for their long-planned journey around the world, but stayed in England instead. He took an apartment in London, close to Artemis College, furnished it, and otherwise frittered away his time by playing Quidditch, watching Quidditch and trying hard to keep a constant level of drunkenness at all times. He resumed his old habit of getting off with every pretty witch that crossed his way, and attended every party he possibly could. Any superficial observer would have reckoned that this was just another rich boy having the time of his life, and Lucius did everything to maintain that misconception, although he had never felt more miserable.

He avoided thinking of his future; every time he did think about it, he was nauseated by his prospects. He would study the most boring subjects in the world Wizard Law and Economics. After finishing College, he would start to work for his unbearable father, sooner or later he'd have to pick a wife to produce the inevitable heir, and the only thing he could hope for was that he'd die a quick, painless death.

People think that money matters; they easily assume that very rich people must automatically be very happy, but that, of course, is nonsense. Yes, Lucius Malfoy would never worry how to pay the rent, he could afford every luxury, but did that make him *happy*? Did he get any true satisfaction out of his family fortune? Certainly not! He could think of only one thing, one *person* to make him happy; he *had* been happier with her than ever before. He'd rather talk to Narcissa for five minutes than sleep with any other for a whole night. But he had got the message. He *would* stay away from her, if it broke his heart.

Briefly, he had employed himself in starting to write in a diary, which he found preposterous in itself and would *never* acknowledge to anyone. He gave up that odd habit soon enough anyway, because what good was there in filling pages and pages with his pining and craving and yearning for the one girl that got only more perfect in his mind the more he thought of her? Even her rejection of him set her apart, higher and higher. All those poems he had memorised to please her came back to him; as cheesy as they were, they seemed to describe his depression far better than he could have described it himself.

He wandered through the streets teeming with Muggles, talking, laughing, their tiny tin vehicles puffing, but he hardly noticed them. He settled on the steps of some grand building, a church maybe, or a courthouse, and took out the half-filled diary, every page brimming over with grief over his lost love, and he added some more crap, scribbling in frenzy.

'Magna civitas, magna solitudo... The City's voice itself, is soft like solitude's. Alas! I have nor hope nor health, nor peace within nor calm around, nor that content surpassing wealth... I met a lady in the meads, full beautiful a fairy's child, her hair was long, her foot was light, and her eyes were wild... There is a smile of love and there is a smile of deceit and there is a Smile of Smiles in which these two smiles meet. And there is a frown of hate and there is a frown of disdain and there is a Frown of Frowns which you strive to forget in vain. Her lips were red, her looks were free, her locks were yellow as gold. The nightmare life-in-death was she, who thickens man's blood with cold. Alone, alone, all, all alone, alone on a wide, wide sea! And never a saint took pity on my soul in agony. He went like one that has been stunned and is of sense forlorn. A sadder and a wiser man, he rose the morrow morn. Thou fair-hair'd angel of the evening! Queen and huntress, chaste and fair, goddess excellently bright! Earth let not thy envious shade dare itself to interpose, goddess excellently bright. She walks in beauty like the night of cloudless climes and starry skies; and all that's best of dark and bright meet in her aspect and her eyes: Thus mellowed to that tender light which heaven to gaudy day denies. One shade the more, one ray the less, had half impaired the nameless grace which waves in every raven tress, or softly lightens o'er her face; where thoughts serenely sweet express how pure, how dear their dwelling-place. And on that cheek, and o'er that brow, so soft, so calm, yet eloquent, the smiles that win, the tints that glow, but tell of days in goodness spent, a mind at peace with all below, a heart whose love is innocent!

A grief without a pang, void, dark and drear, a stifled, drowsy, unimpassioned grief, which finds no natural outlet, no relief, in word, or sigh, or tear Oh Lady! Joy, virtuous Lady! Joy that ne'er was given, save to the pure, and in their purest hour... Joy, Lady! Is the spirit and the power... Undreamt of by the sensual and the proud joy is the sweet voice... There was a time when fancy made me dream of happiness; for hope grew round me, like the twining vine, and fruits, and foliage, not my own, seemed mine. But now afflictions bow me down to earth, nor care I that they rob me of my mirth. But oh! Each visitation suspends what nature gave me at my birth... Hence, viper thoughts, that coil around my mind, reality's dark dream! What a scream of agony by torture lengthened out... Or lonely house long held the witches' home... May all the stars hang bright above her dwelling, silent as though they watched the sleeping earth! With light heart may she rise, Gay fancy, cheerful eyes, joy lift her spirit, joy attune her voice, to her may all things live, from pole to pole, their life the eddying of her living soul! Dear Lady! Friend devoutest of my choice, thus mayest thou ever, evermore rejoice!

He reread what he had scribbled on the papyrus parchment and sneered at himself in disdain. 'Get a grip, you bloody loser,' he thought, 'She'd detest you even more if she knew what utter rubbish you're fabricating for her sake!' He hurled the booklet onto the street and saw a dozen Muggle cars roll over the costly leather cover. Served the bloody thing right; sentimentality only made things worse! He got up with a groan and trotted down the alley like a somnambulist, miraculously finding his way to the Leaky Cauldron and ordering a bottle of schnapps.

He met loads of new people on his drunken rambles, and one night, he crossed the path of a couple of people that would change everything. He had been out with his old buddies Golly and Crabs; they had been sailing first, seen a troll fight next, and ended up in someone's apartment with a dozen other guys who had seen the fight, and a whole barrel of Firewhisky.

One of these blokes was Rabastan Lestrangle. He, too, had studied Wizard Law, finished his WASP degree cum laude, and just started to work as a junior Law Wizard in the practise of Yaxley senior. At first, they talked about work and studies, but the more they got drunk, the more interesting it got. Rabastan was interested in the Dark Arts, so were Lucius and the others, and when they had emptied half of the whiskey, they began to perform their favourite curses. Despite some minor injuries one bloke sustained a deep cut that had to be mended, another couldn't undo a backfiring spell that had sewed his mouth and eyes shut they were having lots of fun.

"You're *really* good, Malfoy," Lestrangle said appreciatively. "Who taught you?"

"I'm mainly an autodidact. My old man hadn't got the patience to show me much."

"That is all the more impressive! You could go far if you received the proper training!" And then he lowered his voice and offered to introduce him to his older brother and some other wizards who practised the Dark Arts together on a whole new level, as he claimed, not only the usual 'school yard rubbish'. Lucius was delighted. He admired the Dark Arts and had always thought that it was a shame that they had been banned from his own school. Plus it finally gave him something to do, something useful and special, something worthy of his notice.

A few days later, Lestrangle fulfilled his promise and introduced Lucius. They met in a deserted building in the outskirts of London. Lestrangle was there, his brother and sister-in-law upon recognising her, Lucius thought to himself that the evening had already paid off, even if it led to nothing else. It was Bellatrix Lestrangle, née Black, Narcissa's oldest sister. Then there were four older wizards, who turned out to be Reginald Lestrangle, Rabastan's and Rodolphus' father, their uncle Robinus, Evan's father, Mr Rosier, and finally, a tall wizard in a hooded cloak, whose face was hidden.

Rabastan had told him how to behave towards this wizard who was clearly 'Lord Voldemort', the leader of the gang. Lucius disapproved of kneeling down for anyone, but he had been too curious to protest, and facing the man now, he thought he understood the instruction. This 'Lord Voldemort' and how had he cackled about that stupid pseudonym! had an air of eerie menace, the air around him seemed charged with frizzing electricity. So he kneeled down and bowed his head, until an unnaturally high voice ordered him to stand up again.

The wizard stripped off his hood; Lucius had to muster all his self-control not to give a start. And he had thought ~~he~~ *he* was pale! The man's features were bony, his complexion waxen and odd, and as for his *eyes* they had a scarlet tinge and sparkled with a sort of energy that bespoke adamant will and ruthlessness. And once he had performed a few spells, Lucius was lost completely. He wanted to learn this! He'd be glad if he was only half as good as this guy!

At the same time, Narcissa was sitting on her windowsill, gazing at the crescent moon. Lately, she had difficulties falling asleep, or sleeping through the night, and she had developed the habit of turning on the music box and listening while watching the night sky. When she couldn't sleep as a child, her mother had told her to count sheep it had never worked. Counting stars was much better, making at least her eyes tired from squinting so hard to catch even the faintest glow.

Her mother was getting better each day, though when she had read the *Daily Prophet* and found a short note on Andy's wedding, she had sustained a slight setback. Since then, Cygnus Black would get up twenty minutes earlier each morning to search through the papers before he thought them fit to be presented to his wife. Narcissa played for her mother each morning, afternoon and night, whatever she wished, however corny (because the truth was that Amandine's taste wasn't very refined, in her daughter's opinion). Everyone tiptoed around her, trying to read her wishes from her eyes, but incapable of granting her only real wish.

She missed Andromeda, but didn't dare to acknowledge it. Her little girl was becoming a mother! She had dreamt of being a grandmother, knowing that Bellatrix was a hopeless case and therefore putting all her hopes in Andromeda instead. She had thought how they would toast on the good news Andromeda would drink orange juice instead of champagne, of course how she would accompany her to the midwife, holding her hand and soothing her, dispelling her worries.

And the wedding! Bellatrix had robbed her of her motherly rights of a wedding already by refusing to have a great ceremony, and only the bridegroom's nearest relations and the other four Blacks had been present in the unattractive registry office that stank of ammonia cleaner. Amandine had believed she could throw a huge party for her next daughter, buy some outrageously expensive wedding robes and exquisite underwear, and then, they would have whispered confidentially, and Amandine would have given her some tips for her wedding night, like her own dear Maman had done, then...

How could the girl have been so stupid! And lewd! Surely that boy must be to blame, *for* ~~her~~ *her* little daughter had been a *good girl* until she had met him; she wouldn't have got involved in such a way with any boy by her own doing! *Pregnant!* Pregnant before she had received her graduation roll even! Amandine was no fool; she knew that those things happened all the time, but she had been perfectly sure that none of *her* daughters could fall like that.

Every day she made Narcissa promise to have a big wedding one day, and in the evening, she would demand that Narcissa swear never to leave her. The girl merely smiled, not commenting on the inconsistency. She did not wish to excite her mother even in a small way, and therefore avoided any kind of cheek. If she had known about her mother's true feelings, she could have talked to her and owned that she was feeling the same. She missed Andy. Bella was long gone; they had never been close to begin with, as their temperaments were too different. Narcissa felt incredibly lonely. Her parents couldn't replace her sister, couldn't replace a peer that Narcissa could talk to openly, even if they had always disagreed in the first place.

Also, she had failed to reach her declared aim the letter with her OWL results had come. Twelve O's, predictably, but just as predictably... 1218 points. Third-best result ever, since the beginning of the records. But that also meant twenty-seven points less than Muggle-born Tom Riddle. Oh well. She knew it was nonsensical to get aggravated because of this, but it hurt her severely that the only thing she had ever truly set her heart on, her only ambition ever, she had failed to achieve.

And there was yet another thing that bugged her. Bugged her badly... After that awful morning, she had heard nothing else of Lucius Malfoy. She had been pretty harsh with him, all right. But he ought to understand how awfully upset she had been then! His affection couldn't have been that deep if he was so easily frightened away, right? And this made her pretty mad at herself, for ever believing in his hollow professions in the first place.

She cast a furtive glance at the small flower on her desk, long faded but still there. It was the Angel's Tear that Lucius had given her for the ball night; Elsy had found it the next day, crumpled on the floor, and unwittingly, had put the flower into a small vase, much to her mistress' displeasure. But in spite of all her ranting, Narcissa hadn't disposed of the little bud in fact, this was the first flower of the many that Lucius had given her in the course of the years that she had actually kept. If someone had asked her why on earth she didn't throw it away at least now when it was dry and dowdy she would have been unable to give an answer, any answer at all. She hardly allowed herself to *look* at it, but couldn't bring herself to get rid of it either.

She hated herself for these thoughts, but she couldn't help it. All the time, she had images in her head how he was flirting with other girls. These flims annoyed her much more than all his real girlfriends in school had. In her head, he was charming and sweet to some daft cow, as charming and attentive as he had always been with her. His piercing gaze now lingered on another, his beautiful hands touched another, he'd smile at another, make another girl tremble with excitement... The bloody bastard! After all they had well... After all *he* had and all *she* had mmh *put into this*... But she thought she had got what she deserved, for ever buying into his *this uttebullshit*. Andy had been right when she said Narcissa was too good for him. But if she was too good, why was *she* suffering now, and not he?!

Magna civitas... Big city, big solitude.

'*The City's voice*...' From: Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'Stanzas'.

'*I met a lady*...' From: John Keats, 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'.

'*There is a smile...*' From: William Blake, 'The Smile'.

'*Her lips were red..*' From: Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'The Rime Of The Ancient Mariner'.

'*Thou fair-haired...*' From: Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'To The Evening Star'.

'*Queen and huntress...*' From: Ben Jonson, 'Hymn To Diana'.

'*She walks...*' From: Lord Byron, 'She walks in Beauty'.

'*A grief without...*' From: Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Dejection: An Ode'.

Autumn Blues

Chapter 20 of 21

Narcissa returns to school, hoping... Well, she can't really say. Lucius on the other hand starts college and has given up any hope at all.

- Chapter Nineteen -

AUTUMN BLUES

Soon spreads the dismal shade of mystery over his head.

WILLIAM BLAKE

Ironically, Narcissa was almost looking forward to going back to school this year. The atmosphere in her parents' house had become tense and depressing; everyone avoided mentioning Andy's name. All of a sudden, there were countless touchy subjects, like weddings in general, new-borns, liaisons of any kind, and regardless what the newspapers were writing about corrupt employees in the Ministry, homicide or adultery Cygnus Black would grunt, 'Bet that's been just another of those jumped-up Muggle-borns!'

No, Ted Tonks had done the subject of integration no favour, not *in this* family anyway. Before all this, Cygnus' attitude had been indifferent on the subject. He had believed that purebloods were better than half-bloods and Muggle-borns, obviously, but he hadn't minded them either. 'We've all been there once,' he had used to say, 'All the great old families were inevitably founded by *one* Muggle-born Adam fodiente, quis nobilior, Eva nente'. Well, that mildness was lost for good.

In Hogwarts, Narcissa would be free to do as she pleased, a liberty that she no longer had since Andromeda's downfall. She had to account for every minute of her day, every owl she received; she sometimes even had to show the books she was reading so Cygnus could ascertain that the contents were appropriate for a decent young girl. She had not argued with him about his new strictness she would never have talked back to him, and it was no use in this case to begin with.

Even her poor mother would be better off after September 1st. She had grown accustomed to not having her daughters around during school time, and with her youngest gone, she could pretend that Andromeda had simply left for school, too. For the first time in six years, Narcissa gladly packed her trunk; for the first time, her heart felt lighter when leaving for King's Cross. There was yet another thing that filled her with something like anticipation, and on the platform, she unobtrusively gazed around to see if she could see Gibbon or Rosier somewhere. They had written to her, but she hadn't been allowed to read their letters Cygnus had intercepted all her post and burnt it before her eyes if the sender was male, or went by the name 'Tonks'. Not that she was suddenly all fond of the guys, but they had mutual friends, hadn't they, and she was quite curious about *them*. Not that *they* had written either.

"Be good," Amandine admonished her for the twentieth time. "And write very often!"

"Naturellement, Maman," she replied with her sweetest smile, kissing her mother on the cheeks.

She embraced her father, too, who grumbled, "Don't amuse yourself too much!"

"I won't, Papa. I'll be the same diligent student that I've always been."

She had spotted Rosier and followed him into his compartment, finding Gibbon there, too. She swiftly explained her postal situation over the summer, and Gibbon murmured, "We've half expected that, after all the gossip. Are you all right now?"

"I am fine, sure."

"Look, what we mainly meant to ask was "

Evan butted in, "We've got four vacancies to fill, and though the others and I have a list of candidates, we felt we couldn't make a decision without you. Nor the initiation."

The *others* a bit more concise, boy! "Well, who've you got then?"

"Luce had a few suggestions in mind " Narcissa pretended to take excessive interest in her luggage, but Evan didn't elaborate the point. "Mitchell Wilkes, from your own year."

"Oh, please. He's a total moron and a terrible bully, you know that?"

"Rupert Avery from the fifth year," Evan continued casually, completely ignoring her objection. "And Devlin Mulciber, even though he's just a third year. He's a great talent for curses."

"We thought you might want to make a suggestion of your own. We thought you might want some girl to back you up."

"Back me up? Oh, *please*. But as a matter of fact, I do have a suggestion to make, yes... I can choose whoever I want?"

"Sure!"

"Okay. In that case, I suggest Severus Snape, and before you say something " She shot Evan a strict glance when he meant to speak up. "He is the most talented student I've ever met, especially for someone his age. And he's got the right sort of spirit for the enterprise."

"But he's a half-blood, you know?"

"Of course I know, Evan. But does it truly matter?"

"Well I thought that *you* would mind in particular, after..."

"After...?" She put a subtle challenge in her voice.

"Well, after that business with Andromeda and her Mudblood lover "

"Be so kind and refrain from abusing my brother-in-law. However, I could by no means blame poor Severus for my sister's lapse, and has an exceptional wizard, as you will certainly agree."

Well, they didn't agree at once, but after half an hour of persistence on Narcissa's part, they gave in far enough to order the kid to their compartment for a little interview before the final decision. He showed up, looking intimidated and trying to hold Narcissa's gaze for confirmation. She patted at the seat next to her. "How were your holidays, Severus?"

"Better than expected my father was hardly there," he muttered insecurely.

"I'm glad to hear it. Listen, there are a couple of things that we would like to know about you. For a start have you got any inclination to become Prefect? Or Head Boy?"

"Excuse me?"

"Yes, I know, you're only in your third year, so it might appear a little premature, but still have you got serious career plans? Concerning Hogwarts, I mean?"

"I haven't really thought about it "

"Look, this is no trick question. What we basically want to know is would you be inconsolable not to be made a Prefect in your fifth year?"

"No one would make me a Prefect anyway!"

"True. How do you feel about well not playing strictly by the rules?"

"Which rules?"

"Excellent reply," Evan whispered and nodded towards Gibbon, before specifying, "*School rules*, man."

"Well... I'd say the question is simply what you can get away with, isn't it...?"

"Perfect. He's perfect."

Gibbon raised a hand. "Not so quickly, Rosie. Look, kid, we know that you're good with curses, and also that you've got the right attitude towards those smug Gryffindors, but since you're not in Hufflepuff, we need to know how you think about loyalty."

"Loyalty to your friends," Narcissa clarified with a smile.

The boy blushed. "You mean like yourself? Or Lucius Malfoy?"

Narcissa thought she couldn't smile any more encouragingly. "For example, yes."

"Spit it out, kiddo," Evan drawled and drummed his fingers on the windowpane.

"I'll always be loyal to my friends," he muttered earnestly. "Miss Black and Mr Malfoy's been very kind to me, too..."

"Very good. Broken the kid in well, Cissa. Being loyal to *Miss Black*, and *Mr Malfoy* is an excellent start. I figure you could be very loyal to their friends, too?"

Narcissa inwardly prayed that she didn't let it show how the sheer mention of his name affected her. Could they *please* delve into that matter further?

But Severus simply answered the question. "I guess so, yes?"

"And do you think you can keep secrets?"

"I think I can answer this with a definite yes."

Narcissa patted his arm and gave him her warmest smile. "To cut a long story short welcome to the club, Severus."

"Yep, welcome, buddy. First thing you want to learn are the names. *Miss Black* is simply Cissa, among the seven of us "

He helplessly looked around. "Seven...?"

"Yes, well, momentarily we're just four, including you. *We were* seven, before Lucius, Damocles, Bertie and Graham graduated. But you can congratulate yourself for being the first of our newcomers."

So much for that. The other three were called for, and just as delighted as young Severus. Narcissa was satisfied to have introduced her protégé to the guys; they'd do him good as far as his social diffidence was concerned, but she became increasingly disappointed. Why was she hanging out with those pardon the term dunderheads, if they did not deign to talk about their formidable friend? Oh, how they had *admired* him all those years, and now that he had left, they had forgotten all about him or what?!

'Calm down', she told herself, 'what's wrong with you?!' She could easily imagine what had happened. Oh yes. Lucius Malfoy had fancied her for quite some time, she didn't really doubt that. She knew she was good-looking, and all those years, she had been right before his nose, and never given him a chance. That had kindled his interest strongly enough, and he had had his victory when she had agreed to go to the ball with him. Perhaps his infatuation for it had been nothing more than that, surely might have lasted a little bit longer, if he hadn't got wind of Andromeda's pregnancy. His pride certainly forbade him to date the sister-in-law of a Muggle-born, and since they no longer saw each other, there was little temptation for a fallback. Quantum oculis, animo tam procul ibit amor! Ph! Who was she to like *such* a guy? She was worth

more than that!

Her resolution was firm, or that's what she believed, for when she noticed one morning that Severus had received a letter in a familiar hand, she could hardly bridle herself. She pretended to drink her coffee, glimpsing over to her neighbour, but Severus was leaning so unfavourably on his elbow, she couldn't read anything, so she asked casually, "Post from your mum?"

"No... Mr uhm Lucius has written to me."

"Has he?" She buttered her toast with exaggerated attention, not looking over.

"Yes..."

Obstinate child! "Anything interesting?"

"No... I mean yes he..." The boy blushed badly. "I find it very interesting, of course!"

"He's not here, Severus. You can be candid." *Becandid*, kid!

"No, it *is* interesting to me. But you wouldn't care, you see..."

She gave up; Evan had just settled opposite of her and he needn't hear her inquiries. She also ignored the following two letters that arrived in the next six weeks, but on a particularly rainy morning in November she hardly remembered how sunshine must look, so long the weather had been abysmal her patience finally cracked. Nobody was sitting near them, and a tad more committed than she approved of, she asked, "How come Lucius is writing to you so regularly?"

He lifted his shoulders and shook his head. "I haven't got the faintest idea."

"Well, what's he writing?!"

"About college... He always inquires about the Quidditch team... And he seemed very pleased when I told him that I had been accepted to the " He glanced around and dropped his voice to a mere whisper, "The *Club*..."

"So you're answering him?"

"Of course! It's so kind of him to correspond with me!"

"Stop being so bloody submissive! Why should he *not* write to you?"

"Because I wasn't a close friend of him or anything. Isn't he writing to you?"

She gave a sarcastic laugh. "To me? I wasn't a close friend of his either!"

He looked puzzled, but it remained unclear if this was due to the statement as such, or the uncommon vigour in her voice. "I just thought erm... Well ~~he~~ surely wanted to be your friend "

She sneered angrily. "But only as long as none of my sisters got married to a Muggle-born, right?"

"You reckon he minds?" His anyhow sallow face turned a tad whiter yet. "You think he despises me for my father as well?"

"He might well despise your *father*, Severus. Frankly, what you've related of him *is* despicable. But there's nothing wrong with *you*. You are one admirable wizard, never forget that, and not even grand Lucius Malfoy could miss it!"

"It's not my place to disagree with you, but... If you were right I don't get why he would be bothered with your sister's husband then. You're a marvellous witch, too; your parents are as pure as they could be, and what your sister does or not has little to do with you "

She made a dismissive gesture and finished the conversation in frustration. If only the writer of the letters had known which effect they had, he would have been vastly happy. No, he hadn't wasted as much as a thought to Andromeda's inadequate marriage; he had thought she was a daft cow anyhow. Neither did it affect his unrivalled esteem for the youngest Miss Black. Yes, young Severus was thoroughly right in saying that Lucius had very much wanted to be her friend, but his respect for her also urged him to accept her refusal to deal with him in any small way. As a matter of fact, his main reason for corresponding with Severus was that he knew that he was Narcissa's pet. Admirable wizard or not, what other reason could he have to write letters to a thirteen-year-old boy, eh? He simply found that this was the only way in which he could be close to Narcissa, as indirect or absurd as it was.

Incidentally, he was as discontent with Severus' discretion as she was. She begrudged the boy's unwillingness to tell her what Lucius had written. Lucius was frustrated because the kid would hardly *mention* Narcissa in his responses. All right, he had explained how she had introduced him to the Sepulture Septuplet Lucius hadn't expected anything else. Severus had also mentioned that Narcissa, he and the Gryffindor girl had won a medal for their Potions work. But this was hardly the sort of information that Lucius craved!

This week, he was dating the older sister of one of his fellow students, Tamara. She was blonde and pretty, with a good figure and a sort of natural grace. She wasn't even stupid, and if it hadn't been for Narcissa, he would have assessed her as the most interesting girl he had gone out with so far. Tamara was real girlfriend material, being friendly and funny as well, the sort of girl that one ought to feel very comfortable with. Just that he didn't.

She was *blonde*, for a start. *Blonde* didn't do; it reminded him too much of *her*. *Her* hair was incomparable, everyone else's must necessarily look inferior, so he'd rather go for dark or red straightaway. Secondly, he had found out that he preferred 'silly' to 'smart', because no witch could rival Narcissa's wit anyway, and he'd rather have no conversation at all than one that made her shine even brighter. At last, Tamara's kindness made him feel guilty. He wasn't in love with her, he would never be, and *because* she was so nice, she deserved better than that.

After a truly pleasant night with Tamara, he was woken up by the pecking of an owl the next morning delivering a letter from Severus, or 'Savvy' as his new buddies had dubbed him. Among other communications, he described the last stunt that the Septuplet had pulled under Narcissa's reign. They had secured the entire student body a day off by conjuring some thousands of birds to afflict the castle thousands of ravens, crows, hawks, sparrows, thrushes, and for some floor confusion, the same numbers of penguins, chicken, turkeys and peacocks. He just loved the idea, and that it had been Narcissa's delighted him even more. He read the letter two more times, searching for *something* between the lines and not noticing that he was smiling nostalgically.

"What's so funny?" Tamara asked amiably from between the sheets.

"A friend from Hogwarts's written to me..."

"A female friend, judging your grin."

"What? No. No, that's Severus... He's just told me a funny story."

"That's nice. Since we're awake so early, can I lure you back to bed for a little re-enactment of tonight?"

He hesitated and smiled at her. The thought that had been forming in his head for some time now finally prevailed. He couldn't do this. It just wasn't fair. "No, I don't think so... Listen I think we need to talk."

"So it *was* a message from some girl, hm?" She chuckled softly. "Your ex or something?"

"No, not an ex. Someone who never was and never will be but... This doesn't make any sense, right?"

"Oh, I guess it does. I've noticed all the time that you've been well,*distracted*."

"So obvious, eh? Blast it, I need to go out with stupid girls again. You're just too perceptive."

She fumbled for her blouse on the floor. "I am, am I not? I would even go so far and make a stab ~~at~~*at* ~~who~~ it is that employs your mind so constantly. That photo on your desk, of your little club in school the only girl there, right? The Black girl? Bellatrix Black's little sister?"

"*Too* perceptive by *far*."

"You miss her?"

"Can you miss someone you've never had?"

"Absolutely. *I* will miss you, and I've never truly had you either. Oh, come on, Lucius. This isn't tragic. We've had a good time, haven't we? And I do believe that you should give it a try with that girl or you'll never know."

"I've given it a thousand tries. She simply doesn't want me. She's been*extremely* clear on that head."

She buttoned up her blouse and got up. "Now*that* sounds tragic."

Adam fodiente... When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then a gentleman? (Thanks to HermioneJeanSnape for telling me the direct translation!!!)

Quantum... Like out of the eyes, love will vanish from the heart.

I hope you're all having a very Merry Christmas!

Marked For Life

Chapter 21 of 21

Inevitably, Lucius joins up with his new friends.

- Chapter Twenty -

MARKED FOR LIFE

Qui non est mecum, contra me est.

EVANGELIUM MATTHAEUM 12,30

Lucius was used to being treated with reverence – except for his own father and Narcissa Black, he had hardly ever met anyone ~~not~~*not* awed by his fortunes and social rank. Curiously enough, even Lord Voldemort seemed to be quite impressed with his acquisition for his Order. The young man showed extraordinary talent for the Dark Arts, yes. But a lot of his disciples were pretty skilful in that quarter.

Truth was that Lucius Malfoy was the epitome of what Lord Voldemort had wanted to be when he was still called Tom Riddle. The boy's dynasty might not go back to great Salazar Slytherin himself, but it was as pure and noble and untainted as it could possibly be. For two thousand years, the respective heirs had only ever married witches from families of equal standing; Lucius Malfoy was related to every wizard family of consequence all through Europe, a policy that had also spared him the deplorable fate of other English purebloods, who were degenerated by marrying their own cousins over and over again. Tom Riddle had seen his own uncle Morfin, who was only a tad better than the wretched man that had been Tom's father. A wizard? Sure. But otherwise... Tom Riddle had styled himself a name that should command respect. Lucius Malfoy had been *born* to such a name.

Since changing his name into 'Lord Voldemort', a plan had been forming in his mind. Vague at first, more and more clear in time, and rich in detail. He would take the place that was rightfully his. He would achieve a power more absolute than the world had seen before. He would defy and eventually defeat death itself. And a wizard like Lucius Malfoy would help him with all three tasks at hand.

He personally educated him to advance in the Dark Arts, and only three months into their dealings, Lucius Malfoy officially joined the Dark Order. Lord Voldemort had given this ceremony a good deal of thought. To get where he wanted to get, he needed unconditional loyalty and service. His 'Death Eaters,' as he would call them, ought to feel more obliged to the Order than to their own families. He must be able to rely on them under all circumstances, but all the time, they mustn't figure him out.

"Aut cavere aut carere, aut omnia aut nihil. Qui non est mecum, contra me est. Nemo potest duobus dominis servire," he called solemnly, and for the less gifted, he also

cried the translation straightaway, "It's faith or abstention, all or nothing. Who is not for me is against me. No one can serve two lords."

His disciples cried in unison, "Volo – I want!"

"Tempus fugit – tempus nos avidum devorat et chaos. Dii essemus, ni moreremur. Vade mecum. Serva me, servabo te. Aeterna in desiderio. – Time flies, time and chaos consume us. We would be gods if we weren't to die. Go with me. Help me and I will help you. Desire the eternal."

"Volo – I want!"

"Parva necat morsu spatiosum vipera taurum, estote ergo prudentes sicut serpentes. Si quid est, quo teneris, aut expedi aut incide. Venit dies magnus irae, aut fortiter mori aut liberos vivere. Ad arma! – The smallest viper's bite can kill a bull. Hence be sly as the snakes. If there is something withholding you, liberate yourself or destroy it. The great day of wrath has come; either die valiantly or live free. To arms!"

"Aut vincere aut mori – cedo nulli! – Either victory or death – I will not yield."

He had taken out a golden dagger and slashed it through his palm, letting the blood drip into a golden goblet. Then he handed the goblet to each of the kneeling youngsters, they swallowed his blood and he announced, "Immota fides! Unwavering fidelity!"

"Immota fides in perpetuum! Unwavering fidelity forever!"

"Meus es tu – you are mine," he said, tipping his wand on their outstretched left arms. A kind of branding appeared on the skin, a skull with a protruding snake, slithering out of its mouth. This part was deliberately painful; Lord Voldemort did believe in the saying that a hard lesson was learnt for good.

"Semper et ubique! Always and anywhere!"

They got up in the same order in which they had drunk. The first one was Bellatrix Lestrange. She equalled Malfoy in talent and purity, the problem with her was rather her uncontrollable temper. She was followed by the boy and her husband's younger brother. Then came Amycus Carrow and his sister Alecko, Jebediah Jugson and the last one was Elias Yaxley. They looked elated – comparably young all of them, they were easily impressed by promises of adventure and combat, by drinking blood and some Latin phrases. He had other followers, decidedly older, who hadn't gone through any similar ceremony and who'd possibly not have been blinded by the whole ballyhoo.

Lucius stared at his wrist, trying not to let it show how much it hurt. The snake flicked its tongue as if mocking him, but he thought it was the coolest thing he had ever seen. He would fight. He would excel himself, prove to the master his worthiness. And to his own father, he'd show it as well. No, not the mark, of course. It was forbidden to speak about the Order or its proceedings. But he would prove to his father that he wasn't the idle child that Abraxas liked to see in him. There was more to life than administering a fortune. Abraxas only sat at home or in his office, lamenting about the state of the world. Lucius was going to *do* something about it.

But for tonight, they'd just celebrate and have some fun. After drinking a vat of elf-made wine, they set out on the streets to show off, basically. Jugson proved his mastery of the Imperius Curse by making scores of Muggles jump onto the street, right in front of the next car. He let them jump down bridges, attack accidental bystanders. Then it was Bellatrix's turn. She had a knack for the Cruciatus Curse, and Lucius thought to himself that this streak was running in the family. Those sisters just *loved* to torture other people, didn't they? Only Narcissa didn't need an Unforgivable for reaching the same end.

Their little party suddenly came to an end when Rabastan, quite out of the blue, pointed his wand at the driver of a car that had stopped before a jammed crossing. "Avada Kedavra," he yelled, and the Muggle collapsed at once, with his car shooting forth into the traffic, causing a mass collision. They were tittering with that sight still when half a dozen Aurors emerged out of thin air, pointing their wands at Rabastan. Naturally, all of their merry little bunch Disapparated at once; still the arrival of the Aurors had sobered them up a bit, and they delighted in simply continuing to get wasted in Rabastan's apartment.

Qui non... Who is not for me is against me.

So sorry for the long break; my internet connection at home was all botched up. I hope it'll work now!
