

Ancient, and Most Noble

by dresswithout sleeves

It was 1975. Change was coming, fast and strong, and it swept the Black sisters along with it: Bellatrix to freedom and to madness, Andromeda to independence and to love, and Narcissa to womanhood and to the bitter taste of loss. Andromeda/Ted, Bellatrix/Rodolphus, Bellatrix/Voldemort (in a manner of speaking), Narcissa/Lucius.

I Used to Rule the World

Chapter 1 of 3

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Disclaimer: Not mine.

i used to rule the world

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"It'll be a laugh, you'll see," Bellatrix whispered into her ear, her breath sweet and thick from wine. They were curled in the cool grass, tangled in the layers upon layers of lace and satin that were their dress robes; it had taken them an hour to get them on right and just ten minutes to unsettle them. Andromeda's head was spinning: from the liquor, from the heat, from far too much dancing. "It'll all be just like this," Bella was murmuring, her lips brushing against her ear. Stars whirled by overhead, maybe close enough to touch. Close enough to try.

"Always just like this."

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Andromeda swore as she stepped off the train. From inside the nicely cool travel car, summer had looked so charming, green and bright and gloriously school-free. But the stagnant heat that engulfed Kings Cross was anything but appealing...from beneath her heavy robes Andromeda could feel sweat trickling down the back of her neck.

Bellatrix pulled her hat down over her eyes. "Bloody *hell*, it's hot," she muttered, fanning herself with her free hand.

"It'll cool down," Cissy said with confidence as she tied her blonde hair back in a ribbon. "And anyway, if it doesn't, we can make Uncle Alphard put a cooling charm on the backyard. He'll do it if Drommie asks."

"He'll do anything if Drommie asks," Bella agreed dryly. She shaded her eyes with her hand, eyes scanning the station. Andromeda winced at the nickname; she'd never lived down her childhood misnomer. "Oh, look. Cygnus sent the carriage." She pointed. The carriage was waiting patiently by one of the brick columns, a house-elf perched in the driver's seat. Bella had developed a habit of calling their parents by their first names when they were out of earshot; she claimed it was a symbol of affection,

but really it was just one of the hundred little rebellions Bella had led over the years.

As it always was when school let out, Kings Cross swelled with the packed bodies of returning students and their families. The heat made it difficult to breathe as they struggled through the crowd towards their transportation; Andromeda felt a faint panic creeping up her spine as claustrophobia began to set in. She let Cissy's little hands wrap themselves in her robes, pushing her forward even as she secured them together.

The carriage itself was charcoal-colored, lined with silver. It was roomy and comfortable inside the coach; the quarter lights blocked the heat, and Bella quickly charmed the hood to keep the temperature cool. As soon as the three girls were settled, they began to shed their layers of robes...first off were the cloaks, then the sweaters, and at last the long knee-socks required at school. Andromeda stretched her legs and wiggled her toes, happy to be free of the confines of the wool and the bustling station.

Cissy, who loved the attention that the carriages drew, was always sure to have a window seat. As they moved through the station and took off, rising above the heads of the other students, Cissy kept her eyes straight ahead and made sure she didn't once look out the windows.

The lesson had been drilled into them since birth: the best way to garner attention is to pretend you were above it. Andromeda could clearly recall her mother, sitting with one finger looped lazily through the handle of her teacup, barely looking at her daughters as she spoke. Druella Black's Guide to Womanhood, step one: always appear disinterested.

"So when are you and Rodolphus announcing the engagement?" Cissy asked after a moment of silence. She breathed gently on the window and drew her name in the mist.

Bella shrugged, examining her fingernails. "Probably in the next couple of weeks. Druella wanted to do it at my birthday party, but I haven't decided if I'll let her. It's one less ball if I do."

"If you hold off on the announcement until August then Cissy will be able to come," Andromeda pointed out, leaning her head on Bella's shoulder as she released a loud yawn. Train rides always drained her, leaving her limp and sleepy on the carriage trip home. "And you know she wants to."

Cissy crossed her arms over her chest. "Stop talking about me like I'm not here," she demanded. "I don't care if I go to your stupid engagement party or not."

Bella laughed. "Well, if it's of such little consequence to you, I guess *will* combine them," she decided, shooting Cissy a condescending smile as the younger girl's face fell. "Of course, that means it'll be in June, so you'll still be stuck with the other children upstairs."

Cissy scowled, flinching at the word 'children'. Since she could walk, she had longed to attend their parents' parties and social functions; it seemed that she was born for the world of swirling dresses and stuffy small-talk. But, at fourteen, she was just shy of the age limit, a rule which would be immaterial by August but painfully enforced until then.

Andromeda sent her a sympathetic smile. She remembered how awful she had felt at fourteen, when Bella was allowed to go downstairs and she was stuck babysitting the youngest children of the guests. She used to watch from the upstairs balcony, trying to pick out people she knew--but they all blended together from above, swallowed in the swirling mass of colorful robes and dim lighting. The dresses had all seemed so alive, as if they were dancing and the wearer was only secondary.

"Be nice, Bella," she scolded lightly as the carriage touched down in front of Black Manor. A house-elf was waiting, and hurried to open the door for them as soon as the wheels touched the earth. One by one, he helped them out of the coach and then crawled inside to gather their clothing.

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They didn't see their parents until dinner. It was possible that Cygnus and Druella had been in the house the whole time, but the girls had been taught since childhood never to shout and none of them were particularly inclined to use the energy to search every room in the estate for what would have been a brief reunion.

Their father was working at the table, as always, and their mother twirled her pasta around on her fork but never actually ate a bite of it. "I've sent out invitations for your birthday party, Bellatrix," she said after a few moments of silence, in which Bella, Andromeda, and Cissy had each counted how many times she spun her fork before giving up and setting it to the side. "The date is set for the twenty-fifth."

"My birthday's the twenty-third," Bella said, sounding bored. "But the twenty-fifth is fine. It'll give me some time to shop."

Though she'd been sullen since the disagreement in the carriage, Cissy's eyes lit at the mention of shopping. Andromeda suppressed a smile--her younger sister was incapable of holding grudges. Unlike herself, whose was anger slow but long, or Bella, whose temper was legendary and quick, Cissy sulked for an hour or two and then promptly forgot whatever had been upsetting her.

"We can go next week," Andromeda proposed, before taking a bite of her pasta. She had been hoping for an excuse to go to Diagon, anyway--she was in desperate needs of some quills and (more importantly) books. Not to mention that it would be best all around if she and Bella bought their dress robes without their mother present; the prospect of spending hours locked in a small dress shop with Druella Black hardly seemed appealing. "I've run out of parchment, anyway."

Her mother arched her eyebrows in a vaguely disapproving expression that all three girls had inherited. "Don't be so attentive with your men," she scolded as she reached for her wineglass. She gave the liquid a light swirl before she touched the glass to her lips. "You've only just left school. If you start writing every day boys will tire of you. A talkative woman is an unattractive woman, Andromeda."

Something grated underneath Andromeda's skin. She forced a smile at her mother; to her left, Bella simply smirked. Cissy seemed to soak up the words and her silence shifted from lazy to intentional, as if she was practicing already how to disappear when she wasn't being spoken to.

Afterwards, on their way up to bed, Bella murmured, "Oh yes, I'm sure being *quiet* is how she trapped Cygnus. She was so silent he thought she was mildly handicapped and took pity."

Andromeda laughed. "'Don't be so attentive to your men,'" she mimicked with a toss of her hair. "That woman couldn't magic herself out of a Zonko's bag if she had an instruction manual with her."

Cissy remained silent. She had always disapproved of their constant mocking of their mother; unlike her older sisters, she held in highest regard the rules and customs of high society. Being prim and proper mattered to Cissy, in a way that it never had to her older sisters. She *liked* tea parties, thrived on the world of social chess. Seating arrangements, the order in which you sent out invitations, what clothing you wore...these things seemed important to her, despite the teasing it wrought.

Bella flaunted the rules, wore wildly inappropriate clothing and drank gin instead of wine; she smoked and swore and threw rowdy parties that never failed to spark gossip. Scandal amused her, and more than that danger amused her...she'd been sleeping with Rodolphus since she was fourteen, despite the impropriety of it all, despite their mother's warnings that "if you let him drink the blood for free, he'll never buy the whole unicorn". It was like she had been born without a drop of fear in her, born with abandon that couldn't be bridled or harnessed by anyone's will but her own.

On the other hand, Andromeda found high society too restrictive, boring...petty. She simply had no interest in playing the social game, had never quite fit in there. Since she was old enough to walk, Andromeda had been slightly on the outside of the Pureblood society; somehow, it just never quite fit her the way it did her sisters. Oh, Bella mocked it and flaunted it, but still she thrived in it, used it to her own advantage. It kept her entertained in direct proportion to how it bored the middle Black sister.

Often, Andromeda felt that if it weren't for her sisters, she'd have gone mad long ago. She was always the quietest one, the least likely to draw attention to herself; middle child syndrome, perhaps. And yet she never felt overshadowed by her sisters...how could she? Cissy had been as much her baby as her mother's, had been Andromeda's little charge since birth. And Bella...

Sometimes Andromeda wasn't sure that she was her own person, just an extension of her sister's soul. They were opposites in nearly everything, but instead of causing tension they were a perfect balance.

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It was tradition that the first night of summer was spent on the floor of Bella's room. It had begun the night Bella had returned from her first year and simply never stopped; although never mentioned or technically planned, both Andromeda and Cissy always showed up around midnight, pillows and blankets in hand.

Bella was releasing an owl from her window when they entered. "Who's that for?" Cissy asked curiously as she settled in, her linking her hands underneath her pillow and resting her chin on top. "Rodolphus?"

Since she was the baby, Cissy had been given the "clean" version of the Bellatrix-Rodolphus love story; the one in which they'd met when she was fourteen and had waited, like well-groomed young Purebloods, until her sixteenth birthday to begin their courtship. She thought it was romantic; Andromeda thought it was boring. The real story, of quick liaisons against the barn, dirty letters written in invisible ink, and sneaking out at all hours of the morning fascinated her much more, and she found it...despite all appearances...far more romantic than the stilted, dry suit in Cissy's mind.

"Of course," Bella answered smoothly. "Just letting him know the date of the announcement."

At the mention of the party, Cissy's expression darkened; she cast her eyes downward and pursed her lips. Bella, apparently sorry for having teased her before, lay down beside her and rested her dark head against her sister's pale one. "Don't worry," she soothed, running her fingers through Cissy's hair, "you'll be fifteen in August and then all the parties in the world will open for you." She pressed a kiss just above her ear and earned a smile.

Andromeda flopped down onto her mass of blankets and pillows and ruffled Cissy's hair, even though she knew the younger girl hated it. They were coming on a time when she'd be too old for such handling, and the thought made Andromeda inexpressibly sad. "I remember my first party," she recalled with a giggle. "I accidentally spilled wine all over Desdemona Rookwood."

Bella shrugged. "I set Aunt Walburga's robes on fire."

Cissy sighed dreamily. She rolled onto her back and stared up at the ceiling, which was charmed to look like the night sky. "Everything will be perfect at mine," she murmured confidently. Then she set her chin. "I'll be perfect."

"Of course you will be," Andromeda agreed. She wrinkled her nose. "You already are, you little brat."

"We both hate you for it, you know," Bella added.

Cissy's answering smile was smug and undisturbed.

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Sometime in the middle of the night, Andromeda woke. She knew instantly that Bella was missing from the room from the way that her right side had grown cold. For a moment, she simply lay in darkness, gazing up at the pretend sky above her, counting the constellations. Bellatrix, Andromeda, Sirius, Regulus. All lined up neatly, almost tangled together as they sprawled across the ceiling.

She turned to look at Cissy. Not a star. Not even really a Black, with her coloring--she was the shade of a Rosier, from her soft features to her light hair and blue eyes.

As quietly as she could, Andromeda disentangled herself from her sheets and the arms of her sleeping sister and crept downstairs. "Bella?"

Faint voices could be heard from the living room downstairs; Andromeda crept as silently as she could, feeling somehow out of place, as if it was ~~was~~ *she* doing something wrong.

Bella's voice was unmistakable, but the one that answered her Andromeda could not identify.

"...my birthday," her sister was saying. "I want to do it then."

She poked her head into the living room as Bella climbed to her feet, brushing ash off of her knees. The fireplace was still smoldering, burning the soft orange of a recently ended floo-call. "What's going on?"

Bella spun, startled, her hand automatically flying to her stashed wand. It took her a few moments, blinking into the darkness, to recognize her sister; when she did, she visibly relaxed. "Oh," she laughed, waving her hand vaguely as if to brush the question away, "Nothing. Just going over some details of the party with Rolph."

"Now?"

"It's only midnight in Argentina."

Andromeda frowned. Her hand went automatically to her chest, pressing against the spot on her sternum that always ached when she was confronted with a lie, or even a half-truth. Ironically, this 'honesty meter' was the one secret she had never shared with anyone, not even her sisters, not even Bella.

She hesitated a moment too long. Bella flashed an easy smile and looped her arm through Andromeda's, giving it a light squeeze as she guided her sister back upstairs. "You're right about one thing," she said through a yawn. "It's late as all hell. I'm ready to sleep off my N.E.W.T.s and forget Hogwarts ever existed."

Andromeda's stomach clenched at her sisters words, as she thought of the long nine months that lay ahead. Nine months of school without Bella, nine months of being stuck in the time capsule of Hogwarts while her sister's life plowed ahead--into marriage, of all things. The real world.

She was moving forward and Andromeda was stuck, left behind for the first time. She felt a stab of pity for Cissy, who was surely used to the feeling; it was foreign and painful and unwelcome in her stomach.

"Stop worrying, Meda," Bella murmured as they slipped back beneath the blankets. Cissy, seeking companions even in sleep, automatically rolled over and set her head against Andromeda's shoulder. "You always worry too much."

Despite the ache in her stomach and her chest, she fell asleep to the sound of her sisters' gentle breathing...the three of them, tangled on the floor in an echo of the stars on the ceiling.

Author's Notes: An absolutely absurd thought occurred to me as I was writing this.

Britney Spears's "Circus" reminds me of Bellatrix. *That's* what was in my head as I cooked up this chapter, a fact which makes me want to laugh...mainly because I think Bellatrix would actually *Avada* me if she knew.

Er. And was real.

Seas Would Rise When I Gave The Word

Chapter 2 of 3

A snapshot during the summer of 1975 in Bellatrix's point of view.

Disclaimer: Still not mine.

seas would rise when i gave the word

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They used Cissy's wireless, though the girl had complained; it was the biggest, and the most easily charmed. Everyone knew that Bellatrix threw the best parties: whereas most of the other families just turned their heads when the young went outside and got drunk off of spare bottles of liquor they found lying about the kitchen, Bellatrix flaunted her activities with the same stop-me attitude that she did everything else. She had a few tables set up in the backyard, and Cissy's wireless hovered above the grass. She'd commandeered a tray of hors d'oeuvres from the kitchen and there were four longneck bottles and a teakettle on every table: Firewhiskey, red wine, white wine, Butterbeer in the bottles and gin in the pot.

Bellatrix always served gin in teacups. When she was younger, thirteen, she and Meda snuck downstairs during their parents' Christmas party because Bellatrix wanted to try the liquor. There hadn't been any empty glasses in the kitchen so they'd used teacups, giggling over their drinks like they were the first to ever think of it.

Meda kicked her shoes off and brought the bottle of Firewhiskey to her lips; she winced at the burn as it went down. She kept it clasped in one hand as she danced, feet sinking into the soft dirt, lightening bugs flashing around her, glowing brighter as the sky got darker. At some point Rolph put his hands on Bellatrix's waist and pulled her to him; she let him. He was warm, like weather, like the liquor, like the burning stars.

Technically they were supposed to be inside, entertaining, official adults now, but it was her last backyard party and she was damned if they would tell her what to do.

She leaned against Rolph. The whiskey was going to her head, making it difficult to stand on her own. Meda was still spinning, her arms spread wide and head thrown back, eyes closed. Her hair had fallen loose from its braid and fanned around her as she spun, so fast that Bellatrix wondered if it wasn't the world that was moving around her and Andromeda the only thing standing still.

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Bellatrix woke early. Meda and Cissy slept, ensnared in the web of blankets and each other, Meda's soft snores the only sound in the room. Above them, the ceiling had shifted to match the weather, and the pregnant-looking clouds kept the room cast in a grey shadow that covered everything.

Her arm had fallen asleep where Meda's head rested on it, her soft brown hair tumbling over Bella's bare skin, its scent...lilies, maybe?...dancing across the surface. Most people looked relaxed when they slept, but not her sister; Meda's brow was furrowed, her mouth drawn into a thin line.

A fierce surge of possession swept through Bellatrix, and she gently pressed her thumb to Meda's forehead, soothing out the creases. She wondered with a trace of panic: who was going to do this for her in September, when she was in her bed at Hogwarts? Bellatrix would be hundreds of miles away, perhaps in her bed with Rodolphus and perhaps not.

Perhaps out, hidden beneath a mask, wrapped in midnight and in costume.

She didn't have the Mark, and that rankled. The others had all blanched at the thought of branding her, at the idea of burning into her skin the same calling that they'd taken so willingly on theirs. But they had swept her into this world, right up to the edge of it, and Bellatrix had never been content to settle for *close enough*. She was never close enough, never, not unless she was at the centre, unless she was the wand and everything else was just a charm.

There was *change* coming, real change, real *power*, so much of it that it raised the hairs on her arms and neck. She could feel it, pulsing, calling, radiating off of the man Rodolphus called Master, and she *wanted it*.

She had never felt anything so intoxicating, so completely untamed, and so wildly powerful. She had never seen his face, had never had the joy of kneeling before him, and yet it seemed to her that this man, this puppet master, this embodiment of everything her age-old family had ever stood for... he was calling for her, reaching for her with his impossibly strong arms, pulling her towards him and not letting go.

All her life, Bellatrix had been surrounded by people bound so tightly that they could barely breathe. By people who demanded she do the same...to bottle up the abandon that flowed through her as naturally as her own blood.

But this man. *This* man required no such self-mutilation. She had heard him, all those years ago, hiding behind the heavy satin curtains in her aunt's parlour room as Rodolphus knelt, head bowed, and let his Master brand him. She had heard him whisper...and it must have been to her, it could only have been meant for *her*... "All I require is your love. Give me your love and you will have your freedom."

Bellatrix felt her heart quicken dizzily. *Freedom*.

Cissy stirred. She rubbed her bleary eyes and lifted her head, blinking slowly in Bellatrix's direction. "What time is it?" she murmured, her voice heavy with sleep.

"Not yet eight," Bellatrix whispered back and gently wriggled free of Meda's grasp. She knelt beside Cissy and gently stroked her hair. "Go back to sleep. I'll come wake you in an hour. We're going to Walburga's for brunch."

Cissy groaned as she closed her eyes. "Sirius will put bugs in my hair again," she grumbled even as sleep reclaimed her.

Bellatrix pet her head once more and then stood. The owl she had sent the night before *had* been to Rolph, but not with the party's date. He'd asked her to collect a package for him before his return from Argentina, and he'd be back before their trip to Diagon next week; anyway, they weren't the sort of things she was going to find in any old apothecary.

She dressed quickly.

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Borgin & Burke's technically didn't open until ten, but Bellatrix had long since set up a special schedule with Caractacus Burke that allowed her to come earlier. After all, it wasn't as if she could be seen there during regular hours; she couldn't risk word of her shopping trips get back to her parents so close to the wedding. Merlin only knew what sort of headache they'd cause over it, considering the nature of the shop.

Such places are for men, Bellatrix, her mother would say. Druella Black's Guide to Womanhood, step two: it's not where you are; it's where you're seen.

Her mother was a nuisance and a bore, but on at least that point they agreed. It suited Bellatrix to keep quiet on her frequent stops in Knockturn Alley. Subterfuge was frustrating but necessary in these swiftly tilting times. A good name and a relatively clean reputation could go a long way. Rodolphus had explained carefully the importance of appearances, not for society's sake, but for their own. If she played the dutiful pureblood wife and he the hardworking businessman, who would suspect them? Who would look at the handsome couple and know that one...and soon, *soon* she told herself, both...of them felt most at home behind a mask?

She'd argued, at first. But in the end, he convinced her...you'll do it to protect your sisters, he'd said, no longer a question. You don't want to draw them into this.

Bellatrix pushed open the door of Borgin & Burke's, scowling. He'd had a point, of course; the thought of Cissy's arm burning dark with the Mark, or Meda's pretty mouth curling around an Unforgiveable... The thought made her vaguely sick. Not that Meda couldn't...that Meda *wouldn't*...utter those two exhilaratingly powerful words, if she had to. If what she loved was threatened.

Oh, no. Bellatrix knew her sister better than that. Meda would say the words and mean them if she thought it was her only option. But they were cut from different stone than little Cissy. The youngest Black just didn't have it in her to kill, not even if it was her only way out, not even if it meant that everything she loved would wither and die. She didn't have the strength.

And that's what Bellatrix was for. She was the hand that reached out and choked when it had to, stole when it had to, killed when it had to.

Surely Meda will understand that, she thought grimly. As long as it was explained to her that way, surely her gentle other half would take her hand and whisper thanks. Yes, she would understand...she always understood; she always knew what Bellatrix was thinking before she thought it. All Bellatrix would have to do would be to *explain*.

"Ah, Miss Black. You're earlier than usual. I take it your summer has begun well?"

She cast him a cutting look. "I'm not here to waste time," she snapped. "Do you have what I need?"

"I always do. You have expensive taste. Basilisk venom isn't easy to come by."

"If it was, I wouldn't bother with *you*," she muttered under her breath. Everything about Caractacus Burke disturbed her: his eyes, small and beady; his hands, fat and sweaty; his words, silk and low. Without stepping closer, Bellatrix tossed him the purse with the payment in it.

He nodded at a small, inconspicuously wrapped package by the door. "I think you'll find it's all there."

Bellatrix grasped the package and left without thanks.

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The first sound they heard upon entering Grimmauld Place was screaming. It was unsurprising, really, considering whose house it was: Aunt Walburga and Uncle Orion were famous for their screaming matches, and the fights had long since stopped troubling their children. Sirius and Regulus were perched on the steps, ears pressed against the wall as they listened.

Sirius's finger went to his lips as Bellatrix swept into the parlour; he nodded at the door, indicating that he wanted to listen, and she rolled her eyes.

"What are they on about?" Meda asked with a sigh, glancing at the clock on the wall. Shouting meant that lunch was delayed, and none of them had eaten before Flooing over.

Regulus grinned. He was the baby by three years, only twelve, and by far the more docile brother. Bellatrix could have used "boring" instead, but refrained out of family pride. Perhaps it was their age difference and perhaps a default of their personalities...either way, she'd lost interest in the youngest Black heir the moment he'd been born. "Sirius rode Grandfather's portrait down the stairs," he bragged, "and he went through a window."

Bellatrix smothered a smile. She worried about his loyalties, sometimes, Gryffindor that he was; but when it came down to it she was sure he'd straighten out. *What didn't* experiment during Hogwarts? All that dizzying space between them and the ever-present gaze of their parents... she'd been taken in by it, too, once.

She recognized in Sirius a sort of kindred spirit...his abandon, his passion, his inability to be anything but just himself. When he was old enough, perhaps she'd introduce her cousin to Him. He'd make a fine Death Eater...all of the energy and none of the fear. Ripe for moulding.

"You'd think they'd be yelling at *me*," Sirius drawled, shrugging shamelessly. "But apparently Mum's blaming Dad for my being wildly uncontrollable, and Dad's blaming Mum for my being completely mad...as it obviously comes from her side."

"Well, he's right about one thing, anyway," Cissy huffed, folding her arms over her chest as she lowered herself onto the stair next to Reggie. "You've ~~ob~~viously got some sort of serious mental handicap that needs to be addressed."

He scowled at her. "Handicaps can be overcome, Cissy. Noses can't."

Cissy's eyes widened and her hands flew to her face, horrified. "What's wrong with my nose?" she demanded frantically. She turned to her sisters. "Did he do something to my nose?"

Bellatrix laughed; Meda smothered her smile with one hand. "There's nothing wrong with your nose," she soothed tiredly. "He hasn't done anything to it."

"Yet," Sirius muttered darkly, and then yelped as Cissy landed a vicious kick to his ankle. He was about to retaliate when the door swung open; Aunt Walburga emerged, her cheek red with a distinctive handprint.

Trailing after her was Uncle Orion, who had a puffy lip and was missing an eyebrow.

"Oh, you're here," Walburga greeted, her voice flat. "Come in and sit down."

As she passed, Bellatrix pressed a kiss to her aunt's and uncle's cheeks. To be honest, she was always a little repulsed by Walburga; the woman stood at almost five-foot-eleven, and her huge frame could easily fill an entire doorway. Her lips were too big for her face, and her chin doubled when she smiled. And though no one ever mentioned it, it was impossible not to notice her slightly lazy left eye, which always tilted to the side when she looked at you.

How that woman had managed to produce two attractive heirs, Bellatrix would never know.

They sat in ascending order by age, with Bellatrix next to Orion and Regulus squeezed next to his mother. Of course it rankled that Sirius was placed above Cissy, but that was politics...they might have been the same age, but he was the male and it was as simple as that.

"Allow me to be the first to congratulate you on your engagement, Bellatrix," Orion said around a mouthful of scone. "Rodolphus Lestrange is an excellent match."

"Thank you," she answered with as modest a smile as she could muster. "I know that Father is very pleased. Of course, I think the house in Buenos Aires that we'll be inheriting factors into that."

"*Bella!*" Cissy hissed, flushing red.

"What she means, of course," Meda interceded smoothly, reaching for her tea cup, "is that the house clearly indicates that Bella will be taken care of by the Lestranges in the manner in which she is accustomed. Would you pass a sugar cube, Aunt Walburga?"

Uncle Orion seemed to struggle with himself for a minute and then sighed. "Lisbon is nice this time of year," he said.

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The letter was waiting when she returned, tied to the leg of a blinking tawny owl.

Bella,

I hope this reaches you, as I am forced to use a borrowed owl. Because I cannot be sure this line of communication is secure, you understand why I must be brief. Our Friend has agreed to meet with you, but nothing can be arranged until the end of summer. Since that's a few months before the wedding is scheduled, you'll be able to rest after the festivities. We can discuss travel arrangements when I return next week. Please try to behave until then.

-Rodolphus

Bellatrix's stomach clenched and she pressed the parchment to her chest, just above her heart. Change was coming, fast and hot and strong, and she could feel her feet leaving the ground as it swept her along with it, demanding nothing, giving everything.

Yes, Bellatrix mused looking out the window at the slow summer sky. Change was coming.

A/N: Thanks to ConstantComment for reading over my story--if not just for being all around awesome!

Now in the Morning I Sleep Alone

Chapter 3 of 3

Narcissa reflects on her friendships with her sisters.

Disclaimer: The Harry Potter universe belongs to JKR. I've just taken a dive into her sandbox.

Now in the Morning I Sleep Alone

The music swirled, tumbling through the ballroom in a gentle wave, sweeping beneath skirts and rustling the curtains as it went. If Narcissa closed her eyes, she could see it, could see where she would stand to catch its highest note, could see where to spin and where to curtsy and where to still. It was effortless, all so perfectly simple, an easy rise and fall...first the eye, catching; then the hand, on the shoulder, one on hem; and last the mouth, a pilgrim's kiss.

In her mind she was there, pressed into the arms of a handsome man, perhaps older, perhaps named Lucius...it didn't matter. She was draped easily on his arm, her head dizzy from dance and drink, her laughter light and charming, eyes glittering...she was beautiful, the most beautiful she had ever been, glowing brighter than any star, any distant and faded star, ever could.

"You're not missing much." Drommie's kind voice broke her reverie. She opened her eyes and glanced at her sister...wrapped in her gorgeous dress robes, hair twisted into a braid which hung over one shoulder, mouth a perfect red. Drommie possessed the gentlest beauty Narcissa had ever seen and always envied. "Just a bunch of boring grown-ups getting drunk and Uncle Alphard telling stories about his adventures in India... which I'm beginning to suspect he makes up."

She smiled a little before she realized she was doing it. Narcissa was determined to be sour over not being allowed to the party and not even her sister could change her mind. "You're just saying that," she pouted with a sigh. "Two months, Drommie. In two months I'll be fifteen and invited, and I'll be engaged before midnight. You just wait and see."

"Oh, I believe you," Drommie murmured and followed Narcissa's gaze to the dance floor. Lucius Malfoy had both arms wrapped around Desdemona Rookwood. They were spinning. she was laughing in her stupid yellow dress. Drommie leaned in, brushing her sister's shoulder with her own, and confided in a low voice, "Desdemona has had a bit of spinach in her teeth all night."

This time, Narcissa let herself laugh.

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Somebody was going to die if Narcissa Black did not get out of her house. The heat had kept them imprisoned inside Black Manor all week, pacing outside of the locked doors and pressing urgently against the cooling charms. She'd been too afraid to even open a window to send owl post, for fear of the creeping heat slinking inside and poisoning the precious, cool air.

Not to mention that *every bloody time* she turned around, someone was talking about The Birthday Party. She'd assigned it capital letters in her head, for all the importance it seemed to have...it was supposed to be the social event of the summer. Bella's birthday and engagement party all rolled into one. Everyone who was anyone would be

there; all the available bachelors were invited.

As prospects for *Drommie*.

Narcissa felt that it was spectacularly unfair that her sister should get a ball that was unofficially dedicated to finding a boyfriend all to herself. *She'd* been going to the parties for three years now...if she hadn't found someone already, it was *obvious* that Mother and Daddy would have to do it for her. And why not? There was nothing wrong with that. Girls had their parents arrange their marriages all the time.

And anyway, Narcissa knew, Drommie's single status wasn't for lack of options. Her sister had a grace to her, a soft loveliness that always came as a surprise. She wasn't like Narcissa, or Bella, whose features were striking and immediate; Drommie's beauty was more gradual, growing with every second look. She probably could have been engaged by now, if she'd really wanted to be; she was just too picky, and that was no one's fault but her own.

Narcissa, on the other hand... she knew already whom she wanted (Lucius Malfoy), and how she wanted him (*immediately*), and all it would take would be one night and she'd have him. But if she didn't get downstairs quickly enough the nearest tart in a low-cut dress would snatch him up and everything would be absolutely ruined forever.

Thursday took a hundred years to roll around, and mercifully some of the heat had broken that morning. Still, Narcissa wore her temperature-adjusting robes from Madam Malkin's; she'd be damned if she'd get caught outside without them if the cool streak broke.

They Floo'd directly to the Leaky Cauldron. Bellatrix went first (*ofcourse*), followed closely by Drommie, and Narcissa let a few seconds pass before she followed. She never trusted Drommie to step out of the fireplace fast enough, as she almost always forgot something.

Anyway, that was just the way they did things. Bella-and-Drommie and Narcissa. It's how it had always been. She'd never managed to break into their little club, but that had never bothered her before. It was just recently. She wasn't a child anymore, or she wouldn't be in two months, and there was hardly any reason for them to keep treating her like she was Reggie's age.

She stepped out of the fireplace, brushing soot off of her robes, and cleared her hair from her face. Sure enough, Bella and Drommie had formed a team huddle over in the corner; but there was a third person with them.

Rodolphus. Narcissa guessed he'd returned from Argentina.

She'd never decided if Rodolphus was handsome or not; he was striking, certainly, with hard, dark eyes and a set chin. She supposed he was good-looking enough for Bellatrix, anyway, if not quite for her. He was no Lucius Malfoy.

She made her way to them, and Rodolphus greeted her with a coolly polite half-smile and a kiss on her hand. "Narcissa," he said with a nod. "Lovely as always."

Perhaps she hadn't been fair before. He was certainly a gentleman, and his looks got better on a second look. "Hello, Rolph," she responded cheerfully. "When did you get back from Argentina? Bella didn't mention she was meeting you today."

"I had business in London last night."

She was saved from answering by Bella's amused laughter. "You certainly did," she hummed, which Narcissa didn't really understand but Drommie seemed to disapprove of. Her middle sister coughed and cut her eyes towards Narcissa in a gesture that seemed to indicate that whatever Rodolphus' business had been, it wasn't to be spoken of in front of her. Bella rolled her eyes. "Oh, please, Meda, like she doesn't already know," she said, although Rodolphus still looked uncomfortable. "I knew all about it at her age."

And then Narcissa got it. Right. Sex.

"You knew more at fourteen than I know *now*," Drommie replied dryly. "Can we at least *pretend* to be appropriate?"

"It's good to know that at least one of you has some sense of propriety," Rodolphus said in a voice that couldn't quite be called teasing but couldn't quite be called disapproval, either. Narcissa always had a fairly difficult time reading him, probably because his expression was always so controlled.

She looked around for a clock. "Shouldn't we get moving?" she asked impatiently, shifting her weight from one foot to the other.

Drommie smiled and reached out to pet her head. "Yes. Bella and Rolph are going off on their own to," she hesitated, "look at rings. We'll meet up with Bella at Madam Malkin's so we can pick out her dress. Come on."

Together, they went out into the bright sunshine; it was as hot as ever, but somehow less oppressive, a lighter heat which kissed as their skin but never seemed to settle. Diagon wasn't particularly busy, but Narcissa still refused to hold her hand once they were out of the Leaky...she wasn't twelve anymore, after all, and she didn't want people to think she had to be... led anywhere.

Drommie smiled down at her. "Where to first?"

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Wizzhard Books was smaller than Flourish and Blotts, tucked between Ollivander's and Twilfit and Tattling's, and rarely had more than two customers at a time. Narcissa loathed it. So much dust and so few windows, and hardly anyone to socialize with; the few women her age that bothered to go into them were either on a mission and didn't have time to talk or were like Drommie and wanted to stand for a million hours and read.

"Are you *done* yet?" She moaned after a few minutes of browsing, "I could've crushed a whole goblin uprising in the time it's taken you to get through the *history* section."

Narcissa heaved a sigh, tapping her foot impatiently and pretending she didn't notice the annoyed look her sister shot her at the words. "It took almost fifty years to put down the last troll uprising," Andromeda said dryly.

"That's my *point*."

Drommie sighed. She gazed longingly at the shelves before her, admiring each overstuffed with volume like it was a piece of jewellery or a new house just waiting to be decorated. She ran her hand thoughtfully over a few spines before turning to her sister. "I'll make you a deal," she offered decisively after a moment. "You go ahead, get whatever it is you need. I'll meet you back here at one-thirty."

"You have all the money," Narcissa pointed out. "And without you I always spend too much."

Drommie reached deep into her pocket and tossed Narcissa a small purse, heavy with galleons. "I'm sure Father is used to your spending habits by now," she said with a resigned shake of her head. "Back here at *one-thirty*. If you're late I'll tell Mother you nicked the purse and spent it all on fattening candy."

"But I haven't!" Narcissa protested indignantly, hands flying to her hips. She fought the urge to stamp her foot.

Drommie smiled cheerfully. "Well, don't be late, and no one has to think you did."

She was always being bullied. It was horribly unfair. Bella did whatever she liked and got away with it, and Drommie just went along and seemed bored all the time, but

Narcissa worked really hard to be perfect, and all she got for her pains was two bossy big sisters.

"I don't know what you like so much about bookstores *anyway*," she grumbled, looping the drawstring of the purse around her wrist.

Drommie sighed, pulling a thick tome with gold engraving on the cover from the shelf. "Haven't you ever wanted to be someone else?" she asked dreamily, running her hand along the book's binding.

Narcissa stared at her. "Why would I *possibly* want that?"

Her sister shook her head. "I wouldn't expect you to understand," she said with a shrug. "Malkin's at two. Don't forget."

With that, Drommie turned away, dismissing her.

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She bought new perfume, a QuickQuotes Quill, some fresh ink, and a new pair of gloves. Altogether a successful trip. She'd window-shopped a bit at Madam Pimpernelle's, but Druella Black's *Guide to Womanhood, Step Three* was never to use beauty products, only spells, because they were more reliable and less noticeable, so she didn't go inside.

Besides, the thought of seeing someone she knew was just *too* embarrassing.

It was almost one-twenty by the time she was satisfied, so she headed back to Wizzhard with her bags in hand. She could see Drommie through the window, her back to Narcissa.

There was a boy with her that Narcissa didn't recognize. He was vaguely familiar, so he probably went to Hogwarts, but he certainly wasn't a Slytherin. He had a nice half-smile and crinkled grey-green eyes; his hair flopped lazily over one eye. He stood a good four inches over Drommie even as he slouched, his shoved hands deep in his pockets as he leaned against the bookshelf.

Narcissa sighed. Her sister was too much of a bleeding-heart, always treating other Houses like they were important.

She went inside with the intention of tricking Drommie into going to Fortescue's with her before heading to Madam Malkin's, but she slowed as she approached, curious to hear the conversation. Her sister was standing relaxed, *Theories of Transubstantial Transfiguration* held in front of her like a shield. If it weren't for the frigid air hanging around her, or the tense way that her fingers ticked against the callused binding, Narcissa might have thought her vaguely bored.

"... bollocks," the boy was saying, expression amused as Drommie ran her eyes over him like she was Aunt Elladora and he was a house-elf that couldn't carry the tea tray.

"Are you sure I can't direct you somewhere, Tonks?" she asked coolly. "Perhaps, I don't know. *away*?"

The boy's smile widened. "You just get sweeter every summer, Andromeda Black," he told her, and then his eyes caught Narcissa's. He winked at her and, without another word, bounded from the shop.

"What was *that*?" Narcissa blurted as soon as he was out of earshot.

Drommie rolled her eyes, dropping the transfiguration book onto the already impressive stack and hefting it into her arms. "Nothing," she said in a clipped tone. "An insufferably big-headed Hufflepuff who is *sorely* mistaken if he thinks he's going to beat me in Charms again this year." Then she smiled. "Come on. Let's go see if we can talk Bella out of buying lingerie and calling it a dress robe, shall we?"

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They couldn't.

A/N: Thanks to ConstantComment for looking this over... and for providing comic relief.