

Scylla, Charybdis and the Delicate Art of Secret-Keeping

by diabolica

The most convincing lies come dressed in layers of truth; the best-kept secrets hide themselves in a thicket of public knowledge, blending in so well as to become invisible. Caught between the Ministry and the Dark Lord, Narcissa Malfoy must choose her alliances carefully.

Part I

Chapter 1 of 5

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i. Prelude

1998

A tingling chime at the back of the house signalled that someone was approaching five minutes before she came into view. Old Lady Nezhah rose and went to the window. It was early for visitors, but when she realised who it was, she understood why the visitor had set out at this hour of the morning. In this season, the sun whispered in a dry-rough voice and traced a blazing arc through the sky. Europeans, it was said, did not tolerate the heat well.

The visitor stood at the gate and waited to learn if she would be allowed entry. Polite. Respectful. It pleased the old woman that such a recent arrival seemed to understand her community's ways.

Not long before, they said, the visitor had moved into a house on the edge of the territory. She was accompanied by two men, one young, one old, both with snow white hair. Some said they were her uncle and brother; others said they were her husband and son. It was difficult to tell, as they had not all been seen in public together. Everyone agreed that Snow White Hair the Elder was probably an albino, although no one had seen him up close. He remained within the confines of the house, stepping out rarely and only after dusk. The Younger was seen only slightly more frequently; the neighbour's drunk of a husband said he'd once been seen at night, riding a broom. The old woman's great-great-grandson, the tale-teller, also swore he had seen the Younger at the reservoir, glowing in the dark.

'The sun would probably burn them to dust,' laughed Old Lady Nezhah's third daughter.

As far as the old woman knew, the visitor had ventured into town only a handful of times. She smiled and nodded, but seldom spoke. It was not in the nature of the people to ask direct questions of strangers. They said her hair was chocolate brown under her odd floppy hat. They said she carried exhaustion like a sack on her back. They said she sounded English. The bookseller said she had passable French and spent money like a demon. Everyone said she and her men were refugees.

Well, that was no surprise.

Bella smoothed her hair as if she had all the time in the world. 'At least there's plenty of reading material,' she quipped before disappearing to the safe room hidden beneath the drawing room.

Narcissa charmed the gates open as she descended the stairs and went to the front door. Through the window she noted a small battalion, mostly functionaries by the look of them with a few Aurors among them, headed by a dark-haired wizard she did not recognise. Behind the leader she noted the unmistakeable figure of Arthur Weasley. She opened the door, and as the Ministry approached, she smiled a faint, caustic smile.

'What have we here, then?' she asked, addressing the leader of the invading force. 'Good morning, Arthur,' she added distractedly. 'I wish I could say how lovely it is to see you, and yet I can't.'

'Mrs Malfoy. We're here to search the premises.'

'Again? Couldn't you at least have chosen a decent hour at which to do so?' Narcissa asked, tamping down her anger.

'If we might come in ...' the dark-haired wizard was saying.

Narcissa stepped back from the door. 'I can't imagine what you think you'll find. Do you at least have a properly executed search order this time?' She addressed herself to Weasley, since he was the one she recognised.

'You have the search order, Proudfoot,' said Weasley. Narcissa almost pitied him; his position at the Ministry clearly didn't warrant him being placed in charge of a raid, yet he could not resist coming along to taunt her. The dark-haired wizard handed her a scroll of parchment, which she made a show of reading, although it was identical to the order they'd brought last time and she could have recited it from memory. Oh, but Fudge himself had signed this one. Telling. Covetous bastard.

Narcissa stepped back to let them pass. 'Well, by all means, come in. Of course, you'll give me a moment to call our advocate before you begin.'

The one called Proudfoot produced a second roll of parchment and handed it over lazily. 'Actually,' he said, 'we can begin straightaway. Exigent circumstances in light of your husband's arrest.'

An indignant voice rose from the wall behind her. 'Do you mean to suggest my son has been arrested? Narcissa, I demand an explanation.'

A mutinous hum ran through the portraits that hung in the hall. Narcissa turned and addressed the largest portrait, that of a pale-faced, imperious looking witch, which held pride of place in the centre of the wall opposite the stairs. 'I shall explain later, Mother Malfoy.' She drew her wand and said, 'My apologies,' then directed a *Silencio* at the portraits. The pale-faced witch glared at her and moved into the portrait next to hers to begin a silent argument with its occupant. Narcissa turned back to the Ministry contingent now moving into the hall. 'Now you've upset my mother-in-law.'

Proudfoot ignored this and asked, 'Are you alone in the house?'

Her eyes narrowed in distaste at his tone. 'I think you know where my husband is, and where my son is. How you must have waited for the opportunity to strike.' She took the new scroll and began to read.

'Elves?' asked Proudfoot.

'Would you like me to summon them for questioning?'

'If we could have them stay here where we can see them.'

'If you insist.' Narcissa summoned the house-elves, who stood against the wall in a line looking fretful. One began to gnaw its lip, another twisted its ears anxiously. 'It does amaze me how the Ministry creates new Decrees to suit its every purpose,' Narcissa continued blandly as she reviewed the second scroll.

Proudfoot said nothing, but began dividing up his team to search the house. Weasley stepped too close to her, regarding Narcissa with a calculating gaze. 'Heard from your sister lately?' he hissed in her ear.

She looked away in disgust. 'I know my obligations, Arthur. Now if you'll excuse me, I still wish to call our advocate. Be sure your guard dogs don't break anything. And I promise to stay where you can see me,' she called over her shoulder as she crossed the drawing room's threshold and moved towards the fireplace.

When Sextus stepped out of the drawing room Floo, unshaven but impeccably dressed, they'd been turning the house upside down for twenty minutes and yet hadn't discovered any of the items listed in the search order. That didn't stop them from creating a pile of items to be 'confiscated for inspection', Narcissa noted bitterly. The pile shrank somewhat when Sextus correctly noted, 'As I've understood your order, you may seize certain items belonging to Mr Malfoy, not to Mrs Malfoy. He's hardly likely to have cursed his wife's jewellery, wouldn't you say?'

'Thieves,' Narcissa muttered under her breath.

Proudfoot apparently didn't much care for the reminder. His face flushed unpleasantly as Narcissa sent the jewellery back to her dressing room with a flick of her wand. He rounded on her. 'What's downstairs?' he demanded.

She regarded him calmly. 'The swimming pool. The wine cellar. Storage. As you are no doubt aware.'

Weasley's eyes glowed at the word 'storage'.

'Take us down there,' he ordered, gesturing to two other members of the team to follow.

'Certainly. You'll accompany us, won't you, Sextus?' she asked the advocate, who nodded.

Narcissa led them down the staircase to the lowest floor of the house and along the corridor to the swimming pool. The protective enchantments she'd set on the door lifted as she approached, and the door swung open; the torches lit themselves. She watched impassively as the Ministry's thugs strode round the pool muttering their crude detection spells. She then opened the door to the wine cellar and watched them help themselves to a few bottles. (*This looks like a very suspicious vintage.*) She considered making a joke about how every twelfth bottle was poisoned for just such occasions, but swallowed her rising bile and said nothing. When they finished with the wine cellar, she led the way towards the storage room.

'What do you keep in here?' Weasley asked.

'The same things we kept here the last time you decided to raid our home. Antiques, most of which belonged to my grandmother. Assorted odds and ends.' She did not remark on the fact that any given item discarded in this room was likely worth more than all the furniture in the Weasleys' home. Instead she said tightly, 'Feel free to look around.'

Narcissa watched with increasing scorn as Weasley and his cronies poked around in the storage room, pulling the dust sheets off some of the larger items and in one case setting loose a pack of doxies which Narcissa did not bother to stun. All the while she chewed her lower lip, knowing Bella would be furious at being closed up under the drawing room; understandably, she hated locked rooms. Sextus patted her arm and finally said to the Ministry group, 'You've been here nearly two hours. Hadn't you better put things to rights before you show yourselves out?'

The other members of the detachment made to leave, but Weasley made a meal of continuing to look around for a moment before waving his wand and sending the dust

sheets back to their places, although each was now slightly askew. He then led the way down the corridor and back up the stairs, his unworthy eyes sliding right past the hidden door. Narcissa stood stony-eyed in the hall as the Ministry's functionaries gathered up the items they were confiscating and prepared to leave. Sextus assured her loudly that first thing in the morning he would file the documents required for the return of those items. She nodded and gave him a pained smile of thanks.

As Fudge's toadies gathered everything together, Weasley struck his final blow.

'Oh, before we leave, we will need to see your left arm, Mrs Malfoy.'

She could not have heard him correctly. 'Pardon?'

'Your left arm,' he repeated, reaching for her.

Narcissa stepped back in horror at the idea, unable to keep the shock from her face. 'If you think your search order gives you the right to manhandle me...'

Sextus stepped between Narcissa and Weasley, an arm out to shield her. 'Is that really necessary?' he asked in a tone that clearly signalled it wasn't.

Proudfoot spoke up at this point. 'Her husband has been apprehended in the company of known Death Eaters. We know for certain he bears the Dark Mark. Otherwise we wouldn't be here.'

'Which has exactly what to do with Mrs Malfoy?'

'We just need to make sure,' said Proudfoot.

Sextus made his contempt plain. 'Are you now arresting people solely based on marks and tattoos? What next? Surely not scars.'

Weasley sighed theatrically, gesturing to the scroll of parchment. 'If she doesn't bear the Mark, then there's nothing to worry about, is there?'

'Some of us still observe the rules of propriety, Arthur. I am not about to roll up my sleeve in front of an audience,' Narcissa spat. As if she would bare any part of her body before these jackals. She looked around at the grim faces of the Ministry contingent. 'But if you insist, then I will show her.' She gestured to a female Auror. 'In the drawing room. Alone.'

Narcissa spun on her heel and stalked off without waiting to see if the Auror had followed her, rage and humiliation blocking her throat. *It's not enough that they can burst into my home, but they have to intrude upon my personal integrity while they're at it.* When the Auror entered the room, Narcissa made to close the door, but the Auror held up her hand.

'Could we leave the door open, if you don't mind? We can go over there where they can't see us.' She looked over her shoulder at the others.

Narcissa's mouth twisted. 'You're not afraid of me, are you?'

The Auror simply gestured to a corner, away from the door. She looked uncomfortable. *Does she recognise the obscenity in which she is participating?* Narcissa wondered.

'You know,' said the Auror quietly, almost kindly, 'I know your niece. She's ...' But Narcissa's expression seemed to have withered the words before they could leave her mouth.

'I have no niece.'

Narcissa strode to the corner away from the door, then turned back to the Auror and pushed up the sleeve covering her left arm to the elbow. The flesh underneath was dusted with golden hairs, white and unblemished save for a few freckles.

'Will that do, or must you see my other arm, as well?' Narcissa asked.

'That will do,' the Auror said.

Narcissa righted her sleeve and followed the Auror back to the hall.

Weasley's eyes skipped past her as she moved to rejoin Sextus. 'Well?' he asked the Auror.

She shook her head. 'There's no Mark.'

Narcissa could have hexed him blind. 'Don't look so disappointed, Arthur.'

Weasley cast a last look around, as if scanning for something he might have missed. 'I think we have everything we need now,' he said to Proudfoot, who nodded in agreement.

It wasn't until after she had closed the door on the Ministry and sent Sextus home and the elves back to their tasks that she realised how her heart was racing. She felt the need to Scourgify the whole house.

Corrupt bastards, she thought viciously as she descended the stairs to let Bella know their unwelcome guests had left. *How could a pure-blood wizard vandalise the home of another with such relish?* It was obscene, especially because she knew that Weasley would use any excuse to come back and put her through it again and again. As long as he held any miserable scrap of power, he would use it against her family.

Narcissa stood before the door to the safe room and tried to steady her shaking hands. With a whisper, she pressed her wand to the pad of her middle finger and watched as a drop of blood welled there, then lifted her hand to brush her finger against the stone. The door recognised her at once and allowed her entry to the room within.

Bella was sitting at a table which she must have conjured, scribbling furiously in a small leather-bound book. Other books were scattered across the table top. On hearing the door open, Bella dropped her quill and turned to face her sister at once.

'Cissy, are you all right?'

'Fine. You?'

'Fine. I was more worried about you. Did they take anything?'

'Nothing of consequence. They didn't find what they were looking for, so they had to bring back some kind of trophy for the Minister. I doubt we'll ever see those things again. They'll just end up in Cornelius's coffers like so much else. I hope that kleptocratic bastard loses his position over all of this.' Narcissa bit her lip, suddenly exhausted. 'I'm only glad Draco wasn't here. I don't want him to see this...'

'I know, Cissy,' Bella whispered. She stood and took Narcissa's hands in hers, searched her face. Narcissa pressed her lips together miserably.

'I'm so sorry you were stuck down here and...'

'I found ways to pass the time.'

A wave of powerless thoughts broke over Narcissa: *They've taken my husband and they can burst into my home any time they damn well please and nowhere is safe anymore...*

'I hate this,' she said finally, her voice small.

Bella nodded and bent forward to touch her forehead to her sister's, squeezing her hands. In a room full of family secrets, they were children again; Narcissa wondered if they were any better armed against the world than they had been thirty years ago.

'I know,' Bella was saying. Her hand came up to brush Narcissa's hair back from her face. 'I know, Cissy. But it will be over soon. They are losing and they know it, and after the Dark Lord's triumph, the Ministry will never touch us again.'

'It can't come soon enough, Bella.' Narcissa looked around helplessly at the objects lining the room, most of which were family heirlooms: Father's books, Mother's diaries, things that she and Lucius had rescued from Bella and Rodolphus's home before it was seized by the Ministry. The history and heritage of the last great true blood families, items she was saving for Draco, all protected by fifteen generations' worth of enchantments. *How can they call these Dark artefacts?* she wondered dully.

(*'We bow to no one,*' Father had said.)

Bella tugged on Narcissa's hands, encouraging her towards the door, then waved her wand. The books strewn over the table returned themselves to the shelves. Then, still holding Narcissa's hand, Bella led the way back up the stairs.

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Summer began in earnest. Draco returned home, and Narcissa felt a nameless relief at having him where she could see him. She exhaled gratefully, not having realised she was holding her breath until she saw him again. Having him in the house somehow made it easier to sleep at night.

Narcissa rose early as usual with only a pale sun for company. Ignoring the other half of the bed, empty and reproachful, she went into the bathroom, splashed water on her face and pulled her hair back. The mirror held little news for her; she felt older and looked it. She turned her eyes away, removed her nightclothes and pulled on a dressing gown, then made her way down to the lowest reaches of the house where the pool awaited her, gleaming in the torchlight, a still and silent jewel.

As she dived in at the deep end, she took satisfaction in shattering the water's calm with noises no one else could hear. Her outstretched arms moved of their own accord, memory like quicksilver in her limbs propelled her forward, even as she kicked out and felt the cool slide of the water over her body. She could do this in her sleep, could live down here in the quiet and deep. With a practised breath, she dived back down and repeated the pattern: pull, slide, kick, pull, slide, kick, up, breathe, down.

Underwater was lovely, shadowy and hushed. Underwater her body was a universe, a system of planets that moved in methodical ellipses, stars that burned white hot. Her muscles were constellations of pain and energy, the burn in her lungs a supernova. Here she was untouchable, pared down to a basic set of needs for motion and oxygen. She drew out the experience until exhaustion threatened to overtake her, then she rose from the water, pleased with her body's performance.

After her daily laps, she dried off with a charm and went back upstairs to shower and dress. The mirror was kinder after a swim, whispering of a flush in her cheeks and brightness in her eye that sleep no longer provided. She made sure to choose her clothes, arrange her hair and apply a bit of make-up with the same care she had taken when Lucius was home.

In her head she reviewed the tasks she intended to accomplish today. She would owl Sextus again, though she didn't expect an informative reply, and then have a look at the books. She would also need to respond to the impertinent letter inviting her to redeem the Malfoy family's shares in a certain company now that Lucius was no longer in a position to serve on the board of directors. At least they would pay market price for those holdings. It was probably just as well to liquefy certain assets, loath as she was to do so under these circumstances, as the family would surely be called upon to top up the Dark Lord's war chest. Thank goodness the solicitations for charity donations had suddenly fallen off.

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Just after Draco's return, the Dark Lord summoned her son to a closed-door meeting. Bella came to escort him, her face a curious mask of pride and cunning, but when Narcissa made to follow, Bella merely held up her hand.

(*'If anything should happen...*)

'No,' Narcissa said. 'If it concerns my son, it concerns me.'

Bella's tone was not unkind, but neither was it acquiescent. 'The Dark Lord asked me to bring Draco. No one else.'

Before she could think more carefully, Narcissa found herself saying, 'Bella, I don't give a damn what he asked you. If you take Draco, you will take me.'

'Mother.' Draco looked mortified. Narcissa ignored him.

'He won't allow it,' said Bella.

(*'If anything should happen to me...*)

Narcissa said, 'Don't be ridiculous, Bella. The Dark Lord would grant you anything.'

And of course Bella relented. She was an uncomplicated creature, especially since her release, and Narcissa was right after all. When Bella begged entrance for her sister, the Dark Lord smiled indulgently at her, murmuring that Narcissa would need to be apprised of the situation in any case.

She sat white-lipped and white-knuckled through a litany of her husband's failings...diary, prophecy, *'Words cannot express my disappointment'*...trying not to look directly at the Dark Lord, snake about his shoulders like a cloak, lest her fear overwhelm her. Narcissa looked at Bella instead, noting with disgust the rapt expression her sister wore. Bella had always worn her jealousy like a string of pearls; one day it would choke her.

(*'If anything should happen to me, Cissa...*)

It was a matter of control. If she concentrated, she could force her lungs to expand in their iron cage; she could manipulate her pulse into continuing unbroken. She could school her features into a perfect mask of humility, if she focussed.

The Dark Lord was saying, 'I am giving you a chance to right your father's blunder. Because I am merciful.' He cast a sideways glance at Bella. 'And because your dear aunt insists that you are ready and willing to serve. But you will get only the one opportunity to prove yourself, boy.'

Listening to the Dark Lord's monologue as if from outside herself, Narcissa could have guessed what was coming. But when it came, she still felt as though someone had handed her a shard of glass and asked her to swallow it.

The Dark Lord spoke of the task as a gift. *But who would make someone prostrate himself before another to receive a gift?* From the look of her sister and son, Narcissa divined that she was the only one in this room, apart from the Dark Lord himself, who knew that this bequest was given at wand-point. There was no way for the recipient to

accept it without taking the blast of its curse to the throat.

('If anything should happen to me, Cissa, go...')

At home afterwards, Draco stood before Narcissa and whispered, solemn and fierce, 'I'll wipe the slate clean for us, I promise. I'll make him proud.'

He had grown so since Easter; she now had to look up to meet her son's eye. There was still dust on his robes where he had knelt before the Dark Lord. He was holding his left arm stiffly, as if it pained him.

Bella was crowing, 'This is such an honour, Cissy. Can you believe it? We should open a bottle of champagne to celebrate.' She clapped her hands together, gleeful and wild, and kissed Draco first on his left cheek, then his right. 'I'm so proud. My boy, my boy...oh!'

When Draco was a baby, Bella had refused to touch him, had never once held him. Now anyone would have thought that she had given birth to the boy herself.

Draco beamed at his aunt. There was a light in his eyes that Narcissa did not understand, or did not want to. He leaned in and whispered in Bella's ear, then turned and ascended the stairs. Near the top, Narcissa saw him punch the air. He must have thought she had turned away.

She watched her sister disappear down the staircase to the lower level of the house, presumably to the wine cellar. It would take a few minutes to pick out a bottle, which would give Narcissa a head start. She knew there was a possibility that Bella would follow; she would decide later what to do about that. Tonight had changed everything. If she had thought before that the fiasco at the Ministry could be forgiven, she knew better now.

Heart hammering against her ribs, Narcissa Summoned her travelling cloak and did the only thing she could think to do.

('If anything should happen to me, Cissa, go to Severus.')

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She wrote to her husband, at least weekly, and for every letter she dispatched at least one remained unsent, composed in her head and never committed to parchment. It was far too risky to reveal certain thoughts; others, she couldn't bring herself to articulate.

She received no responses.

She did not write: *It seems to me that a name is a cloak and a collar both, a form of protection and a kind of binding. A name carries responsibility, is such a heavy thing, and yet those of no wizard family, those of no name, have nothing to hold up against adversity. Finding themselves in difficulty, they have no clan to close ranks around them. And now my own family is grown too small, decimated by war and disease. (She toyed with the question of whether the Dark Lord's service qualified as war or disease.) My parents long dead, one sister lost and another, well...my husband torn from me and our son forced into a servitude I cannot control, I begin to feel quite alone. And while our name in the past opened doors, afforded privileges, its protections are now fading, leaving behind only the binding. A name and a family are not the same thing, I know. I've had a name from birth, but I chose my family when I chose you.*

She tried not to remember her dreams, or to consider what they meant.

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She was distracted by a knock at the door. Exasperated, she looked up from her parchment to find Draco standing in the doorway.

'Mother? Dinner's been on the table for ten minutes. Were you planning to come down?'

'Oh.' Startled, Narcissa looked out the window, noting the low slant of red sunlight over the grounds. She removed her reading glasses and rubbed the bridge of her nose. 'I'm sorry, darling, I lost track of time.'

'I figured as much.' He walked over to where she sat and leaned against the desk. 'You're not helping matters by working yourself to death, you know,' he said, entirely too wise for her liking.

She concentrated on the letter before her. 'My, you sound exactly like your father.'

His mouth turned up in what he must have thought a secret smile. 'Someone has to keep an eye on you,' he said.

Narcissa regarding him matter-of-factly. 'I am not working myself to death; you needn't worry about that. I fully intend to be around to keep an eye on you. Just let me finish this letter.' She returned to her parchment and continued writing. Without looking up she asked, 'And while I'm thinking of it, may I borrow Salazar? Just for this evening. Mine is still trying to track down a reluctant minority shareholder. Squeeze-out proceedings are so tedious,' she muttered.

'I suppose.'

'Thank you, darling. Would you be a dear and fetch him for me?'

While Draco was out of the room, she covered the last two inches of parchment with her tidy copperplate script and made a quick review. Within moments he was back, the owl perched on his arm.

He gestured to the parchment. 'Can't Sextus take care of this sort of thing?'

'Sextus is the best criminal advocate in Britain,' she explained briskly, automatically, eyes on the letter, 'but he knows nothing about tradable instruments.'

'Isn't there a best tradable instruments advocate in Britain?'

'One need not be an advocate to understand tradable instruments,' she responded. 'And if you are in control of your finances, then you are in control of your life.' Narcissa looked up to find her son nodding and mouthing the words along with her. 'Cheeky brat,' she chided him, fondly.

He rolled his eyes. 'You adore me.'

'As it happens, I do.'

Satisfied, she added her signature and addressed an envelope before tying it to Salazar's leg. Draco watched her dispatch the owl and then, very formally, offered her his arm. Touched and a trifle surprised, she smiled and took it, thinking, *How very like Lucius he has become*. Without warning, she felt tears prick at her eyes. She looked down and blinked them away, hoping he wouldn't notice.

As they descended the stairs, she remembered a commitment made earlier in the day. 'By the way, darling, I'll be gone Thursday and Friday this week. I've meetings in Reykjavik.'

'Buying something?'

'And just so there are no misunderstandings,' she continued, 'let's discuss other potential consequences of your little outing, shall we? Even leaving aside the possibility that Potter and his band of filth were to corner you...in which case, I'm sure you'd have acquitted yourself well, even though it would have been at least three against one.' She didn't normally like to use sarcasm against her son, but she found that in her anger she could not help herself. 'Did it occur to you when you slipped away on your own how many people want information on your aunt's current whereabouts? Do you believe for a moment that the Ministry or the Order of the Phoenix wouldn't use you to get that information?'

A shadow of comprehension crossed his face. Draco stared angrily at the floor and refused to reply. Narcissa pressed further. This was too important to let go.

'And can you imagine how many people want revenge on your father right now, people who would be happy to take that revenge through you?' She spoke quietly this time, hoping he would not make her spell out the people to whom she referred. She let the silence hang between them.

'I ... didn't think of that,' he said at last, not meeting her eye.

'I quite believe you didn't.' She exhaled her impatience, wondering what she could possibly say to impress the importance of this subject on him. 'Your actions have *consequences*, Draco. They affect all of us.'

'I wasn't gone that long, Mother.'

'You were gone long enough for me to begin imagining the worst. There is a reason why I insist on knowing where you are at all times, and it is not to oppress you. I have serious concerns for your safety. What do I have to do to make you see that?'

He made a half-hearted attempt to deflect her displeasure, but still it hurt. 'Just because the worst happened to Father doesn't mean I'll let it happen to me.'

Narcissa winced. If he imagined that imprisonment was the worst that could happen... she still had so much to teach him. She said, 'What happened to your father was bad luck. And bad luck can happen to anyone, even those who are most prepared, most capable.'

His eyes flashed. 'Meaning I'm not? Thank you ever so much for your faith in me, Mother.'

'This has nothing to do with my faith in you!' She wanted to shout, but kept her voice even, hushed. 'I won't lose you, too. You cannot do this again, Draco. You must be more careful. You absolutely cannot take off on your own again.'

The set of his jaw was so like his father's, but the look he gave her was very much his own. 'All right,' he conceded. 'I'll be more careful, I promise.'

Was he humouring her, or did he really understand the seriousness of his actions? She could let it rest for the moment. Narcissa had forgotten how much she disliked this sort of parent-child confrontation. How had Lucius managed all these years?

'These are dangerous times, Draco. It is imperative that you understand. We can trust only to family now.'

He raised an eyebrow. 'Family like Aunt Bella?'

She thought, *Fair point*. 'She wasn't always like this, you know. Prison changed her.'

Draco nodded but looked troubled. Then he asked a question that brushed her heart with nimble fingers until it found the bruise and pressed.

'How long do you think it took?'

Aching, Narcissa replied, 'Your father won't be there much longer. I'm working on it. Sextus is working on it. We'll get him out.'

Draco gave her a small, peaceable smile. 'I...I'm sorry, Mother. For worrying you.' He looked as if he might reach out to her, but held back. 'I'll be in my room,' he said and turned to go.

Narcissa nodded distractedly. She still hadn't discovered where Draco had gone when he disappeared, and she wondered if he guessed that she hadn't pressed the point because the idea of knowing made her sick with fear. The sooner she sent him back to Hogwarts, the better.

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'Hello, Sextus. I am dreadfully sorry to bother you, I know it's early, but you see the Ministry's back with another search order. Would you mind ...?'

Sextus shook his head as if to clear it. 'I'll be right over, Narcissa.'

They had come back, of course.

She had stood at the door and watched them approach, a smaller contingent this time. Noting that this time Arthur Weasley seemed to be in charge, she had said, 'This is growing tiresome, Arthur.'

'Confidential tip-off,' Weasley had replied as he handed over the scroll.

Narcissa hadn't bothered to censor herself. 'Oh, is that what you call it when you've run out of excuses? What dark magic items am I supposed to be harbouring this time?'

He had not responded.

She had reviewed the scroll, which was singularly uninformative. She could not discern any particular item they were looking for, nor what had prompted this latest raid. She had no doubt that this was simply Weasley's grudge against Lucius playing itself out.

At length, she said, 'I'll just call my advocate then, shall I?' Without waiting for an answer, she had turned on her heel and headed for the drawing room Floo.

Sextus stepped through a few moments later. 'What's this all about?' he demanded of Weasley.

Narcissa handed Sextus the scroll. He read and shook his head. 'You're required to provide certain information about your tip-off source, Weasley. At the very least you need to demonstrate urgency and name the object or category of objects you're searching for. Narrow and specific, Weasley. That's the legal standard. This order isn't worth the parchment it's written on.'

Weasley smiled. 'In the current climate, ...his eyes narrowed as they found Narcissa...'the Minister himself has suspended that requirement. Surely you keep up on these developments?'

'Exactly when did this happen?' demanded Sextus.

'Yesterday. Now we've sorted that, we'll need to check downstairs.' Weasley turned to Narcissa. 'Show us to the storage room.'

'Certainly. You'll find it hasn't changed a jot since your last ... visit.'

As she led them down the stairs, she heard Weasley whispering furiously to his team. '... anything that appears to be broken.' Once inside the storage room, the Ministry

thugs removed the dust sheets from all the furniture. Again. And inspected every item as if expecting to be bitten or cursed. Again.

Narcissa stood in the doorway and whispered to Sextus, 'Isn't this an illegal search?'

With a slight, helpless shrug, Sextus replied, 'The last I knew, confidential tip-offs were no basis for a search order. They must have passed an emergency decree last night. It wouldn't surprise me if they had done it for the specific purpose of searching your house again.'

Why am I paying an advocate when the government can simply change the law to suit itself? Narcissa wondered.

Once they were satisfied that there were no unusual broken objects in the storage room, Weasley demanded to be shown to the first floor.

She and Sextus stood in the corridor as Weasley barked out questions.

'What's in here?'

'The master suite,' Narcissa intoned.

'And through here?'

'My son's bedroom and dressing room.'

'What about down there?'

'Guest rooms.'

'And the other end?'

'The library. Reading room. Same as last time.'

Weasley divided up the members of the team. She noted with curiosity that he sent the two youngest members of his team to the guest rooms and the next youngest to the master suite, reserving Draco's room for himself. She was unconcerned about the guest rooms, as the elves knew they were to clean daily, removing all traces of Bella's presence. In her paranoia about being returned to prison, Bella, who had disappeared Merlin-knew-where a day or two ago, had set the enchantments that concealed her personal effects quite cleverly. And Draco's room had been thoroughly cleaned after he returned to school, as usual. The elves knew to notify her if they ran across anything unusual in cleaning his room, which they hadn't done. She wondered uneasily if this had something to do with his disappearance during their shopping excursion in Diagon Alley. Mindful of the Ministry's attempt to confiscate her jewellery during their last raid, Sextus kept an eye on the wizards who were searching the master suite. Narcissa watched the others disperse to search their assigned rooms, then trailed along behind Weasley to stand at the door to Draco's bedroom.

She tried to see the room with a stranger's eyes: the bed draped in emerald green (he had insisted on decorating his bedroom in Slytherin colours even before he went to Hogwarts), the succession of brooms lined up neatly along the far wall, each in immaculate condition, brooms which no one but he was allowed to touch. She drew comfort from her son's scent, which lingered in the room even as filth like Arthur Weasley turned it upside down.

Weasley took no notice of her until he emerged empty-handed from Draco's dressing room. Apparently there was nothing broken in there either. He smiled nastily at Narcissa. 'Your son has quite the stash of pornography.'

She refused to be shocked. 'He is sixteen, Arthur. Don't tell me your sons haven't got a similar stash. Or have they got only one magazine to share among them all?'

Weasley looked around, noted that they were alone, then said in an undertone, 'We can bring you in any time, you know. There's plenty of room in Azkaban for your sort.'

An image had fixed itself in her mind of the filthy blood-traitor crushed beneath the Dark Lord's heel; it made her smile. Narcissa turned her back on him and walked over to join Sextus.

~~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Dear Severus,

Congratulations on your new teaching post. I know this is something you have worked towards for many years, and I am confident that you will discharge the post with the utmost professionalism. Your students are fortunate to have such a knowledgeable professor. Lucius would say the same, I am sure.

I know it has been ages since we have corresponded, and I do hope you will forgive me for not writing sooner. Things have been terribly busy these last few months. I wonder if you would have time for dinner or a cup of tea this weekend. We have so much to catch up on.

Again, my congratulations on your new post.

Cordially,

Narcissa Malfoy

Part II

Chapter 2 of 5

'Am I indifferent?' she asked. 'My husband is in prison, my son has turned would-be assassin, and my home is about to be commandeered. Things being what they are, why should I feel anything but enthusiasm for our Lord's aims?'

II.

Autumn

On the appointed day, if not quite the appointed hour, he willed himself into being just outside the gate and, as was his custom, waited to be allowed entry. The gate recognised him at once.

'Good evening, Professor. The lady of the house will see you in the library.'

Automatically, his eyes scanned the house's facade. Torches were lit in the ground-floor hall, but on the first floor only a low light shone in a distant window. It did not look as though anyone were in the library. Odd. The gate swung open, allowing him to proceed down the gravelled drive; he noted an air of vacancy, the unlit downstairs windows. He supposed it was a natural consequence of things. As far as he knew, the lady of the house and her sister were now the only occupants.

He used the time it took to walk the length of the drive to consider what he should say to her.

Five steps led to the front door, which opened as if by unseen hands the moment his foot touched the bottom step. A house-elf waited inside, silent as all the elves in this household, and made him a low bow. He handed off his cloak and climbed the stairs to the first floor, taking no note of the portraits, whose mute, indifferent occupants...having watched him come and go through the house for two decades...took no note of him in return. There was a new stillness about the house, a collective held breath that precedes a thunderstorm, or perhaps a wake. His thoughts returned to the matter at hand.

The thing he had always respected about Narcissa Malfoy was her ability to hold her tongue.

Though they had known each other for years, they saw each other only infrequently, and thus it had required several years and a spy's instinct for information gathering before Severus had realised the reason why Narcissa spoke so rarely and why she moved through social gatherings with an expression of alternating disdain and apprehension. She was, in fact, extremely shy.

In one-on-one conversations, she was perfectly pleasant, polite and gracious, if occasionally a bit stiff. She even had an agreeably dry sense of humour which shone through intermittently. In larger groups, she generally did not engage in the sort of endless prattle towards which most women of his acquaintance tended (which he counted as a point in her favour), nor was she inclined to displays of emotion. Rather, she was somehow distant, and she did not share confidences. Clearly, Lucius was the family socialite, and under his influence Severus had watched Narcissa become less reserved but no less discreet in social settings over the years. For these reasons, Severus had always rather admired her.

It was also for these reasons that her behaviour of late had troubled him. Others in their circle would not have failed to notice that the Malfoys' recent fortunes seemed to have thrown her into turmoil which she seemed incapable of coming to grips with. There had been no repeat of her behaviour at Spinner's End, which had been alarmingly out of character, but all was certainly not as it should be, either. This was one of the matters weighing on his mind as he arrived at his destination.

The double doors to the Malfoy library bore a carving of an open book, whose pages were charmed to move as if blown by a breeze. The doors opened along the book's spine. He entered, as always, a penitent stepping into a cathedral, pausing just inside with head bowed to breathe in the scent of parchment and binding glue mixed with leather and dry dust.

It was a great, vaulted-ceilinged cavern of a room, built with two levels. The windows on the far wall stretched floor-to-ceiling, two storeys high, punctuated by bookshelves. A gallery ran along the second level, allowing enough space for two browsers to pass each other. Between the first and second levels, the room held a collection to rival that of the Hogwarts library; it might, in fact, have been the largest library of magic in Britain. As for potions texts in particular, the Malfoy library outstripped Hogwarts by a clear margin. Severus knew this because he had catalogued the volumes over the course of a summer in his eighteenth year, and every purchase made since then had been on his recommendation. Upon his entry, Severus's gaze rested involuntarily on the corner of the library furthest from the door on the right, and his fingers itched for the chance to pick up the newest acquisitions, which would have been waiting for him since before Lucius was incarcerated. Today, however, there was no time.

He glanced about for Narcissa, expecting to find her seated before the fireplace in one of the wing chairs where he usually sat with Lucius, but was surprised to discover, well as he knew the library, that off to his left lay a room he had never seen before, connected to the library by a door, fronted with bookshelves, which now stood open. Through the doorway, he spotted the person he had come to see, seated at an enormous desk with rolls of parchment ranged about her in neat bundles as darkness gathered beyond the windows at her back. She was scribbling furiously with an elegant black quill, a pair of reading spectacles balanced on her nose. He had also never seen Lucius's wife wearing spectacles.

He approached the open door, taking no care to cover the noise of his footsteps. She did not look up. Severus cleared his throat to announce his presence. 'Hello, Narcissa.'

She looked up quickly from her parchment as if startled; a slight, weary smile bloomed on her face. Her expression was tired but welcoming. 'Severus. Please, come in. Give me just a moment.'

He remained just outside the door. 'I seem to have interrupted you,' he noted. 'Is this a bad time?'

'I was only catching up on my correspondence. I needed a bit of an interruption, actually.'

She removed the spectacles and stood, rubbing the bridge of her nose. Her lips moved soundlessly, and the parchment bundles vanished. She gestured through the door to the pair of wing chairs before the library fire. He regarded her with interest as she crossed the room. She lit a fire in the grate, which provided light but no heat, and they sat.

'So, what can I offer you, Severus?' He scanned her face, but found no trace of artifice there before she continued, 'Tea? Coffee? Something stronger?'

'I'm fine, thank you.'

'It's no trouble. I was just about to have a pot of tea sent up, in fact. Will you join me?'

He relented. 'Perhaps one cup, if it's no trouble.'

She nodded and summoned a house-elf. 'A pot of the Krasnodar,' she told the elf, then turned to Severus. 'You don't take milk or sugar, do you?' Severus shook his head. Narcissa nodded to the elf, who Disapparated with a low bow and a quiet 'yes, Mistress.'

'I wasn't expecting you quite yet, Severus. Isn't there a meeting tonight?'

'Yes, in about an hour. I understood it was supposed to be held here, but security concerns prompted a change of venue.'

Her nose wrinkled slightly. 'The Ministry raided our home on Wednesday. The second time in four months,' she explained. 'Not that I'm sorry about the change, really. I couldn't face them all.'

Severus wondered if Narcissa had been apprised that, on her sister's suggestion, the Dark Lord was considering the Malfoy home as a permanent base of operations. The only snag at the moment was the Ministry's frequent raids.

A tea tray appeared on the table between the two chairs. Narcissa checked the pot and poured tea into the two cups. He reached for his cup too quickly, and his hand brushed hers as she set the pot down. She pulled back with downcast eyes. 'You received my message, then?' she asked.

He took his cup and saucer but did not drink. 'Yes.'

'How is Draco faring?' she asked.

When he looked up at her, he noticed for the first time the darkness beneath her pale eyes. Her anxiety was palpable. Severus told her, 'He's nowhere near succeeding in the task set him.'

'I wonder if I should be pleased or terrified.'

He wondered if she was testing him. 'You speak incautiously, Narcissa.'

She did not appear concerned. 'Anything I say would be incautious these days. The alternative is to keep it all in my own head.'

'You would be well advised to do so.'

Her manner grew cold. 'Forgive me, Severus, I was under the impression you were here to talk about my son, not to chide me.'

'I never meant to chide.' He paused. 'Only to warn.'

Her lips formed a thin line. 'What do you mean?' she asked quietly, refusing to meet his eye.

'It would not do to appear ... indifferent to the Dark Lord's aims.'

She sipped her tea. 'Am I indifferent?' she wondered aloud. 'My husband is in prison, my son has turned would-be assassin, and I understand my home will be commandeered just as soon as the Ministry is under control. Things being what they are, why should I feel anything but enthusiasm for our Lord's aims?'

Well, that answered one question.

'This is precisely what I'm talking about. Narcissa, if I were to repeat to the Dark Lord anything that you have said in the last five minutes, your home, your husband and your child would be the least of your worries.' Noting the sudden flash of apprehension that crossed her face, quickly stifled though it was, he continued, 'Your lack of enthusiasm is gaining you the wrong sort of attention.'

Her voice was level, but her hands trembled slightly as she said, 'And here I thought myself beneath his notice.' She met his eyes and inquired earnestly, 'What am I supposed to do, Severus? I'm under siege.'

Images of Yaxley, whose keen hungry eyes traced her every movement, and the Carrows, whose accents and vocabulary she found vulgar, flitted across her consciousness. She was such easy prey.

'I am not unsympathetic to your position, but...'

'I need to stiffen my upper lip.'

He nodded. 'For want of a better phrase.'

They were silent a moment. Her head rested against the chair back, eyes on the fire. At length, she asked, 'How will I manage it?'

He drank his tea and considered the question. 'Do what you've always done, I suppose. When they arrive, be a gracious hostess. Speak when called upon and laugh at the right moments. But above all, keep your emotions out of it. The Dark Lord has never been motivated by pity.' He paused. 'And close your mind if you can.'

'Is that what you do?'

He kept his eyes on hers. 'My mind is never closed to the Dark Lord, of course. But how else could I spy on Dumbledore? If I let my emotions into it, I'd never have got near enough to him to provide the Dark Lord any information at all.'

'It's all a very carefully balanced act,' she observed.

'It is essential to the success of our efforts. My resolve does not waver, and neither should yours.' He waited a moment before continuing, weighing carefully what he was about to say next, because he had not decided until this moment that it needed to be said. 'I feel compelled to advise you, Narcissa, that he is considering marking you.'

Her face betrayed no hint of fear, which at least meant she was taking his warning seriously, but the teacup halted halfway to her lips and stayed there. Her eyes returned to the fire. When it came, her response to this pronouncement was cautious, diplomatic.

'The Dark Lord honours only his most trusted followers with the Mark, people like you and Bella. Surely someone as insignificant as myself would not merit such recognition.'

Severus knew that Narcissa's unmarked arm, cradling their infant son, had been a powerful factor in Lucius's release after the first war, along with her compelling testimony about his odd behaviour, which was deemed to be evidence of his having been under the Imperius Curse. She must have counted on not having the Mark as a sort of insurance this time around, which was why the Dark Lord knew he could use it as a threat.

He chose his next words with precision. 'He may not do it to honour you but to ... assure himself of your loyalty. And to remind Draco of his expectations.' He left unspoken the message it would send to Lucius.

She spoke softly, as if to herself. 'Have we not all paid dearly already for my husband's transgressions?'

Severus was silent. *Not dearly enough*, he thought.

'Does the Dark Lord bid you relay his message?' Narcissa asked.

'No. I speak on my own behalf. At some personal cost, as you may imagine.'

'Then I am in your debt yet again. You have already risked quite a lot on my family's behalf.' She was silent for so long that he could almost have imagined she had forgotten his presence. Before he had made up his mind to remind her, however, she spoke again. 'I can't help but wonder why you would tell me this, if it would displease the Dark Lord.'

'Draco needs no further reminder of the Dark Lord's expectations,' he said. 'And Lucius wouldn't want this for you.'

She nodded slowly. 'Then my path is clear. I shall follow your example, Severus, and be obedient in all things.' Her voice traced the line between sarcasm and earnestness, or perhaps it was his imagination.

Thin-lipped and business-like, he nodded. 'You wanted to discuss your son.'

'Yes,' she said absently, as though she'd forgotten why he was there. 'Right. When I took Draco shopping for his school things this summer, he disappeared during our trip to London and wouldn't tell me where he'd gone. Now I've more or less discovered where he went. I've recently received an invoice. For a necklace.' He felt her tracking his expression, but made no move to respond. She continued, 'As Lucius is in no position to make any purchases, and as I am quite certain I didn't buy it, I am forced to

conclude that it was Draco who bought it.'

'A gift for Miss Parkinson, perhaps?' he asked mildly.

'The necklace was purchased at Borgin and Burkes and carries a killing curse. I would hope that Lucius and I have taught our son other ways of resolving relationship difficulties.' She paused. 'I suspect Draco has other plans for it.'

'Yes, rather.'

'I thought I should let you know, since I'm in no position to do anything about it. I can't put this in a letter, and I can't very well storm in to Hogwarts and demand that my son explain himself. He's beyond my reach.' She looked away. 'I'm sure I don't need to tell you how many ways this could possibly go wrong.'

'No.'

'I'd appreciate it very much if you'd have a word with him. This is the kind of thing that Lucius would handle.' A sharp, bitter chuckle escaped her. 'Draco doesn't listen to me anymore, but he'll listen to you.'

'I'll see what I can do.'

'There's something else. During the Ministry's last raid, Arthur Weasley paid particular attention to Draco's room, and I heard him telling his thugs to look for something that appears to be broken.' I don't know what that means, but he seems to know something. Does that ring any bells?'

'No. But I shall keep my ears open.'

'Thank you, Severus. You do so much for us. Really. If there's ever anything we can do for you ...'

'I do not forget all that you and Lucius have done for me over the years.' He wanted to wrap this up. 'We'll speak no further of this,' he assured her in a tone that was, for him, almost kind. 'I should go. I have a report to deliver. You will keep in mind what we have discussed?'

She appeared to bristle, but quickly regained her composure. 'I will.'

He finished his tea. 'You did the right thing, telling me,' he said. 'I'll be in touch. I would recommend that you don't mention to Bellatrix that we've spoken. I wouldn't want to raise your sister's curiosity.'

She nodded, mute, and he left her before the cold fire to make his way to his next destination.

~~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

I am trying to remain strong without you, to keep my head down and my ears open, to choose my battles wisely. Yet sometimes she did not write to her husband, I feel like I'm choking on the things I cannot say.

Bella has turned the storage room into a sort of holding cell. I saw her in the corridor as I was going for my morning swim. She was leading the unconscious figure of a man through the door as I reached the bottom of the stairs. His feet dragged the ground, his head lolled. She left the door open, and I peered in as I passed. I couldn't help but look. The room had been cleared. She held him in place with her wand as a pair of chains rose up from the wall and buckled themselves at his wrists. She must have conjured them. There was blood on his chin. I wish I could say he was no one I recognised.

I wonder what she's done with the things that were in that room.

~~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Bella avoided the library, or at least, Narcissa had never seen her in there. She preferred to spend her free time outdoors, practicing with her throwing knife or flying. Thus, Narcissa was startled when she entered the library one morning and found her sister seated in Lucius's favourite armchair at the far end, near the windows, a large leather-bound book in her lap. Glancing involuntarily over towards her little study, Narcissa was only slightly relieved to note that the door was firmly shut and did not appear to have been opened; then again, Bella would know how to cover her tracks.

But Bella, a darkling thing that could pull the light from the sky, was staring out the window as if she had not heard anyone enter. She had been gone for four days.

'Good morning, Bella.' Narcissa spoke without thinking, then wondered at the appropriateness of the greeting, when it was apparent that Bella had never gone to sleep last night. Approaching the windows, Narcissa caught a faint whiff of smoke, bergamot and the acrid scent of Unforgivables. Bella's robes were dusty.

Bella remained seated but looked up. 'Cissy,' she said, as if inviting her sister to tea. Then she fell silent, her eyes turned to the window once more.

Narcissa gestured to the book. 'You found it,' she said, unsure whether it had at all been a good idea to leave it in Bella's room, without explanation. She had considered writing a note to go with it, but couldn't think what to say.

Bella looked down at the book, then lifted uncomprehending eyes to Narcissa's face. 'Did you leave this for me?'

Narcissa nodded hopefully. 'Yes.'

Bella blinked. 'Why?' There was nothing accusative in her tone, only detached curiosity.

'I thought you might like to have it. I found it among Mother's things after she passed, when we settled the estate. She was saving it for you, I think.' The last was a lie. Their mother had not believed Bella would ever be released, but there was no harm in letting Bella know Mother had loved her enough to hang onto a bit of her former life. 'Did ... did you have a chance to look at it?'

In answer, Bella nodded. Unusually, she appeared troubled. Normally when she returned from her outings, she was wild-eyed, manic, ferociously happy. Narcissa wondered if things had gone badly for her.

'Mother passed, you said?'

'Yes.'

'When?'

'It's been about ten years now.'

The fingers of Bella's left hand were balled into a fist, her thumb pushing against her curled index finger. She spoke again, slowly. 'Exactly when did she die?'

They had had this conversation before, Narcissa realised. When Bella first returned. Of course, Narcissa had written to her to advise her of their mother's death when it happened, one of the hardest letters Narcissa had ever had to write. And Bella had written back, so Narcissa knew she had been aware of Mother's death, but Bella's memory seemed to be pitted and scarred; there were rabbit holes where details disappeared.

'The thirteenth of March, 1986,' Narcissa answered calmly.

'I should write these things down,' Bella murmured. Then, her voice louder, stronger, she asked Narcissa, 'And is she buried in the family plot?'

'Yes.'

'I should go and see her.'

'You can come with me next month,' offered Narcissa. 'I always go on her birthday.'

'Yes, I think that's best. I need time ...' Bella's voice trailed off. Her left hand uncoiled itself and trailed, unconscious, over the surface of the album. Bella looked down into her lap, as if she had only just noticed the heavy book with the initials 'B & R' tooled on the cover. She opened it to the first page and ran her hand over the formal photographer's portrait affixed there. Her nineteen-year-old self, dressed in gossamer silver robes, standing beside a twenty-three-year-old Rodolphus (rather handsome, in fact, in his black dress robes), blinked back at her.

She continued turning the pages, past the formal family portraits, shots of the ceremony, candid photos of the reception afterwards. When she arrived at the page bearing photos of the after-dinner toasts, Bella looked around, as if assuring herself that she and Narcissa were alone. She pressed her lips into a thin line, knitted her brow. Then she spoke in a whisper,

'Cissy, I can't remember any of this.'

Narcissa watched her sister guardedly. Bella did not look at her, but flipped back to the formal portraits. 'Is that you?' she asked, her finger tracing the outline of one particular picture.

Narcissa tried to see the photo with her sister's eyes. Three girls: two dark-haired, one blonde. Narcissa and Andromeda wore matching blue robes. Bella sat, with her ramrod posture and disastrous beauty, in a high-backed armchair. Narcissa sat on one of the chair's arms, coltish, angular, a set of matchsticks wearing expensive robes. She remembered trying hard not to slouch as the photographer took ages to snap the picture. Andromeda stood behind them, her hands on the chair's back. Sullen and always so secretive, Andromeda must have been planning her betrayal even then. Narcissa wondered if Bella was going to ask about her.

Narcissa said, 'Yes, that's me.'

Bella asked, 'How old were you then?'

'Fifteen, I think.'

'You were so pretty.'

Narcissa blinked in shock. 'Thank you, Bella,' she said.

'No breasts though.' Bella looked up at Narcissa. Mischief gleamed in her dark eyes. 'You still haven't grown a pair.'

Narcissa laughed. 'Yes, well, you always had enough for both of us.'

Something like a smile pulled at Bella's mouth. 'We were happy then, weren't we?' she asked, as though she really wanted to know the answer.

'We were.'

Bella flipped forward several pages and fixed her eyes on their Uncle Orion, standing beside their father, glass raised; he had made the evening's most moving toast, as Narcissa recalled. Something about the beauty of a star, burning bright, and a wish for the newlyweds to bask in the brightness of a new, peaceful world. The old hypocrite. On his other side sat Aunt Wallberga, an uncharacteristically cheerful smile on her face. She must have been drunk.

'Dementors,' said Bella, 'steal every happy thought you've ever had, every happy memory. They leave you with only the worst things you can remember or imagine, and they feed off that. They consume your misery. They make you cold.' Bella shuddered. 'They took everything. My thoughts, my memories, any source of comfort.' She shook her head. 'I did it for him, Cissy, and I would do it again, and again. That is how devoted I am. Isn't that dedication?'

'It is,' agreed Narcissa. It was dedication of a sort, after all.

'He has given me so much,' said Bella, quietly, to herself. 'I owe him that devotion.'

Not knowing what to say to that, Narcissa remained silent.

Bella stood, laying the album on a side table, and looked around the room. 'Uncle Orion had a library,' she said. 'A bit like this, but not with so many windows. The carpet was red, do you remember?' She looked at Narcissa for confirmation, but hardly acknowledged the answering nod.

Bella continued, 'He had a library. I used to count the volumes' Her eyes were no longer focussed on the room before her. She seemed to still be flipping through photos in a dark room in her own mind. After a moment she said, 'I can remember every detail of that library, but I cannot remember my own wedding day. Cissy, how is that fair?'

Narcissa still did not know how to speak of these things. But from experience she knew that whatever she said, she ran the risk of touching off an explosion. Warily, Narcissa said, 'It's not fair.'

All the softness in Bella had vanished, the sisterly connection severed. 'No. I was faithful, and I was locked away, while those who deserted him, those who collaborated with the Ministry, went free.'

Narcissa braced herself; they had strayed into dangerous territory, and she was not ready for another row. She had heard it said after the trial that Bellatrix Lestrange had no conscience, no sense of morality. That was a lie. Bella's moral code had black areas and white, with no shadow of self-preservation, and her conscience compelled her to act on that. As such, she could never understand why Narcissa and Lucius had done what they did.

Bella had no children.

But the storm did not break. 'No,' said Bella again, her voice still faintly troubled, shaking off her concerns. She moved towards the door, saying, 'I think I'll have something to eat before I go to bed. I'm quite tired, actually.'

~~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

It became a habit of a sort, though nothing so regular as to be remarked on.

('Off to comfort the widow Malfoy, are we? Give her my regards')

Once a month or so, he would tap on the door to the library and accept a cup of tea. They would sit together, usually to discuss Draco, but often they did not speak at all, and he would peruse her thoughts. Tonight, though she had done an admirable job of masking it, she was troubled. He knew why.

'It was foolhardy in the extreme,' said Narcissa.

'I agree.'

'Has Dumbledore caught on?'

'No. Everyone at Hogwarts considers it an isolated incident.' The lie slid fluently off his tongue, and though he should have lost respect for her for believing it, he found himself merely relieved when she nodded and did not question him further. He realised that he had been expecting her to blame him for the incident with the necklace, but he would not consider why that thought should unsettle him.

'You spoke to Draco, then?' she asked.

'Yes, although it wasn't easy. He avoids me after class, ignores me when I summon him to my office.'

Narcissa appeared surprised. 'That's very unlike him. He's always spoken so highly of you. What did he say?'

'He levelled a host of accusations: that I'm interfering in his life, that I want to "steal his glory",' Severus grumbled, 'that I've usurped his father's position in the Dark Lord's esteem.' He paused before adding, 'And yours.'

('Couldn't wait for my father to be out of the picture, could you?')

Narcissa's eyes widened and flashed. 'How dare he! He has absolutely no reason to say such things.'

'Apart from common teenage arrogance,' Severus said, reasonably ignoring how close that blade had come to nicking the artery of truth.

'Severus, I apologise for his behaviour. He was completely out of order. I can't imagine what he was thinking of.'

'I can.' At her puzzled look, he elaborated. 'I was once that age myself, you know. He's trying to avoid me, and so he figures that if he can infuriate me sufficiently, I'll stop calling him to my office. I make a convenient target for his anger. It can't be that he really thinks you and I would ever...behind Lucius's back...'

'I don't care how angry he was...he should never have spoken to you like that.'

'I got that point across.'

'Good.'

'Has your sister been teaching him Occlumency?'

She brushed away a speck of lint from her robes. 'He's been trying to learn. Why? Surely he didn't try to use it against you?'

'Indeed he did, albeit clumsily. I suggest you have Bellatrix step up their lessons over the holidays. Dumbledore must never suspect that he has anything to hide. Draco is over-confident. He must learn to be more subtle.'

For a moment she appeared lost in thought. 'I begin to wonder whether Lucius and I have sheltered Draco too much. And now when he needs his father more than ever, he's on his own, and I have no idea what to do with him. He won't answer my letters. I don't want my son to be a killer, but...' She looked up; her stricken expression suggested she realised the irony of what she was saying. 'I'm sorry, Severus. I don't mean to carry on so.'

'You shouldn't take this so personally. What he said to me...he was merely lashing out.'

'I love my husband.'

'I know.'

'I would never betray him.'

'Neither would I.'

('Are you kidding, Professor? Since I was ten, I've seen how you look at her')

She nodded at that. 'Have you ever loved someone so much that you'd sacrifice your own happiness for theirs?' she asked suddenly.

'Certainly not. I was hatched from an egg and am therefore unable to feel such mundane human emotions.'

The corners of her mouth turned up ever so slightly. She regarded him with sly incredulity. 'Why Severus, if I didn't know better, I would say you just made a joke. At your own expense.' She raised an eyebrow. 'Has this ever happened before?'

'You must be imagining things.'

She laughed then in earnest. 'Indeed I must.' When her laughter quieted, there was a moment when they were both silent. Then Narcissa spoke again, her voice kind. 'But if you ever did, she was a lucky woman.'

Severus exhaled sharply. 'You cannot prove any such thing.'

Again she dissolved in laughter. For a moment she was unable to speak, and he merely watched her, watched the smile that erupted on her face: sudden, beautiful and terrifying as fire from a dragon. He could feel the lines of his own face soften somewhat, but he otherwise did not share her merriment.

'That was brilliant, Severus. Have you any idea how long it's been since I laughed like that?'

'Too long, I expect.'

'That's certainly true. You should make jokes more often. It suits you.'

Despite everything, despite the fact that everyone seemed to consider it a given that he and not Draco should murder Dumbledore, his bitterness that no one would regret the damage to his own soul, he left that evening feeling oddly lighter. He had quite forgotten what it was like to make a woman laugh.

~~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

With Draco home for the Christmas holidays, Narcissa did her best to keep the household running smoothly and maintain some semblance of routine. She had overseen the decoration of the house, prepared menus and done all the gift shopping. She had broken down twice at the thought that Lucius would not be joining them this year...once upon seeing the house-elves open a particular box of Christmas ornaments (Lucius had given her one for every year of their marriage, something Narcissa's father had done for her mother) and once as she had sat down to sign the usual Christmas greeting letters to certain key associates (should she sign them simply in her own name, or should she forge Lucius's signature as if he too were wishing them a happy Christmas?). Stupid, seemingly insignificant details ambushed her, defeated her, reminded her how alone she was. Fortunately, no one had witnessed either episode.

The wrinkle in her plans to maintain her holiday routines, of course, was Bella.

With Bella everything depended on her mood, which depended on the day and the weather, the arrangement of the planets, and above all the Dark Lord...in short, with Bella everything depended on factors completely outside Narcissa's control. If everything was going smoothly, Bella was fine, but generally speaking nothing seemed to go smoothly *enough* these days, even as this undeclared war seemed to be turning in their favour. And the war effort exerted an irresistible pull over all their lives, as it was the centre around which the Dark Lord himself revolved. The rest of them were moons circling a dark planet. Narcissa knew herself to be the furthest of these moons, the smallest and the coldest.

Bella was only happy when the Dark Lord was happy...and happiest of all when she could disappear for days at a time doing whatever it was she did for him. (Narcissa made a point of not asking.) But on those disagreeable occasions when the Dark Lord disappeared on his own for days...or worse, weeks...at a time, leaving Bella behind at the Manor, she ran the gamut from bored to cagey to vicious, none of which boded well for maintaining family peace at the holidays.

Opening presents, gloomy affair that it was, had gone well...mostly because Bella had not joined them. Unfortunately, the Christmas dinner which Narcissa had so meticulously planned began to go badly when Bella Apparated directly into the chair next to Draco just when Narcissa had begun to think she would not show up at all.

Draco, who after the summer was accustomed to his aunt's eccentricities, started only slightly. 'Hello, Aunt Bella.'

Narcissa, who had been carrying on a perfectly pleasant conversation with her son (at least, perfectly pleasant under the circumstances), was careful not to look up from her plate. 'Bella, how good of you to join us. I do wish you'd make your entrance with a bit more subtlety, though,' she said drily.

'Startle you, did I? What are we having?'

'Asian-inspired roast turkey breast with steamed vegetables.'

'Asian turkey with what? Do they even have turkeys in Asia? Can we not have a proper, traditional English meal even for fucking Christmas?'

So she does remember what day it is, Narcissa thought unkindly. Realising it was useless to explain her own family's traditions to Bella, and questioning her decision to maintain her carefully planned menu in the face of her sister's capriciousness, Narcissa merely said, 'This is a proper meal. This particular recipe is high in protein and low in fat. It's actually quite tasty, isn't it, Draco?' Narcissa raised an eyebrow at her son, who nodded mechanically. 'You should try it,' she told Bella.

'What is it with you and low fat food, Cissy? You're not starving yourself again, are you? I thought Mother cured you of that when you were fifteen.' Bella plucked the coriander garnish off the serving plate and waved it about. 'What is this?'

Narcissa was fairly certain that it would set a terrible example for her son if his mother were to use an Unforgivable on his aunt at the dinner table on Christmas Day, but that was precisely what she felt like doing. Rather than saying something she might regret, she merely smiled politely in the hope of not letting on her annoyance, which became a sight more difficult when Bella summoned a house-elf and demanded 'plain roast turkey without all that green shit'. When the elf looked briefly at Narcissa for confirmation, Bella set it on fire.

'Aguamenti!'

Narcissa doused the burned, shaken elf, which immediately began cleaning the mess of water and ash. She congratulated herself for sounding only slightly rattled. 'Return to the kitchen,' she told the elf briskly. 'Miss Bella will eat what the rest of us are eating.'

When the elf disappeared, Narcissa asked her sister, 'Bella, how many times must I tell you...when you contradict my orders, the elves get confused, and then no one gets a decent meal.'

'It was being cheeky.' Bella grinned slyly at Draco, who was refusing to look at her. 'I didn't really hurt it.'

Narcissa's eyes narrowed at her sister. Damned if she'd let Bella give her son the impression that this was acceptable behaviour. She said, 'If we give in to every base urge we feel, then we are no better than Mudbloods and no more fit to rule.'

At that, Bella snorted...loudly...which made Narcissa want to cringe. 'Trust you to quote Father at me,' said Bella acidly, as she waved her wand to serve herself a rather generous helping of the turkey.

'Was he wrong?' Narcissa asked.

'Spare me your righteous indignation. Your elves could do with a little more punishment.' Under her breath, Bella added, 'That was one thing your husband was good for.'

Narcissa regarded her sister coldly. 'Pardon?'

Bella acted as though she'd not spoken, and Narcissa seethed but let it go. Bella spread her napkin on her lap and took up her fork...in her right hand...as if this were what she had wanted to eat all along. 'One has to do *something* to break the monotony around here,' she grumbled, spearing a piece of turkey.

Narcissa watched her sister eat and tried not to frown. Bella's table manners had suffered terribly during her time in prison. She made a frightful amount of noise banging the cutlery against her plate, and she still ate far too quickly. She reminded Narcissa of an animal expecting its food to be stolen mid-meal. It was pitiful to watch.

Feeling suddenly vicious, Narcissa said, 'You're free to find other lodgings if these are too monotonous for your taste. Perhaps you could return to your own house.'

Bella stopped with her fork halfway to her mouth. She looked almost appreciative. 'Cissy, what a very Lucius-like thing to say.'

'Was it?' Though she would not have admitted it to Bella, Narcissa supposed her sister was right. She met Bella's eyes, challenging her. 'Should I apologise?'

Bella grinned knowingly. 'No, seeing as you're not actually sorry. In fact, I'm almost proud of you for it, though I'm positively wounded.' She turned to Draco. 'Isn't your mummy terrible to me?' she asked in the hideous baby voice that Narcissa so despised. Draco stared diplomatically at his plate, having learnt to keep quiet during these exchanges between his mother and aunt.

Without giving him a chance to respond, Bella continued, addressing Narcissa with bright menace, 'Mummy knows perfectly well that the Ministry has confiscated all the property Auntie Bella once possessed.' Her voice turned flat as she returned her gaze to her nephew. 'Did Mummy tell you what they did with my home, Draco? They were going to auction it off to blood traitors, but the house didn't cooperate, so they razed it. Then they built a public park on the site, because why should only *one* family of blood traitors get to enjoy what was once mine when the Ministry could make it available to *all* blood traitors and Mudbloods?'

Narcissa thought but did not say, *Be grateful you still have your Gringotts vault, thanks to me.*

Bella turned to Narcissa. 'But why would I go anywhere else, hmm? You won't send me away, Cissy. Not your dear sister, returned to you from long years of exile.' She batted her lashes exactly the way she used to do when she was ten years old and trying to wheedle some much-desired thing out of Mother or Father, exactly the way Narcissa herself did when trying to get her own way. For the barest of seconds, she could see the girl Bella once was, petulant and fetching, peeking out from a window jagged with broken panes.

Narcissa set down her cutlery, glanced out the window at the dark grounds and changed the subject to one more neutral, which she found to be effective when dealing with her sister. 'I was thinking we might go riding tomorrow if the weather holds.'

Another useful tactic in relations with Bella: keep her occupied at activities that minimised her possibilities to create havoc, preferably those that did not involve conversation.

A stray bit of steamed chestnut flew off of Bella's fork and landed next to Draco's plate. Draco Vanished it discreetly. Observing this, Narcissa couldn't help but feel a prickle of pride in the boy she and Lucius had raised.

Bella, who had noticed nothing, sniffed, 'I don't know if I'll feel like it.'

'Nonsense. You've always loved riding.'

Bella cocked her head to the side as she chewed, which Narcissa took as an expression of indifference. Narcissa pressed on, 'You're just a bit out of practice, that's all.'

Bella's eyes narrowed just a touch and one corner of her mouth turned up in the very faintest of sneers. 'Yes, well. That's not exactly my fault, now is it?'

'No,' Narcissa lied. 'But we'll soon have you back in fine form.' Narcissa turned to her son. 'Will you join us, darling?'

'No, Mother, I'm invited to the Goyles' tomorrow. I won't be back until the day after. Honestly, woman, do you remember *nothing* that I tell you?'

Narcissa blinked, stung. Of course he had told her that. He had mentioned it when they sat down to dinner, in fact, but Bella's entrance had somehow erased it from her memory. She opened her mouth to chastise him for his cheek when Bella cut in.

'Watch your tone when speaking to your mother, Draco. Just because your father's not around doesn't mean that no one in this house will Cruciate you for your insolence.' Her manner was light and she was smiling, which was so typically Bella. Narcissa watched her son's expression and knew the fear he must be suppressing.

There was no point explaining to Bella that Cruciatus was not part of her parenting repertoire. Thus, Narcissa said lightly, 'That won't be necessary, Bella. Because if my son doesn't keep a civil tongue, all I have to do is have a little chat with Pansy about his childhood nicknames.'

At this, Draco tried to look casual, but she knew he was bluffing. 'You wouldn't, Mother.'

'Care to test me, boo boo bear?'

'Right.' Draco was blushing now. He set his knife and fork on his empty plate and laid his napkin aside. 'Then with your permission, ladies, I'll just excuse myself now before this goes any further.' Under his breath, he added, 'And I'm never inviting Pansy over again.'

'We haven't had pudding yet,' Narcissa objected.

Draco rubbed his temple. 'I'm not much in the mood, Mother.' He sounded exhausted and suddenly looked ten years older. Seeing the look on her face, he was quick to add, 'I couldn't eat another thing after that delicious turkey.'

Narcissa nodded, trying not to look disappointed. She thought of the crackers she had bought for after dinner, then realised that trying to have a normal Christmas celebration this year was like trying to put a tiara on a cockatrice. Draco inclined his head towards his mother and aunt and then headed towards the door.

'Forgetting something, are you, darling?' Narcissa asked.

She knew it was a desperate and transparent ploy, but she refused to forego the only scrap of affection she could reasonably expect these days. Draco stopped, turned around and, with a knowing half-smile, leaned down to kiss her cheek. As he pulled away, she noted that his fingernails were bitten down to the quick, a habit Lucius had managed to break him of before he'd started at Hogwarts. Her heart twisted.

'I wish you wouldn't call me that,' he said with no real irritation.

She thought, *I refuse to bury him* She said, 'I know, but I'm your mother. What can you do?'

Part III

Chapter 3 of 5

Severus had withstood the whispers about the nature of his relationship with Narcissa and not discouraged the gossip. Thus he had protected the mother as well as the son, but it had never once occurred to him that Narcissa herself might want more than his protection.

III.

Winter, Spring

1997

'Any word from Lucius?' asked Severus.

'I write every week, but I've had no answers. I don't think they're giving him my letters. And they still won't let me see him,' she said. 'The Ministry has misplaced three separate Portkey applications. I've the feeling they're trying to punish me as well as him.'

'I suppose that's hardly surprising.'

'The Ministry does want its pound of flesh. Sextus has managed to see him twice, but they never held a trial. After what they did to Bella, I expected them to at least put on a show trial, but they simply convicted Lucius without bothering to try him. Can they really wonder that we've risen up against them? Every Wizarding community in the world understands the necessity of fair trials and a competent criminal justice system in a civilised society. Even Muggles acknowledge it. And yes, I realise it's impolitic to admit that Muggles might have got something right...I'm only pointing out that Scrimgeour's government, just like Fudge's government before it, hasn't the sense of our inferiors.' She glanced over at him and noted his expression. 'I'm babbling, aren't I?'

Severus, who had never viewed a battlefield from an ivory tower, tried to guide her back to the topic at hand. 'What did Sextus say?'

'That Lucius is holding up. He told me the Ministry has ordered all suspected Death Eaters to be kept separated, but he was awfully vague. I had the impression he was trying to spare me ...'

Severus nodded. He supposed he would have done the same in the advocate's place.

'In any case,' Narcissa continued, 'I took that to mean they've separated my husband from members of his own class and thrown him in with a bunch of common criminals.' She looked at Severus as if asking him to deny it.

He nearly snorted. If he knew Lucius, the man even now had murderers and thieves fetching and carrying for him. He did not say as much to Narcissa. Instead he said, 'Lucius is a powerful wizard and an able soldier. He can take care of himself.'

'You're right, of course.' She paused, as if he had reminded her of something. 'Is it true ... what they were saying tonight?'

The evening's entertainment had included a game of reminiscences on the Dark deeds of Lucius Malfoy, instigated by Bellatrix...probably for the fun of watching her sister squirm. But Narcissa did not crack, and though she could not be innocent of what the Dark Lord required from his disciples, Severus knew the unsubtle hints dropped tonight about Lucius's escapades in the Dark Lord's service included many things Lucius had never told his wife.

(Did Lucius ever lift her hair away from her neck and breathe her scent to cancel the foetor of spilt blood? Or did he always, as Severus had seen him do, shed his darkness like a cloak at the door, kiss his wife's cheek, ruffle his son's hair and calmly ask what they were having for tea?)

'They were trying to provoke you.'

'Yes, but...'

He wanted to close off this line of inquiry, concern for Lucius's wishes making him more abrupt than necessary. 'It is a war, Narcissa. It was a war fifteen years ago, and it is a war now.'

He held his breath and hoped she would not push for details, because some things were not meant to be discussed. If Lucius had tried to protect his family from them, Severus could understand that. He knew what it was to look into the dark mirror of the past and feel shame spread hot and sticky over the calloused skin of his conscience.

Narcissa nodded and rubbed her temples. The tightness around her eyes made her look stricken, and Severus felt a kind of apprehension for her. If he should chance to notice her distress, the Dark Lord would tap the vein and drink until he reached the fountain of her misery, simply because it would amuse him to break something Lucius treasured.

She said, 'I'm just tired. It's been a bit of a rough day. I was sparring with Bella this afternoon, and it rather wore me out.'

This piqued Severus's interest. 'You were duelling?'

'She's spent fourteen years in Azkaban. She needs to get back on form.' That Narcissa could utter these words with no hint of irony astonished him. 'Why are you looking at me like that?' she asked.

'I mean no disrespect, but you realise that there are those who would say that duelling with Bellatrix is foolish to the point of being suicidal?'

Narcissa was unruffled. 'Yes. In fact, I had noticed that none of the Dark Lord's subjects will volunteer to spar with her.' Contempt danced lightly on her exhaled breath. 'Bella is certainly an exceptional duellist, but I assure you that if I couldn't hold my own against her, I wouldn't have survived adolescence. Mother used to make us practise together, you know. I hate the fact that my sister insists on fighting in a war, but it's her choice. We're family; I'm bound to make sure she's prepared. It's not as if we'd actually hurt each other.' He did not quite catch the last thing she said; it could have been either 'not badly anyway' or 'not that way anyway'.

And what of Sirius Black? thought Severus. A different code must apply to family traitors.

'I confess myself ... surprised.'

'Honestly, Severus, what's all the fuss about?' She was smiling. 'How useless do you think I am?'

'I never said you were useless. I just didn't know ...' She continued to regard him evenly, refusing to fill in the blank. '... that you sparred,' he finished feebly.

Her eyes rolled skyward, as if she couldn't be bothered to voice her thoughts on the matter, but she did not appear to be truly offended. Just as he was beginning to wish he'd never expressed disbelief about her willingness to tempt death, Narcissa suddenly held up a hand and whispered, 'Do you hear that?'

Severus cocked his head to the side and listened. Hesitantly at first, and then with greater confidence, someone was playing a tune. He cast about for the source of the sound. 'What is it?'

A grin was slowly tugging at the corner of her mouth. 'It's Bella.' In the lull of the conversation, a melody emerged to take flight, beautiful in its simplicity.

'Do you mean to say...?'

'I do, indeed. My sister is testing her Christmas present, unless my ears deceive me.' She looked positively gleeful.

'Your sister plays the harpsichord?'

'At the moment, yes. But it's one of those new models that becomes a piano or a clavichord at the tap of a wand, even if you're rubbish at Transfiguration, which Bella isn't. It's self-tuning, too.' Narcissa looked as if she were congratulating herself on a job well done.

Having no idea what to say to that, Severus resorted to the bland. 'She must have been very pleased.'

'Nonsense. She feigned complete disinterest. But I knew she'd not be able to resist, so I spelled the music room to pipe sound into this room, and here's my proof. She's good, isn't she?'

'I am hardly in a position to judge,' he said noncommittally, though certainly the sound was not unpleasant. Had he not known who was playing, he might even have said it was agreeable.

'She could have been a professional, you know. Was all set to be, in fact. But then she decided on another career track. Rather like you.'

'What do you mean?' His tone was sharp. The thought that he and Bellatrix LeStrange could be considered in any way alike was unspeakably offensive.

Narcissa smiled as if she knew a secret. 'You wanted to be a healer once, as I recall. Do you ever wonder how your life might have turned out if you'd continued on that path?'

'I never dwell on the past,' he said briskly.

Narcissa said, 'Anyway, I thought perhaps rediscovering an old hobby might keep Bella occupied when she's here. A productive hobby, I mean. She's taken up knife-throwing, but that makes me nervous. I do hope she keeps this up.'

They listened for a few moments more as the melody changed, turned more fantastical, with greater flourish. Where before Narcissa had seemed distressed, she now looked almost content, or at least well distracted. Severus marvelled at her ability to ignore the fact that her sister was a criminal and a pit viper. Was this really what passed for loyalty among purebloods? From the outside it looked very like folly.

He was so occupied gauging the play of emotion across Narcissa's features that he was almost startled when suddenly she said, 'I know there's no love lost between the two of you, but Bella has her good points.'

He ignored the last part of that statement, which was categorically not true, competent musician or no. 'That is certainly putting it mildly.'

'She's only nasty to you because the Dark Lord trusts you so,' she countered. 'Surely you see that. Bella's not the easiest person to get along with, I know. Then again, neither are you.'

'I cannot think what I might have done to deserve that,' he responded drily.

'Severus, how long have we known each other?'

Though it was obviously a rhetorical question, he thought on it. Then, almost without his being aware of it, he was saying, 'Twenty-odd years.'

She looked up at the ceiling, as if trying to remember. 'Not counting school,' she added.

'No, we didn't socialise much at school, as I recall. Mostly because you terrified me.'

'Terrified you? What rubbish! You've never been terrified of anything in your life.'

'Not true, I assure you.'

'I never terrified you.'

'All right. You intimidated me, then.'

'How is that remotely possible?'

He thought, *Because your kind represented everything that a scrawny half-blood charity-case wanted and could never have.*

He replied, 'You were the imposing seventh-year girl who never spoke, except to Regulus. I thought you standoffish,' he said. 'This was before I realised that you were merely very shy.'

She looked thoughtful. 'I was impossibly shy, especially at school. Growing up in Bella's shadow and all that. She was the beautiful one, the brilliant one. She could always bend the situation to suit herself, always knew what to say. People were simply drawn to her. In comparison, I just faded into the wallpaper.'

He nearly snorted, wondering how women could be so transparent in soliciting compliments. He remembered fragments of conversation, things said by boys in other houses as they watched her walk away (*'Now there's a ride, eh?'*, *'Stuck up bitch, if you ask me. But yeah, still a ride'*); things the Slytherin boys wouldn't have dared to say back then because, first, she was a Black and, second, she belonged to a Malfoy. It was curious how the same comments were now, after Lucius's fall from grace, making the rounds in post-meeting conversation, when Bellatrix was not present of course...no Death Eater was *that* foolish. It seemed some boys never grew up.

He settled on saying, 'I'm sure that's not true either.' This conversation was becoming too personal, and there were things he had meant to discuss with her.

Severus asked, 'Has anyone asked you for certain information, about your finances?'

Had she gone suddenly pale, or was it his imagination?

'Pardon?' she asked.

He considered, again, how best to say what he meant to say. 'Something I overheard. It seems Lucius told the Dark Lord he would provide a kind of list. Of all his assets. As proof of his loyalty.'

'How much proof does he need?'

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'Narcissa,' he said, warningly.

'Severus, I assure you that I understand the gravity of the situation, but I don't understand his reasoning.' Narcissa asked, 'With powers like his, what does the Dark Lord care for gold?'

He does not care for gold, Severus might have answered. *He merely wants entrance to every aspect of your lives, until you have no privacy and no protected space, until he has absolute, utter control. Like all tyrants, he wants everything, whether or not you have it to give.*

'It is not for us to ask his reasons,' he said.

Narcissa frowned. 'No one has asked me anything like that,' she said. 'We would give it if he asked, of course. Does he think we're holding something back?'

'If you so much as tried, he would know.'

'I know, which is why everything we have is at his disposal,' Narcissa said pointedly, her eyes on his. Severus wondered if this was true, and though he was unsure what he would do with the information, he decided to push against her mind to find out. He expected to encounter a thought that either supported or disproved her willingness to fund this war from her own pocket. Instead he found something else.

She was wondering what it would be like to kiss him. Or rather, based on the image floating on the surface of her mind, she was wondering what it would be like to crawl into his lap and begin unbuttoning his robes as she kissed him.

Severus averted his eyes and tried to breathe steadily. His chest suddenly felt tight. After a moment had passed, he said, 'It's late, and I have lessons tomorrow.' He stood, hoping she would not read too much into a quick departure.

She murmured, 'Time does get away from us, does it not? Thank you.'

'For what?' he asked, abrupt in his haste to leave.

'For being candid with me.'

He acknowledged this with a nod, unable to look at her, and stepped towards the fireplace. Nodding toward the urn of Floo powder on the mantel, he asked, as was polite, 'May I?'

'Of course. Good-bye, Severus.'

He merely nodded and named his destination as her figure wavered on the other side of the fire and then guttered out.

He stepped into his office, thinking she must be mad. Or exceedingly sex-starved after months of separation from Lucius. Because there was no earthly reason for Narcissa Malfoy to have been thinking such thoughts. He had completely forgotten to tell her about the poisoned mead.

He'd withstood the whispers...or in Draco's case, shouts...about the nature of his relationship with Narcissa and not discouraged the gossip, finding it convenient to let others in the Dark Lord's service believe he had a prior claim on her. Thus he had protected the mother as well as the son. Though he didn't suppose Lucius would necessarily approve of his methods, he did imagine Lucius would appreciate the fact that up until now no one had tried to take liberties with his wife, because certainly there were those who would have done, given half a chance. And Severus had protected her because it had never once occurred to him that Narcissa herself might want more than his protection.

He spent the next day vacillating: perhaps he had not seen what he thought he had seen *then why was the image so vivid?*; then again, perhaps that was really what she wanted (*but why would she?*). The best thing to do would be nothing, Severus knew. If Narcissa needed affection, or release, or whatever, she could find someone else, or wait for her husband's return. In the meantime, if he needed to relay information about her son, he could find a way that did not involve actually seeing her. This was a distraction neither of them could afford, and so, yes, the best thing to do would be nothing.

Certainly, doing nothing would be so much easier if he could have stopped picturing the splay of his fingers over the backs of her thighs.

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Another letter never written: *A creeping expropriation has begun. Once I worried about the Ministry, its raids and its avarice. Yet now, bit by bit, our home is being occupied by another force entirely. First a meeting once in a while, then Bella annexed the storage room, then one or two people moved into spare rooms. The meetings are now almost weekly occurrences, and soon ... what can I say? It is the Dark Lord's will.*

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'What are you doing, Cissy?'

Narcissa looked up to find Bella in the doorway between her bedroom and dressing room. She turned back to her task, keeping her eyes on her sister in the mirror that hung opposite the door, hoping Bella had not noted the tiny jump she had not been able to suppress. It drove her absolutely mad the way Bella would simply materialise out of thin air with no respect for anyone's privacy.

'What are you doing, sneaking into my dressing room?' Narcissa asked mildly.

'I don't sneak, I prowl.'

Narcissa thought, *Typical Bella. I should hang a bell round her neck so I can hear her coming!* 'I see,' she said. 'In future, would you mind knocking first before you prowl into my rooms?'

'What's interesting about that? You didn't answer my question.'

Narcissa tried to recall the question. *Ah, yes.* 'I am packing,' she said, gesturing to her favourite portmanteau...Opaleye skin, in a gorgeous shade of lavender...which sat on a four-sided chest of drawers in the middle of the room.

Bella approached and peered down into the bag, which contained a built-in cupboard with room enough to hang two weeks' worth of robes, as well as drawers for other necessities. 'Handy,' she remarked. 'Where are you going?'

'Meeting. I told you last week.'

'How long will you be away?'

'One night, possibly two.'

'Leaving me here all alone?'

Narcissa thought, *I hate it when you do this.*

'Yes. Do try not to burn the house down. Your brother-in-law is rather fond of it.'

'Brother-in-law, brother-in-arms, he is no brother of mine.'

Narcissa Summoned a robe, scrutinized it carefully and sent it back to its place, all the while refusing to look at Bella.

'What is that supposed to mean?' she asked.

'Your husband,' Bella sweetly informed her sister, 'is a disgrace. All those years he had his freedom, and what did he ~~do~~ with it?'

'I suggest you keep your opinions about Lucius to yourself, Bella. I'd rather not hear them.'

Bella conjured herself a comfortable swivelling chair beside the chest of drawers and sat down to watch her sister pack. She crossed her legs at the knee, swinging her foot lazily. Narcissa braced herself. Bella was obviously in a mood.

'You were a true believer once, little sister,' Bella remarked. 'I hope nothing has changed.'

Narcissa turned and looked Bella directly in the eye, enunciating her words carefully so there could be no mistake. 'I am a believer still, Bella.'

Bella hummed thoughtfully, then flicked her wand. Her lips never moved. The robes on the opposite wall rearranged themselves, though the new order was not immediately apparent. Knowing Bella, it was probably reverse alphabetical by designer or something equally obtuse.

'What sort of meeting?' Bella asked.

Narcissa flicked her own wand and said, '*Discessio*.' The robes immediately rearranged themselves according to colour and season, as Narcissa preferred. Without looking at her sister, she answered, 'Business, I suppose. Something Lucius would normally handle, but since he's not available, I must go in his place. I think I'm supposed to

vote on some resolution or other; I'm sure they'll tell me when I get there.'

'Business,' Bella repeated importantly. 'That reminds me, I came here to relay a message.'

Narcissa Summoned another robe. Charcoal grey cashmere, conservative but not drab. This one would do. At the tap of her wand, the robe tucked itself into her portmanteau. Narcissa peeked in to make sure it had hung itself properly. Her chest tightened when Bella's words sank in. *Here it comes*, she thought. *He said it would happen, and here it comes*. 'What message is that?'

'Your husband promised the Dark Lord a full accounting of the Malfoy interests. Before he was dragged off to Azkaban, that is.'

'Oh?'

'The Dark Lord would like the promised accounting.'

'Bella, you know as well as I that anything we have is his for the asking.'

Bella nodded. 'Do you think you can get it together by next week, then?'

'I can try.' Narcissa tried to sound noncommittal. In Bella terms...in the Dark Lord's terms...a week was almost alarmingly reasonable. She wondered what he meant by it. 'You know how it is. I'm not sure I know where Lucius keeps all his records. I'll have to do some digging.'

Her underwear drawers were on the wall opposite; she had to go around Bella to get to them, and as she tried, Bella caught her by the wrist.

'Look at your lovely white hands,' said Bella, turning Narcissa's hand palm up and tracing her fingers in a circle over the surface. Surprisingly, it didn't tickle. Bella continued in that voice Narcissa despised, '*Fine* hands, and clean. White as ... snow. Never done the Dark Lord's work.'

(*Lucius had said, 'You're too precious to fight.'*)

Narcissa, who knew her sister for a scorpion, fat with poison, tried to hold her hand steady. She looked down into Bella's eyes. There was something like pity there in the darkness, or perhaps only contempt.

Bella said, 'I do hope these pretty hands can stand a bit of digging. Wars do not fund themselves, after all.'

Narcissa's mind worked furiously. Bella dropped her hand, and Narcissa was able to push past her and open the correct drawer. She busied herself with selecting what she needed for her trip.

Bella asked, 'You miss him dreadfully, don't you? Lucius, I mean.'

Narcissa marvelled at the way Bella's mind switched tracks. It was like conversing with the Cheshire Cat. 'Do you not miss Rodolphus?' she countered as her underwear packed itself.

Sprawled in her chair, Bella scanned the ceiling for an answer. 'We're used to living apart, aren't we? We hardly know each other anymore. I couldn't say I miss him.'

For Bella, this was an unusually candid remark. Narcissa folded her arms across her chest and asked, out of honest curiosity, 'Do you love him?'

'Love him?' Bella arched a cynical eyebrow at this, and Narcissa wondered, not for the first time, if her sister had ever consummated her marriage to Rodolphus Lestrange, if she was even capable after what had been done to her. She thought of the hundred ways in which Bella's heart was twisted, how it was hardly any wonder that the one man she had ever truly loved was the one who had never demanded anything carnal from her but had given her the only thing her twisted heart could covet: the power of retribution.

Bella was saying, 'My husband's proven himself rather useful at times, but I wouldn't say I love him. You could say I feel a certain affection toward him *As though he were merely a loyal dog*, thought Narcissa. Bella's tone was almost thoughtful, before it turned derisive. 'Not like you love your husband, I'm sure.'

'I've spent the last two decades with the man.'

'You didn't always.'

Surveying her shoe collection, Narcissa thought, *Didn't always love him? That's what you think, Bella* She said, 'I made up my mind to love him, and I have done.' She selected two pairs, which sailed neatly from their rack into the portmanteau.

'That's sweet,' said Bella. 'What do you miss most about him?'

'Oh, I don't know.' There were a hundred things she missed about Lucius, from the way he could never quite manage his own cufflinks to the unaccountably secure feeling of his hand on the small of her back. 'His companionship, I suppose,' said Narcissa, thinking of those conversations about the events of every day as they lay in bed at night before falling asleep.

Bella broke into a wicked smile, and Narcissa knew that she had said the wrong thing.

'Companionship,' Bella murmured. 'Well, if it's *companionship* you want, there's a whole houseful of men who would be eager to provide it. Or what about Snape? He's practically gagging to be your companion.'

Narcissa tried sound bored. 'Must you be vulgar, Bella?'

'What's vulgar about basic human needs?' Bella asked lightly. 'You're a woman adrift without her husband. You're wealthy, and you've still got your looks, such as they are. And the first thing you did after your beloved husband went to Azkaban was run to Snape for *protection*.'

'Bella,' Narcissa said warningly.

Bella's contempt was plainly written in her features. 'You threw yourself at his feet. Literally. It was revolting. How do you think I felt, watching my sister grovel for that...?' Bella made an unintelligible noise and shuddered, her expression suggesting that the memory nauseated her. 'And now you regularly summon him here on the pretext of discussing your son. What is he supposed to think? Of course he knows what you're really asking for.'

Narcissa felt as if she had been slapped. She had almost forgotten Bella's habit of telling the truth only so as to inflict maximum damage.

'You know exactly why I went to Severus. But by all means, spit it out, Bella. If you're accusing me of something, I'd like you to say it outright.'

Bella stood up then, her eyes suddenly lit with concern. 'I wasn't accusing you of anything,' she said, and no one else would have noted the calculation threading its way through the sincerity in her tone. She brushed a lock of hair away from Narcissa's face, rough fingers skimming her cheek with a whispery touch, and although she knew better, Narcissa found it difficult not to be drawn in.

'You don't need him,' said Bella. 'Haven't I always protected you?'

Narcissa turned her face away. 'I don't know what you mean.'

'Don't do it, Cissy.'

Narcissa crossed her arms over her chest. 'Bella, let me be very clear. Nothing has happened or ever will happen between Severus and me.'

Bella appeared unruffled. She stepped back and countered with: 'I'm merely noting a pattern of behaviour that you seem to be unaware of.'

Narcissa shook her head. 'I've no idea what you're talking about.'

Again, Bella leaned in close to Narcissa, but the atmosphere had changed completely. 'I've noticed Snape comes round rather more frequently as time goes on. What do you suppose he comes round for?' Bella tilted her head and breathed in, scenting the air. Refusing to back away, Narcissa was conscious of her sister's physical power; magic and cruelty hummed darkly around her. Bella whispered in her sister's ear, 'Does Lucius's lapdog sense a bitch in heat?'

Narcissa would not look at her. 'You need to leave now.'

Bella stepped back, feigned innocence. 'What have I said?'

'Go, Bella.'

Bella, with her dead eyes and her rictus smile, said, 'Don't forget those accounts,' then turned indolently on her heel, hair brushing her back like a dark veil. Disgusted, Narcissa listened to her sister's withdrawing footsteps, waiting for her to be gone.

But Bella paused in the doorway. Without turning around, she asked, 'Do you really think Lucius has always been faithful?'

She vanished, mid-step, as she passed through the door.

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It wasn't much of a visitors' room. As far as she could tell, the only touch intended for visitors was a pair of daffodil-yellow curtains that framed a window set with opaque glass, probably shatterproof. Standing out as they did against the relentlessly grey walls, the curtains looked almost profane. She dared not touch the table in front of her, with its cracked, scarred surface promising splinters for her trouble. She hadn't even been able to sit down until her escort left the room to fetch Lucius and she could cast a wandless cleaning spell over the well-worn chairs without causing offence.

Of course, they had taken her wand at the entrance. (*Security measures, for your own protection, ma'am. Can't have a prisoner get hold of one, now can we?*) As she always did in situations where she felt uncomfortable, she straightened her spine and composed her features into a mask of disdain.

'Exactly what do you think my husband would do to me?' she had asked, ill-tempered, though she knew that these measures were meant for their protection, not hers. The guard had merely shrugged.

Though the Dementors had left Azkaban to join the Dark Lord, their presence here lingered, unmistakeable. The air in the visitors' room was oppressively cold and damp, which made her wonder what the cells were like. Bella never mentioned her time in prison except to brandish it like a weapon at those of her comrades who *lacked faith*. Narcissa was therefore unsure whether she could trust her sister's description of the accommodations.

All Narcissa's letters, all the money she had spent and waning influence she had brought to bear, and this was to be the fruit of her labours: a hurried meeting with her husband in a dingy room under the supervision of a soulless functionary who would report anything he heard to the proper authorities. She would be unable to touch him, unable to ask him what she really wanted to know or tell him what he needed to hear. Though her pride would scarce allow it, things really had come to this, that she would grovel before her inferiors for just the chance to exchange bland pleasantries over a blistered old tabletop.

A summary of her worries: How changed would he be? How changed would he find her? What had he endured in this place that she couldn't protect him from? Would he see the guilt of that on her face? Had she worn the right robes? What should she say about Draco? What consolation could she offer Lucius, when nothing she and Sextus did seemed to make any difference? What if they had nothing to say to each other?

So caught up was she in these thoughts that it took her a moment to realise the door had opened behind her. Narcissa turned, expecting to see Lucius...probably filthy and ragged as Bella had been when she made her way out, but still himself; instead, she found herself face to face with a baby-faced wizard in governor's robes. He must be new. 'Mrs Malfoy?' he inquired.

'Yes.'

'You were here to see your husband?'

'Yes.'

'My apologies, Mrs Malfoy, and begging your pardon, but he won't come out.'

'I'm sorry?'

'The guards have told him you're here and were all set to bring him round, of course, but' ...here he paused, concerned, apologetic...'he won't come out of his cell.'

Untroubled, she stifled a sigh, more annoyed by his unstudied subterfuge than the fact of his request. She had expected no less. After all, she had come this far, and what was one more petty bureaucrat with his hand out when Lucius was somewhere beyond that door waiting to see her? Experienced in such matters, she was prepared. She stood, fixed a suitably anxious expression on her face and stepped toward him.

'Please,' she said quietly, taking his hand in hers. Her voice struck just the right note: solicitous, imploring even, with a light authoritative edge. 'There must be something you can do.'

She was so well-versed in the sleight of hand these occasions required that his surprise registered on his face when he felt the miniaturised cloth bag in his palm. For a long moment, he looked down at the tiny Gringotts crest, artlessly rolled the little bag between his fingers, felt the coins...probably a months' wages for him...that were his to spend at the touch of a wand. She observed with cynical eyes this deliberation, this submission to avarice. She thought, *What a greenhorn you are. Now slip that bag into your pocket, and go get my husband like a good little quill-pusher.*

He raised his head slowly and looked at her, a new coldness in his eyes. 'I am sorry, Mrs Malfoy. I think there's been a misunderstanding. There's really nothing I can do. I meant what I said: he won't come out. I couldn't tell you why, but there it is.' He shook his head curtly.

She thought, *I have just met the only honest man in the Ministry's employ*

He did not try to hide the bag as he pressed it back into her hand, nor his contempt in doing so. 'You'll be wanting this back, I'm sure.' Unnecessarily, he added, 'The guard will show you out.'

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The good news was that she needn't worry about further Ministry raids. The bad news, of course, was that Malfoy Manor had finally been occupied.

Though the Dark Lord himself had not taken up residence in the Manor *Where did he sleep?*she wondered. *Did he sleep at all?* and spent only a few hours a week there at most (*He never ate either, did he even need food?*), it seemed every Death Eater who had ever existed had more or less moved into her home. It was like living in Kings Cross. They came and went, looking to Bella for direction when the Dark Lord himself was not in, or to Severus when he was around. The lady of the house went largely unnoticed, having learnt to keep out of the way. Narcissa stayed on the first floor nearly all the time now, moving between the library and her rooms, venturing no further. She missed her daily swim, but dared not go down to the lower level of the house. She heard noises at odd hours, banging and shouting. She did not enquire as to their source.

The meeting was interminable. She could barely bring herself to listen, knowing that if anything important were to happen, Severus would tell her later. Instead she was playing a game in her head, thinking of a number at random then dividing it by twelve, multiplying by thirteen, dividing by fourteen. She did this to keep her mind off the image of her son, bandaged and prone after Potter's attack on him; to avoid considering how only Severus's quick thinking had saved him and what that meant. She kept her eyes on the table top or fixed on the wall opposite, ignoring Yaxley, whose eyes darted her way once or twice and then flicked toward Bella to see if she had noticed. Narcissa declined to glance at Bella or Severus, would not look up at the Dark Lord. Thus, she was caught off guard when the Dark Lord informed the table that before they broke for the evening, he had a gift to present to their hostess.

Narcissa blinked in surprise.

'There is one among us who has provided not only sanctuary, but all the comforts we could wish. She has graciously opened her home to us and deserves our gratitude,' the Dark Lord was saying. A sycophantic murmur of agreement went around the table. All eyes on her, Narcissa felt her cheeks flush uncomfortably. 'For your contribution to our efforts, Narcissa, we offer our thanks and a small token of appreciation.'

Heart thumping wildly, she managed a quiet 'Thank you, my Lord.' Panic threatened to overwhelm her, but she forced herself to look up, bullied her features into a semblance of gratitude as the Dark Lord raised his wand.

Then a snake was twisting its way through the air toward her, a miniature Nagini, thin and lethal*He knows*, she thought. *Somehow he knows and this is a sort of punishment and my life ends here.* It was not a hysterical thought, as she might have expected. She did not in fact panic, but merely froze.

(*'Bella, let me out! Bella! I won't tell, I promise!'*)

Her throat constricted. She would have raised her hands to defend herself, but there was no time. The snake wrapped itself once, twice, thrice around her neck, its belly dry and whisper-soft and abhorrent over her collarbone as it sought out her pulse. She fixed her gaze just over the Dark Lord's right shoulder. Her mouth fell open, stupidly, but as she could not breathe, she was fortunately unable to disgrace herself by screaming.

(*'Please, Bella, I didn't see anything. Please letmeoutletmeoutletmeout!'*)

Then with a flash of light, the delicate slither of scales stilled, replaced by something hard and motionless. She fought the urge to reach up and rip it off her throat. 'Does that not look lovely?' the Dark Lord asked.

Bella spoke. 'It is beautiful, my Lord. Very becoming on my sister.'*Oh, she's so keen to call me her sister now*,Narcissa thought bitterly. Another murmur ran the length of the table.

The meeting broke up. For a moment, Narcissa sat stunned as everyone rose and began to disperse. Tellingly, Bella would not look at her. Narcissa caught Severus's eye briefly; his gaze directed her toward the Dark Lord. As if she didn't know what was expected. She was among the last to rise, her mouth still dry, the surge of adrenaline beginning to level off, making her legs tremble. As she rose, she looked toward the Dark Lord, who beckoned her forward and steered her toward the mirror that hung above the drawing room fireplace. There, around her throat, a necklace in the form of a snake biting its own tail gleamed in the torchlight.

The Dark Lord had her by the shoulders, his grip loose and all the more menacing for it. His fingers were cold. His lips barely moved when he spoke. 'It was chosen especially for you, Narcissa. I hope you will want to wear it always.' Heavy as platinum, the snake had two fiery green eyes in its sleek head, which sat just under the hollow of her throat.

(*'Do not lie to Lord Voldemort.'*)

Her eyes in the mirror remained respectfully downcast. 'Thank you, my Lord. Words cannot express my gratitude.'

'You are canny, Narcissa. I want you to know how we value the sacrifices you have made.'

'You honour me, my Lord. I thank you.'

The Dark Lord released her shoulders. 'Wear it well, Narcissa.'

On her way out of the drawing room, Narcissa passed Severus and spared him a glance, but his Lord had gestured to him and he hastened to obey. She went to the library to wait for him, listening as the house quieted around her.

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He shut the door behind him as he entered. She was standing, as if she had been about to give up and go to bed. When she saw him, she sat back down before the fire without a word, picked up a wine glass from the little table beside her chair and lifted it to her lips before she realised it was empty and set it down again. He took a chair, regarding her steadily.

She looked slightly dishevelled, her hair having partially escaped its pins, robes discarded over the arm of the sofa, so that she wore only a simple, if still elegant, dress. At her throat, the Dark Lord's collar shone with its own light. Her feet, which were now tucked up beside her on the seat, child-like, peeked out from under the hem of her dress, provocatively bare. It was a strange, unconscious intimacy for a woman always so primly and properly dressed. She might have been twenty years old in this light, these circumstances. A pomegranate carelessly split, Persephone at the mouth of the underworld.

'What does it mean, Severus?' she asked at length. 'I take it this'...she gestured at the apparently seamless metal encircling her neck...'can't be removed.'

In response, he shook his head.

'Am I now confined to the house?' she asked.

'Nothing so dramatic. It merely records your comings and goings. The Dark Lord wants to keep track of you, not limit your freedom of movement.' The irony in his tone would have been easily missed by someone who did not know him.

She turned her eyes to him, her expression fearful and defiant. He imagined he saw something feral under the dread. She said, 'So this is my punishment.'

'He knows you went to Hogwarts. He is not pleased.'

'How did he find out?'

'Please tell me you did not really expect to keep it secret.'

She sat up, her hands balled into fists. 'Severus, that vicious little criminal tried to murder my son! He put Draco in the hospital wing for Merlin knows how long. You said yourself that Draco had been gravely, almost fatally injured. Any mother would have stormed into Hogwarts under those circumstances. How would it have looked if I *hadn't* gone?'

'To the hospital wing, certainly. But you did not have to go to Dumbledore's office.' He was playing the devil's advocate, and it pained him to do so, but if it kept her at bay, then...

She looked incredulous. 'You were there, Severus. You know what happened. I demanded Potter's immediate expulsion, and the old bastard refused, which I still don't understand. If Draco had tried to murder Potter, he'd have been expelled inside of a minute.' She held her head in her hands. 'It's not as if I gave away the Dark Lord's deepest secrets,' she said quietly.

'Then why did Dumbledore want to speak to you alone?'

Her voice was heavy with irony. 'My best guess is that he did not particularly care to be upbraided in front of his Potions master.'

'Narcissa.' He used her name as a talisman, a three-syllable lynchpin for his refusal to examine his own motives. 'Did he make you an offer?'

'Pardon?'

He remained silent, watched her calculate a response. Finally she said, 'Why do you ask?'

'Because the man has delusions of saving the world. What did he say?'

'He was clever about it,' she conceded. 'He only said that help will always be given at Hogwarts to those who ask.'

'And what did you say?' he asked, his impatience beginning to show. She regarded him warily. He pressed her. 'Narcissa, outside of your family, I alone know what you are willing to do to protect your son. What did you say?'

'Severus, honestly. Why would I put my faith in a Muggle-loving blood traitor like Albus Dumbledore? What could he do for me?'

There was only one way to know, and though his previous foray into her mind had revealed unwelcome(*distracting*) information, he pushed and found an image of Narcissa regarding Dumbledore through an impenetrable mask of incredulity, scorn and even pity when she told him she had no earthly idea what he was talking about.

Which, of course, was what had happened. It was also precisely what she wanted him to see.

He was furious at himself for not noticing it earlier, and his fury bled into his speech. Severus admonished the mother as he had admonished the son.

'Going to Dumbledore's office was unbelievably foolish, Narcissa. I hope I need not tell you that you placed yourself in the path of a very accomplished and ruthless Legilimens. The information he could have pulled from your mind...have you any idea what I had to do to assure the Dark Lord of your loyalty?' He left the thought unvoiced, knowing Narcissa would immediately fill in the blank.

She was unrepentant. 'Well, in that case, it's fortunate I had the good sense to tell the barmy old man what to do with his offer.'

('If I weren't in on the plot to kill me, I would never have known she was lying. Severus, why did you never tell me Narcissa Malfoy was such a gifted Occlumens?')

Because I had no idea, Albus. And now I do.

All this time he had spent thinking of her as the wife of Lucius Malfoy, when, he now realised, he should have remembered she was the sister of Bellatrix Lestrange. How much had he missed when they had come calling, side-by-side on his doorstep like a pair of chess pieces, white queen and black, the sun on the meadow and the shadow on the grass.

His anger, fuelled by a sense of betrayal he did not fully understand or wish to explore, turned out to be a flash fire, unexpectedly ignited and now suddenly extinguished. Exhausted by the aftershock, he was both bemused and disturbed to find it had failed to burn away the anxiety that another boy might lose his mother because of Voldemort's whim and his own carelessness.

'Now wherever I go,' she was saying, 'the Dark Lord will know I've been there?'

Defeated, he told her, 'It's better than the Mark.' He spoke from experience, though she could not know that.

With an ironic smile, she said, 'Yes, at least it matches my wedding rings.' She held up her left hand; the emerald on her fourth finger caught the low light. No doubt the Dark Lord had considered that and found it gratifying. 'Did you convince him to go this route rather than the other?' she asked.

'No one convinces the Dark Lord of anything.'

'You should not be telling me any of this, should you?'

'No.'

A slight lift of her eyebrows indicated that she understood, that she acknowledged his role. That she thanked him.

'Does it report what I say back to him, or just where I go?' she asked.

'Just your location. So that you don't scarper.' *And that you don't go running off to Hogwarts for asylum,* he might have said.

She looked irritated, as if the very thought were ridiculous. 'Where would I go, Severus? Should I run off to the south of France and leave my family to the Dark Lord's tender mercies? Turn myself over to the Order of the Phoenix?'

Her lips twisted into a sardonic smile; he responded by tilting his head very slightly to one side. By this gesture the Dark Lord had revealed how very little he understood Narcissa Malfoy. Another woman would have leapt at Dumbledore's offer.

'I've been effectively collared, just like Lucius,' she said, gesturing toward the glistening snake at her throat. 'I've a horror of snakes, you know. I am irrationally, desperately afraid of them. That's why I avoid those meetings if I can. Nagini ... well. One of the worst things I can think of is to have a snake crawling on my skin. Ironical for a Slytherin, wouldn't you say?'

'I didn't know,' he said, which was not true.

'No, of course not. The only person at that table who knew was Bella. At least, I thought she was.'

Severus did not comment. Never having had a sibling, he could not imagine what it was like to be betrayed by one. Even after overhearing the conversation in which Bellatrix had informed the Dark Lord of Narcissa's snake phobia (due to Bellatrix having locked her five-year-old sister in a cupboard and then, in revenge for a childish transgression long forgotten, having filled the cupboard with live snakes), Severus knew it was not his place to disillusion Narcissa about her sister. This was why conversation that went beyond the perfunctory was best avoided, he mused, because there was no comforting thing he could tell her. One simply cannot say, 'Your sister is a right bitch.'

Instead, he offered truthfully, if lamely, 'It's not an uncommon fear.'

'I'm sure it was an accident.' Narcissa was now speaking mostly to herself, her right hand rubbing absently at the back of her left wrist. 'She knows how...she can't have meant it.'

Severus was uncertain whether she was referring to this evening's incident or the one decades past. Either way, he was certain Bellatrix had definitely meant it.

'You did well tonight,' he said, more to prevent any further rumination on the subject than out of any desire to praise her. Knowing what he now knew, he couldn't think why he might have said it.

Distractedly, she murmured, 'Kind of you to say.' She made as if to rise, saying, 'I shouldn't keep you. I'm sure you're anxious to get back.'

He also rose, because this conversation was not over, or he did not want it to be. His mouth was open to say...what? what could he have said?...and suddenly they were standing far too close to one another. He held out a hand as if to stop her pushing past him, but he did not touch her. She stood as she had before the Dark Lord, with her eyes lowered. But now the scent of wine on her breath mingled with a scent he had always associated with this house, and which he now recognised as privilege...a body of musk, polished wood, cut glass and leather...with a bottom note of despair.

There were reasons, he knew, to do nothing about what he had seen the last time he looked into her mind, now he had learnt it was nothing but a smoke screen, a simple trick that had nevertheless taken him in. (*Her illusions had tricked **him**, the master illusionist, leaving him galled and dazzled*)

By now he had spent too many hours turning those reasons over like coins; he had examined their rough surfaces, stacked them on his writing desk and compared them to the reasons for *doing something*: years of class-conscious slights, a grubby boy's desire to sully something he knows to be precious to a resented other, the feeling of always being *used* and wanting to use someone else for a change. In the quiet of his office, the do-nothing stack had seemed so much taller by comparison.

(*There was the matter of his friendship with Lucius, such as it was; the species of loyalty he felt toward the man who had taught him the value of compartmentalisation, without which he would not have survived his early years as a Death Eater; and the fact that of all those he'd fought alongside on either side of this conflict, Lucius was the only one he would call an equal, for which reason alone Lucius had his respect. And now Lucius was locked away, leaving his wife and son at the Dark Lord's mercy, having asked Severus to look after them if things ever came to this.*

But.

There was also the fact that without Lucius as his backer, he would not have reached the inner circle so quickly, perhaps not at all. And if he had never cherished the ambition of reaching the inner circle, would he have handed his best friend over to her executioner?

He could hardly remember those do-nothing reasons now. In the dark of this library, with the scent of her breath on his face, his only thought could be summarised as ~~as well~~ *as well hang for the dragon, too.*

He was depending on Narcissa to step back, to turn away, to make the decision for him, so why did she not move aside?

He did not say, 'Wait,' or 'Don't go,' or 'Will you be all right?', or any of the banalities another person might have used to justify close physical proximity to the vulnerable wife of a good friend. With the sense that he was standing on a rampart, tempted to put one foot over the edge just to see what would happen, he waited for her to look at him, which she would not do. Her lower lip was wet, a glassy, inviting curve, separated from her top lip by a few dark millimetres. Seconds ticked by, and he did not step back from the brink. The gap between their bodies was no wider than the spectre of Lucius himself.

Her voice was a pulse, a heartbeat, tell-tale and soft. She told him a secret which he had already guessed:

'I don't need a protector.'

'No,' he replied. 'You are not powerless.'

The gap closed.

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He had expected that if he were ever to touch her, her skin would be window-glass cool, as her hand that distant night had been cold in its unbreakable grip. But the flesh his fingers met now was fever hot, a cauldron left too long on the fire.

He let her take the lead, let her bruise his lips and claw at his chest, let her manoeuvre him until he found himself on the sofa with his hands full of impotent wrath. He concentrated only on the surprising strength of her fingers on the back of his neck, the sound of her ragged breaths, the sweet-almond scent that clung to her hair.

It was all done with a deftness he never would have anticipated, this inexorable slide, the revelation of a mystery. The contact made him draw a startled breath, but she gave him no time to adjust. Adamant, acquisitive, her mouth distracted him as she drew him in. At first, the resistance he met almost made him push her away, afraid of hurting her, of letting her hurt herself; she was undeterred, and the impasse was resolved in a slick rush. He was at eye level with the collar she now wore, staring into the twinkling emerald eyes that knew the location of the body but not its position. A tremor was building inside her, a storm bubbling forth to beat at the bars of her cage, and he let her spend her rage and frustration like currency, let her scatter it like ash.

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The noise in her head sounded something like:

(*Your husband is a disgrace.*)

(*Words cannot express my disappointment.*)

(*My apologies, Mrs Malfoy, and begging your pardon, but he won't come out*)

(*The appearance of propriety must be maintained at all times*)

(*You're too precious to fight*)

(*And Lucius wouldn't want this for you.*)

(I'll make him proud.)

(If anything should happen to me, Cissa ..)

(What do you suppose he comes round for?)

(You are not powerless.)

(... bitch in heat ..)

(... go to Severus.)

~~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

She sat up and pulled on her robes, fiddling with the clasp for too long, fingers inexplicably clumsy. Outside the windows, the gardens were turning from black to deep blue.

'Your Order may be interested in knowing,' she said, 'when Bella is distracted, she overextends her wand arm.'

Part IV

Chapter 4 of 5

She had begun to fear that Lucius was truly broken, but the fire in him now told her that was not the case. He was reluctant; she could understand that. But her resolve was not shaken. It would simply take work to convince him that her plan was the only way forward.

IV.

Lost Year

1997-1998

'Dumbledore is dead.'

Severus stood in the hall, completely dishevelled and perfectly calm. Behind him she saw Draco, and it was all she could do not to run to him. Her son solved the problem for her, moving with surprising speed to put an arm around her shoulders. He reeked of sweat, he was covered in dust, and, according to Severus, the task was discharged.

'Mother,' he said into her hair. 'Are you all right?'

Her arms wound around his waist. 'I'm fine. What about you, what happened?' It had been an unusually quiet evening; now she knew why.

'I figured it out,' said Draco, with a note of triumph. 'I let them into Hogwarts. He's gone. You're safe now.'

She smiled at him. 'Of course I am, darling.' Narcissa looked over at Severus, who could see right through her, could see what she wanted, but he turned his eyes away and refused to give it to her.

She addressed her son. 'Others. You said others. Where are they?'

'There was a skirmish,' Severus said. 'We scattered so as to confuse our pursuers.'

'Won't they know you've come here?'

Severus spoke impatiently. 'Where is the first place Draco would go when he is in trouble?'

'He'd come home, of course.' She tightened her grip on her son, as if to emphasise the point.

'No doubt that is what they will also think. Which means this is the last place they would check. They will assume I was too clever to bring him here.'

Though she knew her home was as well protected as it was possible to be, still she shuddered at the thought of who might descend on them. She wondered if bringing him here was Severus's way of showing her that Draco was all right.

'What happens now?' she asked, afraid of the answer. Afraid of not knowing.

With an expressionless lift of his shoulders, Severus replied, 'Now we wait.'

Draco asked Severus, 'How long do you think it will take?' Severus shook his head. Narcissa supposed there was no telling.

She let go her son and asked, 'Can I get you anything, darling?'

Draco paused, as if the answer to that question was completely unexpected. 'I could murder a roast beef sandwich, actually.' Then he paused, eyes closed, and gave a tiny, self-conscious shake of his head.

Narcissa almost laughed. A roast beef sandwich was perfectly manageable. It was absurd how happy it could make her to do something small for him. 'Go and sit down.' She gestured towards the drawing room. 'I'll call an elf.'

Draco smiled at her gratefully. 'Severus?' she asked.

'Nothing for me, thank you,' he said, his voice dripping with irony. 'Draco, you should pack a bag. Once we are summoned, there's no telling how long we'll be gone.' Draco

nodded.

Severus looked from mother to son and said, 'If you would excuse me for a moment.' Before Narcissa could say anything else, he strode down the corridor, disappearing through the washroom door.

'Will you need help, darling?' she asked Draco.

He shook his head. 'No. I'll be right back.'

'I'll be in the drawing room.' She squeezed his hand and watched him ascend the stairs.

Narcissa noted her shaking hands as she summoned a house-elf and requested a sandwich and a pot of tea. As the elf Disapparated, the shaking worsened and spread, until she was shivering violently. She tried to even out her breathing, repeating to herself 'he's alive he's alive he's alive'. She was seized with a sudden fear that if she went upstairs to his rooms, Draco would not be there. To dispel it, she rubbed her hands over her arms, wrapped the words around herself like a blanket (*he's alive he's alive he's alive*). The shivers would not stop.

Severus must have seen her standing there, though she had not heard him approach. He stayed back, as though he did not wish to get too close to her. 'You're shaking,' he said, as if she didn't know.

'Who...?' She floundered. 'Who completed the task?' She meant, *Please reassure me that my son has not committed murder.*

'I did. As was his will.'

Of course, she thought. *Because the Dark Lord willed it, not because I asked.* It was a relief somehow. She did not care to question why.

'Thank you,' she said sincerely. They were paltry words in the circumstances. She had no others to offer.

He looked at her, hard; she refused to meet his eyes, knowing that if she did she would go to pieces. She thought, *What have I done?*

She said, 'I've tried to contact you.'

'I know,' he told her. His tone suggested he found her owls a nuisance. He hesitated, as if gathering his thoughts, before he said, 'I have fulfilled the Vow as it relates to Draco's task, and I will continue to keep him safe. So really, there is no need to ...'

She waited for him to continue, but he did not. 'To what?' she asked.

Severus, whose speech was always so careful, so deliberate, blurted out, 'You don't owe me anything, Narcissa.'

She was stunned. 'Do you honestly think I broke my marriage vows out of a sense of obligation?'

'I don't know why you did what you did.'

The truth was that she had a multitude of reasons, or justifications: she had been abandoned, she had no one she could trust, her husband would not see her, her sister had betrayed her, she was frightened, she was angry, she was weak, she could not have helped herself. The one thing that had not occurred to her was that she owed Severus...not in that way. And yet, here he was, suggesting that she had paid him in trade, like a whore.

She wanted to hurt him for it. 'I did it because I wanted to,' she said angrily. 'What was your excuse?'

He blinked, as if startled, and for a moment he looked like a man who has made a grave miscalculation. But his face quickly reclaimed its emotionless expression.

'I did not mean to suggest ...' he began.

'Mother?'

Narcissa stepped back from Severus and looked up to see Draco on the stairs, a suitcase in his hand. She looked over her shoulder into the drawing room, where a tray bearing a roast beef sandwich and a pot of tea waited on a side table.

She tried to smile. 'Your sandwich is ready,' she told her son.

His eyes flicked from her to Severus. 'Right,' said Draco, arriving on the bottom step. 'Thank you, Mother.'

'Shall we ...?' She must not look at Severus.

Before she could complete her thought, two things happened: Draco winced, and Severus said, 'This is it. The summons.'

Severus addressed Draco. 'We must not keep him waiting.'

Draco straightened his spine. 'I'm ready. I just need a quick word with my Mother.'

With a curt nod, Severus gestured to the front door. 'Hurry. I'll be just outside.'

Draco's eyes followed Severus out the front door before he turned to her. He wore a troubled expression. 'What just...I mean, what happened just now?'

She could barely hide her anxiety. 'Nothing, darling. I was trying to convince Severus to take me with you.' It surprised her how easy it was to lie to him, whom she loved so much. She dared not say more.

Her lie had the desired effect. 'Absolutely not. I want you here, where it's safe.' If she closed her eyes, she could almost believe it was Lucius speaking to her, until he asked, 'Can you shrink this for me? I never get it right.' He held up the suitcase with a sheepish half-smile.

She laughed and uttered the charm. As he tucked the suitcase into his pocket, he said, 'I don't want you to worry about me. I'll be fine.' He kissed her cheek...grim, determined...and stepped back. 'See you soon.'

'Be careful. Don't give him any cause to...'

'I won't,' he assured her. Narcissa watched through the window as Draco took Severus's arm. They turned in place until their two figures blended into the dark, indistinguishable.

~~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Three days later, she got her husband back.

Just like that. One moment she was contemplating the breadth of her faithlessness over a scroll of parchment, the quill in her hand forgotten; the next moment the fireplace

in the library blazed to life and Severus said, 'Narcissa, we're coming through.'

He then pulled back, and a moment later Rodolphus Lestrange stepped into the library, brushing the soot from his robes, followed a moment later by his brother, and then by Lucius.

He was unshaven and looked unsteady on his feet, his body not quite comfortable in robes that had fit him perfectly a year ago, the same robes he had been wearing when he last left the house. He was thin and pale, a structure comprised of bleached bones, as if the colour had been leached out of him. Severus came through last. Narcissa stood, insensible, at a complete loss for what to say.

Lucius's eyes found her. 'Cissa.'

All she could manage to articulate was, 'How?'

'Did no one ever tell you not to look a gift horse in the mouth?' replied Severus. 'Azkaban belongs to the Dark Lord now. In his generosity, he has granted a blanket amnesty to all political prisoners.'

Of course he would call it an amnesty she thought. She wanted to laugh at the absurdity of it, or weep with relief. Or both. At once.

'Cissy,' said Rodolphus. 'Where's my wife?'

'I'm sorry, Rodolphus, she's not here.'

He looked crestfallen. 'Where?'

'I couldn't say.'

Severus said, 'She will return by this evening.' He turned to Narcissa. 'There's to be a celebration.' Narcissa nodded.

'Lucius.' She stepped forward, sloughing off her shock, aware that she was grinning like a lunatic, aware that it was unseemly under the circumstances. And yet she did not care. He was home. He was rumpled and pale, bearded and unusually taciturn and *home*.

Shaking her head in amazement, she reached out to embrace him, but with a speed belied by his disoriented appearance, he caught her by the wrists. 'Don't,' he said. She regarded him, confused. 'I'm filthy,' he explained.

Her eyes flicked over to Severus, whose face was unreadable, a mask. What had he said to Lucius, she wondered.

Severus said, 'I'll just leave you to get reacquainted. See you tonight.'

Narcissa said nothing, only searched her husband's face. Lucius turned his head. 'Of course,' he told Severus as the other man stepped into the fireplace and vanished.

Lucius was still holding her wrists. At a small cough from one of the Lestranges, he released her.

Narcissa addressed her brother-in-law. 'I've put you and Bella in your usual rooms, Rodolphus. Please make yourself at home. Rabastan, your rooms are free. I'll send an elf.'

She should have shown them to their rooms herself, but she wouldn't let Lucius out of her sight. If she turned her back for too long, he might be gone again.

She turned to him, longing to touch him, wondering what to say. 'Perhaps we should...' she began. Lucius nodded and, wordlessly, he followed her to their rooms.

Arriving at the door, he hesitated. She opened it for him with a small smile and led him through the sitting room to their bedroom. He entered as if it were a room he'd never seen. His eyes darted about, and he sat down on the bed. He looked at a loss. Instead of removing his shoes and shrugging off his rumpled robes as he would have done before, he merely sat staring at his hands.

This is your home, she wanted to shout. *I am your wife. Say something!* Instead she asked, 'Are you hungry, darling? Shall I have a bath prepared, or ...?'

'I'll have to see the Dark Lord this evening. Severus said...'

Narcissa's chest tightened. She knew the fear that was coiling in his belly, having felt it herself every time she was called, and Lucius had so many reasons to fear the Dark Lord.

'What did Severus say?' she prompted, not because she wanted to know if her own name had been mentioned. Her betrayal stepped up beside her and tugged on her hand.

Lucius said, 'I have erred, and I am not forgiven.'

'Darling ...'

He looked up then, eyes focussed on her face as if really seeing her for the first time since he stepped through the Floo. 'Isn't there something you should be doing?' he asked mildly.

Confused, she asked, 'Doing?'

'Yes.'

'For a start, I should be with my husband, whom I haven't seen in a year.' She tried to make it a joke, but he was serious.

'Why are you still here?'

A cold flush spread over the back of her neck. Severus had told him. Warily she asked, 'Where else would I be, Lucius?'

He stared at his hands, which lay in his lap. 'I thought you would be gone by now,' he said, matter-of-factly.

'I don't understand.'

'You were going to leave me. I found the proof.' His tone suggested that his anger would be incandescent, if he could only summon the energy.

She shook her head, still confused. 'Lucius, you'll have to explain better than that.'

'I know about the accounts. You weren't exactly discreet. I stumbled on one of the statements while looking for a quill in your desk one day. Hundreds of thousands of Galleons, Narcissa, in your name alone. So I looked further. And what did I find? Seven different accounts, in Guernsey, Andorra, Reykjavik. All these years I have deferred to you in money matters. I have done exactly as you said, always. And *this* is how you repay me?' He spoke as if referring to another man's troubles, unfortunate but only vaguely interesting, in which he had no stake.

This was the last thing she had expected. 'Why didn't you say anything?'

'I meant to. I was furious, and I meant to confront you, but then'...he winced...'the Ascension Day incident occurred. And I began to think perhaps it would be better if you did leave. And take Draco. Especially if you didn't tell me where you were going, which seemed likely.'

By now his indifference had crumbled. He looked miserable.

Her voice was quiet. 'You never did tell me what happened that day. *What his Lordship did to you when he found out about that damned diary* she wanted to say. 'But let's stay on topic, shall we? Because I still don't understand. Is that why you refused to see me when I visited, or to answer my letters?'

'You sent letters?'

'Every week. And when I finally secured a Portkey to Azkaban, after considerable effort...do you have any idea how many palms I had to grease for that?...I arrived there only to be told that you wouldn't see me!'

'I didn't get the letters,' he said.

Narcissa felt a sense of relief on hearing this, as she had used it to reassure herself for a year now. But he was also avoiding her question.

'That's comforting,' she said, noting how hard she sounded. 'And you refused to see me why?'

'Oh,' he said. As if he'd only just remembered that. 'I couldn't face you.'

'You were *that* angry with me?' He was shaking his head, his lips soundlessly forming the word 'no', his eyes on the floor. 'So you left me to wonder what had happened to you? *Why* could you not face me?' she insisted.

He looked up, his expression incredulous. 'Are you serious? I knew you were unhappy, and when I thought of what you must think of me, the shame...'

She was growing exasperated. 'You didn't exactly ask me what I thought of you, did you? I was desperate for anything, a word, a glimpse of you. Something to reassure me you were alive. I thought they had quietly executed you and I'd never see you again. I felt like a *widow*! And now you tell me you left me hanging out *of embarrassment*? Do you really not...I could hex you right now for sheer stupidity, Lucius.'

'It's no worse than I've thought of doing to myself, I assure you.'

'You thought if you refused to see me...what? That I would just leave? Leave you?' To her complete astonishment, he nodded. 'And Draco? Did you really think he would leave you to rot in prison? Putting aside what you assumed about me...which I fully intend to get back to...how could you think such a thing, when your son has been risking his life for the chance to see you again?'

Now he looked as if she *had* hexed him; his shoulders had turned inwards, his head bowed.

'I didn't think of it that way. I can't explain it. In that place, my thoughts were...it made sense to me then. I couldn't see you, Cissa. I couldn't bear to think what I'd done to you and Draco. It would have felt selfish to me. I wanted to see you so much, but I didn't deserve to. I deserved to be removed from you. I am unworthy...'

She thought, *This is not my husband speaking. I want my husband back.*

She stood before him now, her face inches from his, refusing to let him look away. When he tried, she reached out and grabbed his chin, forced him to look her in the eye. 'Listen to me now. Listen.' Her eyes were hard, diamond bright. She spoke carefully so there could be no misunderstanding. 'You have never been unworthy.'

'Then why didn't you tell me about the accounts?'

She bit her lip. 'I was never going to leave you, Lucius. I want to be very, very clear about that. I would never leave you. I should have told you about the accounts. And they aren't the only thing I haven't told you about.'

Narcissa outlined her plan, starting from the beginning.

He sat in silence, but she could tell he was not listening, that he did not understand the importance of what she was saying. She held her breath, waiting for him to acknowledge her work. Finally:

'No,' he said flatly.

'Just like that, no?'

'No. I can't. We can't.'

'Lucius, be reasonable. We...'

The look he gave her told her she had grievously misjudged the situation. 'Be reasonable?' he threw back at her. 'Cissa, this is my home *Our* home. Draco's. This is the only home we've ever known.'

She wanted to shout, *It is a house. Bricks and mortar and history and enchantments, but still only a house, and a house will do us no good if we are all dead*. But she knew better than to press him now and so was silent.

He shook his head. 'No, Cissa. Absolutely not. It doesn't matter. I can fix this. He's angry now, but he won't be forever. I was his right hand, and he needs me now. I'll do whatever I can to prove myself. If I can just get back in his good graces, things will be fine.'

'Lucius, I don't think...'

'What? You don't think I can turn this around?'

'That's not what I was going to say.' The turn of this conversation was beginning to alarm her. 'I was going to say that I don't think we should discount the possibility of...'

'I said no. This is my family's home, my birthright. It is our son's legacy, and I will not leave it. I cannot believe you would suggest such a thing.'

That stung. She had begun to fear that Lucius was truly broken, but the fire in him now told her he was not. She bit her tongue, was so accustomed now to biting it that she no longer felt the sting, nor tasted the blood. He was reluctant; she could understand that. But her resolve was not shaken. It would simply take work to convince him.

She decided to drop the subject of her plan and concentrate on the task at hand. 'You'll need to prepare for this evening,' she said. 'The first thing we should do is get you out of those robes.'

The corner of his mouth twitched. 'That eager, are you?'

In spite of herself, Narcissa smiled. This was the man she knew. She would be forgiven.

'There will be time for that later,' she told him. 'Let's just get you ready, shall we?'

~~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

After healing the worst (or perhaps only the most visible) of his injuries that night, she laid him, barely conscious, in their bed. Out of habit, she had spelled the door against entry by anyone but her son and promptly forgotten everything but Lucius.

Detachedly she wondered why, when she had been consumed by terror only hours ago as the Dark Lord raised his wand against her husband *Let this be a lesson to all of you*), now she felt only numb, as if the fear had taken every other emotion with it when it moved on, leaving her burned out, hollow.

She stripped down to her knickers and camisole and crawled into bed beside him. He turned to her, shaking uncontrollably, and curled his body into hers as if seeking warmth. She put her arms around him and lent him the heat of her body to ease his shivers. If she could feel anything, she was certain her heart would be breaking.

He was saying something, his mouth against her breastbone. She pulled back, whispered, 'What was that, darling?'

'I'm cold.'

'I know. That's normal.' How did she know that? She couldn't remember.

She reached for her wand, but he caught her elbow. 'Don't go,' he said.

'I'm just getting my wand.' She stretched her arm to retrieve it from the bedside table and cast a warming charm around him. 'Is that better?' she asked.

He nodded. 'Stay with me.'

'I will, darling. I'm not going anywhere.' She kissed the top of his head and stroked his still-fine but no longer sleek hair. After a few more minutes, his shivers and his breathing eased. Thinking him asleep, she tried to disentangle her arms, but again he caught her and held her, his grip surprisingly tight. He was whispering something over and over, his mouth moving against her breast. It took a moment before she realised it was, '... I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry'

She bent down close to his ear and said, 'You have nothing to be sorry for.'

He shook his head and his nose brushed her nipple, which tightened in response. She scolded herself. They were surrounded by enemies, no longer safe in their own home; he had just been Cruciated within an inch of his life, and suddenly her knickers were growing damp. This was hardly the time.

But his hand was on the small of her back, the place he alone knew that she loved to be touched, his fingers clumsy but insistent. His mouth opened against the fabric covering her breast, his breath hot before his lips closed over her nipple, sucking through the thin cotton. The hand moving over her back slid downwards and pulled her flush against him, nascent erection pressed against her thigh. She froze, wanting what he was offering but concerned for his pain.

'Darling, I ...'

'... missed you,' he whispered fiercely, completing a thought she didn't know she was thinking.

He pushed ineffectually at her camisole. 'Take this off.'

Without questioning it, she sat up, pulled the camisole over her head and lay down again beside him, only to discover that in the moment it had taken to remove a garment, he had fallen fast asleep.

His body slackened, his face now relaxed. Aching, she lay in the dark and, for the first time in over a year, listened to her husband's quiet breathing. The house was silent. Narcissa moved to her side of the bed, keeping one hand on Lucius.

As she settled in to stare at the canopy...though exhausted, she knew sleep would not come easily...Lucius made a small distressed noise, a roar silenced before it could really begin.

She stroked his arm. 'It's all right, darling. I'm here.' Her words were coins dropped into the dry well of his unconscious despair; she listened for a long time to their silent descent, the ring and echo as they hit the hollow bottom and were still.

~~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Severus knocked and entered, noting at once that, unusually, the torches and the fireplace were unlit. The only light entered through the library's windows, which she sat facing, her chair turned away from the door, her back to him. The sun had nearly set. A slim white arm perched on the chair's armrest, long-fingered hand idly twirling a wand. It was not until he had advanced several steps into the library that he realised the long-fingered hand had ragged and broken nails, knuckles enlarged from years spent in a damp cell.

'Looking for my sister, are you, Snape?' Bellatrix rose from her chair, her back still to him, and hissed his name, as if its texture on her tongue offended her.

'I was looking for Lucius.'

She found herself another chair, one that faced him, and sat down. Her wand continued to dance between her fingers, a diversion and a threat. She did not invite him to sit. Instead she asked, 'Would you believe me if I said they weren't here?'

He looked around the room, empty except for the two of them. 'As it happens, I had already surmised as much.'

'I meant in the house.'

'You know as well as I do they are not to leave the house.'

Severus noted a flicker of annoyance that yet another titbit of information she believed exclusive had been shared with him. He took no small satisfaction in that.

'Well,' she continued, 'I suppose you could say they are ... indisposed. Happy reunion and all that. Nothing you would want to disturb, I'm sure.'

She edged around his defences, subtle as a Vipertooth. Permitting her no entrance, he gave her a look that was viciously bland.

The wand paused in its circuit, then suddenly disappeared, a gesture he knew was meant to indicate that she did not find him threatening. Of course, he also knew the wand could reappear in her hand without warning, by which time he would have already been cursed.

With one elbow on each armrest, Bellatrix steepled her fingers beneath her chin. 'You wouldn't be thinking of challenging Lucius for her, would you? Wands at dawn...or better yet, a potion in his soup. That sounds more like you. You're not the romantic sort.'

'I have no idea what you mean,' said Severus. She was boring him.

'Now, now. We *know* things, you and I.' She spun the words out like a spider, slow and deliberate. 'For example, we both know that you know exactly what I mean. We both know that you are fundamentally an opportunist. I don't blame you, really. I realise you cannot help your low birth. But one's better nature cannot win out over one's self interest. Nothing with you comes for nothing, certainly not your protection.'

Her needling could not touch him; his truths lay behind doors locked to her. He said, 'Opportunism, as ~~w~~*both know*, is hardly a question of birth. And you have a surfeit of imagination, Bellatrix.'

'Oh, I won't deny that I am imaginative. Just ask Yaxley how many bollocks he has these days.' A smile, girlish and ghastly, lit up her face. If she giggled, he would be forced to hex her.

The non-sequitur piqued his curiosity, but he would die before he asked what she meant. Instead, he quirked an irritated eyebrow and waited for the inevitable boast, thinking this ranked as one of the maddest conversations in a life of utterly mad conversations.

'*That*,' Bellatrix informed him, 'is what happens to filthy half-bloods who cannot keep their eyes or their hands to themselves.' For a second he thought the wand had reappeared, but even as he blinked, the object now arcing between her fingers became shorter, flatter, silvery at one end. 'If you so much as lay a finger on my little sister, I would have no compunction about making a necklace of yours.'

She held the knife still for a fraction of a second, allowing him to catch the glint off the blade, then it too disappeared...inserted into her sleeve no doubt. A Stygian trick.

He was not troubled. He thought, *The things I could show you, you insufferable harpy*. Had he been so inclined, he could have shown her images calculated to make her choke on her own monstrous bigotry, each more convincing than the last. A beautiful pair of hands scrabbling over his chest. A well-bred, mannerly mouth whispering filthy words in his ear. Narcissa rippling above him like a white flame, licking the salt of her unmaking from his lower lip with her wine-tart tongue. Such was the power of his mind. A witch like Bellatrix, powerful as she was, would be swallowed whole.

Without a trace of concern, he said, 'Why, Bellatrix, don't tell me you actually care what happens to another human being, even if she is your sister. I might think you've gone soft.'

Her hands lay with deceptive gravity on the armrests of her chair. 'Family always comes first,' she said without irony.

He chose his words with great care, ensured his inflection was flawless. 'Well, this certainly was ... instructive. Good evening, Bellatrix.'

Let her think she had given something away inadvertently. Without waiting for a reply, he turned and left.

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Narcissa did not find it difficult to pretend she was not a hostage. The past year had granted her ample experience of avoiding reality. Lucius, having been released from Azkaban only to become a prisoner in his own home, found it more difficult.

Guards were brought in. No one referred to them as guards, but there was no mistaking their purpose. It was impossible to say how many there were exactly, because they frequently wore their masks on duty. They were only boys; from their voices and mannerisms, they couldn't be more than two or three years out of Hogwarts, hardly older than Draco. During the day, one of them shadowed Lucius around the house. At night, two would stand outside their bedroom door. They appeared to trade off so that the same boy never served daytime duty two days in a row. At first she found this confusing, but later she stopped thinking of them as human and began thinking of them as fixtures, like house-elves or part of the furniture. As such, the changes bothered her less.

She couldn't decide what it meant for the war effort that able-bodied soldiers could be spared for such a trifling matter as keeping an eye on the Malfoys. Perhaps they were winning, or perhaps the Dark Lord was foolish as well as mad after all.

~~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

After the meeting that night, Lucius sat for an hour without speaking, watching the fire she had conjured in the sitting room.

(*Lucius, I see no reason for you to have a wand anymore*)

He refused to look at her when she came to tell him she was going to bed. Narcissa wondered how much more they could reasonably be asked to bear.

They undressed in silence, as they had after the funeral of Abraxas Malfoy.

They lay, each on his or her own side of the bed, discrete units, and she wondered how the Dark Lord had managed to separate them. Lucius's scent had returned, now that he had his own aftershave and his elf-laundered clothes again. Having missed a year of his life, she breathed it in, hungry for details, but she could not speak.

In the dark he turned. She could feel the air displaced by his body...light, unsteady...as he shifted; the covers whispered around him. It was a turning towards, not a turning away, and she was grateful. She waited for him to say something.

'Cissa, why did you never tell me about the accounts? Really.'

It was the question she had been dreading. She wished she could say they were merely insurance, coins for a ferryman she hoped never to have to pay. But that would not have been the entire truth.

All the things she had not allowed herself to think through the long months without him, every poisonous sentiment never set to parchment, formed a barrier in her throat, iron-flavoured and intractable. She wished it would choke her and be done with it.

(*You did this to us.*)

(*This is your fault.*)

(*You abandoned us.*)

She swallowed hard. 'I didn't think we would ever need them.'

(*You knew what he was capable of*)

(*He's taken our son.*)

(*I may never forgive you for this*)

'You blame me, don't you?' asked Lucius.

'I did,' she admitted. 'When you were away, I cursed you for the situation we were in. But you couldn't have known it would come to this, could you?'

'No,' he said quietly and not without irony. She wondered if it really took losing his wand to make him see this course was a path to futility.

Weighed down by her own burdens, she decided to cut him free. 'I don't blame you, Lucius.'

A hand with wax paper skin reached across and travelled an unmarked path up her forearm until it held her hand and squeezed. His little gesture of thanks cut her open, and she cursed herself, knowing that forgiveness is easy to grant when you have something to repent yourself.

The knowledge of what she had done had settled like a lead-coloured bruise in her memory. She had wondered if it meant she did not love her husband, if it meant she loved Severus, if it meant that she was the sort of person she had always despised: a hypocrite. Then, on seeing Lucius step out of the Floo that day, she realised it meant only the latter, something that Severus could not have failed to notice and agree with.

'I said nothing about the accounts because ... honestly, I forgot all about them until Ascension Day. The money was sitting there, growing quietly all these years.' She knew her next words would strike at his pride, and she was sorry for it. 'After that day, I thought it best if there was no unnecessary information in your mind, should the Dark Lord choose to torture you again. I knew no one would question me to get such information. I didn't think of it as a secret. It was just part of administering our finances, as I've always done.'

'You didn't trust me.'

'I wanted to protect you.'

'Things are different now,' he said. 'We cannot have secrets from each other. If there's anything else you haven't told me, I wish you would tell me now.'

The bruise spread, dull and so deep it silenced her. She understood the urge to confess, to gain absolution; it trailed her like a shadow. It sat on her desk and turned the pages of her books before she could absorb the information written there; it perched on the edge of the bath, skimming cold fingers through the water, regarding her with baleful eyes. But she also knew this urge was entirely selfish and that Lucius would not thank her for indulging it.

'There's nothing else, is there?' he asked. 'I need you with me now. I need to know we stand together, with no secrets between us.'

She searched the dark for the place she thought his eyes would be. 'There is nothing. I stand with you. With Draco. You two are everything.'

The backs of his fingers grazed her cheek and found no tears there. He could not see her face in this light.

'That's what I wanted to know, Cissa.'

~~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

As he left the drawing room, Severus was surprised to see Narcissa coming down the stairs. She looked equally surprised to see him. Her eyes scanned the hall, making sure they were alone. A low hum of voices emanated from behind the closed drawing room door; they had only moments, at best.

Severus asked, 'How is he?'

Quietly, she answered, 'He is not as he was.'

Severus frowned, appalled at the little drop of implication, of hope, that welled under his skin like blood at her choice of words.

She asked, 'Do you have any Dreamless Sleep?'

Annoyance at his own weakness made him abrupt. 'Which of you needs it?'

'What do you think?' she asked impatiently.

Anyway, it was a small drop and dried quickly when exposed to air.

'It matters in terms of the dosage,' he said.

~~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

This had been Mother Malfoy's reading room. She had been a rather bookish woman, apparently. Narcissa had never truly known her. What little she knew of the woman's personality had been gleaned from the portraits, one of which presided over them now. Narcissa had forgotten the existence of this room until it had been co-opted by their houseguests. Once the furniture had been rearranged, it suited their purposes, as it was about the right size and contained a sufficient number of chairs for a small audience. Following the destruction of an antique side table and a lovely old writing desk, there was also sufficient floor space. The portrait of Lucius's mother, now permanently silenced, was merely a bonus.

'Please have a seat, ma'am.'

Narcissa's head snapped up. Normally the boys sent to do his Lordship's work weren't so polite. Normally they did not address her at all. Certainly, they did not ~~invite~~ her to take a seat for a spectacle that she would rather not witness. Fortunately, she was the only audience member today.

The boy had brown eyes that were warm, almost kind, and incongruous in his mask. He must be one of his Lordship's unnecessary sentries. He sounded young; he could not have been much older than Draco.

She knew that voice. Where had she heard that voice?

The boy was looking at Narcissa. 'Are you ...?' he began.

Am I what, little man? Am I comfortable? No. Am I getting ready to scream? Not if I can help it. Am I going to draw my wand and hex you into oblivion? I only wish.

Narcissa said nothing. Beneath his robes, it appeared the boy was shuffling his feet.

The numbers game was insufficient for these purposes. So instead of choosing a number, she concentrated on building an image of a place where she and Lucius and Draco would be safe. In her mind, she saw a whitewashed house that glittered beneath a strong, hot sun...a holiday sun, almost painfully bright, which glanced off a red tile roof.

The boy, all embarrassed courtesy, asked Lucius to remove his outer robes. Dead-eyed, vitiated, Lucius obeyed.

That voice, where had she heard it? Scanning her memory, Narcissa connected it with a party at the Flints'. Two years ago, was it? But he wasn't one of the Flint boys.

She glanced at Lucius, who was staring at the floor, waiting. *How will he ever forgive me for witnessing this?*

'Are you ready?' the boy asked Lucius. Lucius nodded.

Adrian! That was his name. George and Nathalie's son. He used to play Quidditch with Draco.

On the shady side of the house, she placed a bench, then added cushions. Blue, she decided, a calming colour.

The boy addressed her again, very quietly. 'If you would rather close your eyes, I won't tell them.'

Silently, Narcissa looked to her husband, who inclined his head towards her, a movement so slight that the boy did not notice. His expression was as blank as hers.

She added window boxes to the house and tried to decide which plants would be best suited to the climate, which would require the least amount of care.

'Crucio.'

~~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

It took months, but Narcissa was patient even though it nearly killed her.

In the dead time after the New Year, with bare black branches stark against a grey sky outside the windows, Lucius said, 'Look around you.' He gestured at the portraits in the sitting room, generations of Malfoys looking on to see how this discussion would end.

She said, 'I've thought it out and...'

He said, 'This is my legacy...Draco's legacy...and I will not abandon it to a pack of jackals.'

She said, 'Can you think of another way?'

He said, 'We'll never survive.'

She said, 'We will. We have to.'

'You know what happened to Regulus.' He was shaking his head.

'Does anyone know what really happened to Regulus?'

Lucius paused. 'The Dark Lord...'

'I know the story,' she said, 'but I've listened to the others over the years, and I've yet to hear anyone claim credit for killing him. Have you?'

He shook his head.

She continued, 'I do know Regulus never said anything about a change of heart. He just disappeared one day, and later the Dark Lord said, 'Let this be a lesson to all of you.' But did anyone actually search for him?'

'Are you saying...'

'I'm saying, how do we know he isn't living a quiet life in Argentina right now?'

'How could he be? If he were alive, he'd have contacted you. At the very least, we would have heard from him after the Dark Lord vanished, when we all thought him dead.'

'I've thought of that. There's no easy answer, because he should have contacted us. It would be unforgivable to let his mother die of grief the way she did if he were alive somewhere. Unless he thought we'd turn him over.' It pained her to think it, but she could find no other explanation for her cousin's failure to come to her. And she was certain he would have done, unless he really was dead, which was unthinkable.

She asked, 'What if he was afraid of us, or of Bella? What if he got so far away he didn't hear of the Dark Lord's disappearance? The point is we don't know what really happened. But I doubt he was killed by Death Eaters; if that were the case, they'd have crowded about it. They'd have laid his body somewhere and set the Mark over it, and we know that didn't happen, or the Dark Lord would be tormenting us with his desertion now.' She sighed. 'I think he escaped, and I think we have a real chance of escaping, too.'

'You've thought a lot about this.'

'I've had nothing but time. Everything's in place.'

He looked thoughtful. 'All right. Even assuming I agreed, we still have the problem of that ... thing he's put on you.' Lucius still took it as a personal insult that the Dark Lord had put a tracking device on his wife; part of Narcissa bristled at being patronised as such, and part of her found it almost sweet.

'There has to be a spell to remove it, something that won't let him know it's been removed.'

'How would we take Draco out of school unnoticed?'

She swallowed. 'Severus will help.' She did not mention what she was prepared to do in exchange.

'I don't know, Cissa. If I had a wand ...'

Every discussion led to this, and this was where every discussion ended. She held his eye, willing him to understand, to help her.

He said, 'When I was twenty, this was all so simple. I thought I was doing the right thing, and somehow I involved myself...not just myself, now I've involved you and Draco in something...I risked the two most important people in the world, and for what?'

'You aren't the only one who thought this was the right path,' Narcissa replied. 'I believed in him, too.'

'The world we were trying to build, all our dreams, our ideals. It's just so much dust now, isn't it?' His despair was palpable. He reached for her, threaded his fingers through hers. 'There was a time when I was sure I would be Minister for Magic by the age of thirty,' he said.

She smiled, sadly, thinking that perhaps this was what one did at their age: compared one's erstwhile expectations and dreams to reality and mourned. She was still half in love with the ambitions of their early marriage, though she should long since have purged them.

'And I was to be your most trusted adviser,' she chimed in.

He said, 'You have always been my most trusted adviser.'

She squeezed his hand. 'As you have been mine.'

'We've got to get that thing off you,' Lucius said.

'It can't be impossible. If we apply ourselves, we should be able to figure it out.'

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Narcissa leaned her head against the back of her chair, letting the heat from the fire and the quiet voices in the background lull her almost into sleep. They sat in the drawing room, Severus and Lucius discussing the current situation in hushed tones, Draco listening attentively, each of them with a snifter in his hand. (Draco had been particularly pleased to be included in Lucius and Severus's old ritual, she had noted.) It had been a quiet day, a rare, almost singular occasion, as they were alone in the house...Bella and Rodolphus having disappeared with a whole host of others the previous evening. Narcissa had even been coaxed down the stairs for dinner. Their evening had proceeded as it would have before, in the time between wars. With Lucius and Severus conversing quietly, Narcissa was happy to listen and contribute the odd comment. She felt almost at peace, watching the fire trace itself into ribbons and shadows in the hearth.

Her reverie ended abruptly when she heard the front door, and Bella appeared in the hall outside the drawing room. 'Well, isn't this cosy?' she asked.

Narcissa stiffened, noting that Lucius suddenly looked more alert, more cautious. Draco sat up straighter. Only Severus remained unruffled, undisturbed. He sipped his Armagnac and regarded Bella with detached boredom.

'Bella,' Narcissa greeted her, trying to cover her awkwardness. 'I didn't realise you were back. Where's Rodolphus?'

Bella responded with a dismissive 'How should I know?' She dropped into a chair, perfectly at ease, and stretched out her long legs. 'Snape. I'm surprised to see you here. Shouldn't you be twisting young minds to your own ends or something?'

'Bella,' Narcissa said warningly.

Severus smirked. 'It's the Easter holidays, Bellatrix. Even I have to take the evening off once in a while.'

'So what are we discussing?' asked Bella, all studied nonchalance. 'Anything interesting happening on the first floor these days, Lucius?'

'Give it a rest, Bella.'

'Cissy, I was merely trying to be friendly to your husband, and look how he treats me. Why, you'd think he had no manners whatsoever.'

Narcissa resolved not to let her sister bait her. 'Bella, if you have something to say, say it. Otherwise, you need not stay. I'm sure you'd be bored silly by this conversation.'

'On the contrary, I think this conversation could be quite interesting. These two have *a lot* to talk about, don't you think, Cissy?' Bella shot a pointed look at her sister. 'They have so much in common.'

Narcissa began, 'Bella...'

But Lucius cut across her. 'Your sister is quite right, Narcissa. Why, right this moment, Severus and I are both wondering what the hell Bellatrix is talking about.'

Bella's eyebrow arched. 'You know, Lucius, I've never understood your relationship with Snape. You were such a high-flyer once, and now this filthy half-blood has eclipsed you in every way. Considering everything that happened while you were away, it surprises me that your outsize ego can tolerate having him around.'

Lucius leaned forward in his seat. 'Severus has been a very good friend to us, Bella, and I would ask you to address him with a bit more respect.'

The tip of Bella's tongue touched her bottom lip. 'Oh, I quite agree that Snape's certainly been an excellent friend to Cissy. Haven't you, Snape?' She reached for her pocket.

Severus remained perfectly still, but Lucius made a small involuntary movement, then quickly realised she was feinting.

Bella laughed. 'You weren't going for your wand, were you, Lucius?'

Lucius looked from Bella to Narcissa, who should have anticipated that Bella would eventually do something like this, though Narcissa could have cursed her for doing it in front of Draco. As Narcissa was thinking of what to say, Lucius looked a question at her, but he turned away before she could answer with a silent gesture.

'What are you trying to say, Bella?' Lucius demanded. 'Spit it out.'

Severus spoke up. 'Oh, is this the first you've heard of your sister-in-law's pet theory? What she's trying to say is, I've been carrying on a torrid affair with your wife. So sorry you had to find out this way, old friend,' Severus said drily. 'Of course, according to Bellatrix, I'm also meant to be taking orders from Dumbledore's portrait and passing secret messages to ... Kingsley Shacklebolt, was it? Isn't that what you told the Dark Lord, Bellatrix?' Narcissa could see that Bella was taken aback, though she covered it quickly. Severus looked over at Lucius. 'You can imagine how well that information was received.'

Bella sniffed. 'It is not my place to question why he would take the word of someone who used to listen at keyholes for a living,' said Bella. She looked at her sister. 'You were right, Cissy. This conversation is frightfully dull.' Bella stood up and delivered her parting shot.

'Draco,' she said with a meaningful nod, 'you should tell your father what you told me.' She looked from Severus to Narcissa, then turned and left.

After she had gone, Lucius looked at Draco. 'What did she mean, "tell your father what you told me"?'

Narcissa scanned their faces: Lucius looked unconcerned, as if he expected no different from Bella. It was impossible, as always, to tell what Severus was thinking. But Narcissa had schooled her son in the art of Occlumency, and to her eye, Draco looked as if he were weighing his father's happiness in the palm of his hand.

Draco shook his head. 'I honestly don't know, Father. Aunt Bella says the maddest things sometimes.'

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That night Lucius stayed her hand as she was about to utter the spell to unbutton the back of her dress. Standing behind her, his breath tickling her neck, he unbuttoned it himself, then pushed it off her shoulders and slid the fabric over her hips. It pooled on the floor at her feet. In silence, she lifted her arms and allowed him to pull her camisole over her head so that when she turned, she stood before him, bare-breasted in the cool air. She thought about how long it had been and felt herself blush. He kissed her then, with a ferocity he had not shown since his return from Azkaban. With a wordless request, he borrowed her wand and dispatched his own clothing, pulling her towards the bed.

She felt the edge of their bed against the backs of her legs. His hands at her waist insisted that she lean back so that her legs dangled over the edge; his fingers sought out the soft skin on the inside of her thighs. His eyes tracked her movements. Still standing, he leaned down to kiss her again. Somehow she was reminded of nights on the far side of the lake at Hogwarts, out after curfew, the reverent way that he had touched her when they were new to each other. His index finger traced a gentle line over her sex, separated from her flesh only by the thin fabric of the knickers she still wore.

He knelt before her and rubbed his cheek against the inside of her thigh. Leaned back on her elbows, she felt his stubble raise gooseflesh over her entire body. He held her eyes as he Banished her knickers. His tongue darted out, opened her further.

He knew her well. He lapped at her with maddening deliberation. All the while, he was gauging her reactions: her shallow breaths, the flush in her cheeks. Her eyes were closing, but just as she was about to peak, he turned away. Again she felt his stubble on her thigh and mewled in frustration.

On his knees before her, he brought her to the brink again and again denied her. 'Lucius, please ...' she hissed.

Between provocative little jabs of his tongue, he whispered the same late-night words he had whispered a hundred times over the course of their marriage: 'No one else

could make you come undone like this.'

Her breathing quickened; a knot of anxiety tightened in her belly, but she returned his gaze, desire and dread working in tandem. Yet he was smiling now, so like his previous self. He dipped his head again and pushed her to the brink a third time, but this time he let her tumble over so that she lost the poisonous thread of those thoughts. He brought her down gently, kissed her thighs, rested against her skin until the trembling subsided.

'Come here,' she said, sliding back to make room for him.

'I want you on top,' he said as he stretched out beside her, 'like in that hotel in Djerba, remember?'

'Yes,' she breathed, memories of their tenth anniversary passing through her like tremors as she moved over him.

Afterwards, he pulled her to him and pressed her back to his chest, nuzzling her neck. Despite her previous unease, she now felt languorous, well-loved and relaxed.

As she sank deliciously towards sleep, she thought he whispered, 'When all of this is over, wouldn't it be wonderful to have another child?'

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Draco woke him out of a dead sleep with an unbelievable racket from the fireplace.

When he stepped through the Floo, Severus found himself in an unfamiliar room. The portraits, each in a frame bearing the Malfoy crest, icy blond occupants regarding the new arrival with interest, suggested that he was somewhere in the Manor. Through a doorway to his left, he noted an enormous four-poster bed and wondered briefly if this was the master suite.

Narcissa sat with Lucius on a sofa, supporting him as he vomited blood into a basin on his lap. Lucius appeared only half-conscious. Without flinching, Narcissa Vanished the mess.

She looked up, relief flooding her face when she saw him. 'Severus.'

Lucius looked as though he'd been mauled by a bear. One eyebrow was split; the skin around the eye beneath was swollen, darkened. His good eye was closed. There was a smear of blood on his chin where Narcissa had wiped it. His fingers appeared to have been slammed in a door. Severus opened his bag. 'What happened?'

'You shouldn't have called him,' said a voice from the corner. Bellatrix, venomous but serene, fixed her dark eyes on Severus. She was pale and shaking, as if she had been Cruciated, but trying to hide it. 'There's no reason to interfere with the Dark Lord's just punishment.'

'Are you really going to trouble him with this?' Narcissa hissed at her sister. She turned to Severus. 'I don't know what happened. They took him into the drawing room and closed the door. They were in there for hours. I've no idea what they did to him.'

'Dolohov?' Severus asked, wondering what was really going on.

Draco spoke up. 'Yeah, him and Greg's dad.'

That was all Severus needed to know. It was exactly like Dolohov...sadistic, predictable and unimaginative...to use a sanguinary curse on an unarmed man. Goyle, always useless with a wand, was probably the source of Lucius's split eyebrow, black eye, and numerous other bruises. It could have been worse.

Severus drew his wand. 'Draco, get the Blood-Replenishing Potion out of my bag. Narcissa, keep him upright.' He began the incantation as the boy took the potion from his bag. When Draco held up the correct bottle, Severus nodded without taking his eyes off Lucius and without breaking the chant. Draco held the bottle to his father's lips just as what looked like another pint of blood came up. The boy pulled back, looking queasy, but then deftly tipped the potion down Lucius's throat. Again Narcissa Vanished the blood. Bellatrix observed all of this without lifting a finger to help.

Lucius's head rested against Narcissa's shoulder. Her trembling hands were white around his waist, her lips moving against his ear. If she was whispering to him, it was so quiet that Severus could not hear her. Having cast the spell to counter Dolohov's curse, Severus waited to ensure it had worked. He watched as Lucius's breathing slowed and contemplated whether to heal the injuries to Lucius's face. Bellatrix was right: If Lucius had been punished for some transgression, the Dark Lord would not be pleased at what he had done here. Instead, he cast a nonverbal charm to determine whether Dolohov had inflicted any other unpleasantness on Lucius. Satisfied that Lucius had no further internal injuries, Severus began the work of setting the bones in his hands.

All the while he kept an eye on Narcissa, who was still whispering almost silently in Lucius's ear. Severus had seen her calm her husband merely by laying her hand over his. The only person in his life who had ever had that power lay now in her grave, put there by a handful of careless words.

Bellatrix said, 'You realise I'll have to report this.'

Severus closed his eyes and drew a deep breath. He did not need to look at her to know the expression of triumph she wore when he asked, 'And why is that, Bellatrix?'

'Lucius is persona non grata. The Dark Lord's word is law, Snape. I should not have to tell you that.'

Narcissa looked at her son. 'Draco.' At some gesture Severus had not caught, Draco moved forward and shifted his father's weight from his mother's arms. Narcissa rose from the sofa and went to stand before her sister. Again, her voice was inaudible to anyone but the person she addressed, but Severus noted that her wand remained in her hand. A moment later, Bellatrix shot her sister a look full of malice and left the room.

Narcissa looked resigned when she returned to the sofa. Draco had settled himself in her place, supporting his father. Narcissa went down on her knees and laid her hand on Lucius's arm. Draco's eyes darted between Severus and his mother.

'Will he be all right?' Narcissa asked.

Severus put a hand on Lucius's chest, felt the even rhythm of inhalation and exhalation. He nodded. 'What did you say to Bellatrix?' he asked.

With a turn of the head, Narcissa replied, 'It's between Bella and myself.'

'Do you think she'll tell anyone?' asked Draco.

Narcissa's eyes were on Lucius. 'No. Then again, with Bella, one never knows.'

'We should put him to bed,' Severus said.

As if waking from a dream, Narcissa nodded. She said, 'I'll do it.' Wand in hand, she levitated her husband into the next room. As she settled him in the four-poster bed, Severus reached into his bag and handed Draco three more bottles of Blood-Replenishing Potion.

'Hang on to these; he might need them later.' He regarded the boy carefully. 'Would you like to tell me what precipitated this?'

Draco looked ill, very like he did last year when he was planning an assassination he couldn't possibly carry out. 'It's a long story,' he said. 'But the short version is that Potter was here, and then he escaped.'

Severus felt a prickle of dread. 'Draco, where is your wand?'

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When Alecto Carrow charged into the Headmaster's office with Draco in tow, Severus had the good sense to act surprised.

'What have we here?' he asked disinterestedly.

'Out after hours.'

'Where did you find him?'

'In the corridor leading to the Slytherin dormitories.'

Severus addressed Draco. 'Coming or going, Mr Malfoy?'

'I was returning to my dormitory, sir. I lost track of time while studying in the library.'

Alecto piped up. 'See, that's what he told me, only I don't believe that.'

Severus told her, 'I will deal with him.'

'You sure, Snape? I can take care of this.'

'I quite believe you would like to, Alecto. But based on his family ties, he is my responsibility. You may go.' He turned to Draco, noting how the boy's eyes avoided Dumbledore's portrait. 'Mr Malfoy, you will remain standing. This may take a while.'

As soon as Alecto left, Severus rounded on Draco. 'Explain yourself.'

'My mother asked me to give you something.' The boy looked around at the portraits on the walls of the Headmaster's study; a scrap of parchment appeared in his hand. Taking a quill from the desk, he hurriedly wrote on the parchment, then folded it and handed it to Severus. 'You should read it now.'

Severus took the parchment without looking at it. Bemused, he asked, 'You could not have found another way to pass me this note?'

'When?' the boy exclaimed. 'How? I've looked for you for two weeks trying to tell you this. It's not like I see you in class anymore.'

'So you got yourself sent to the Headmaster?'

Draco gestured at the parchment. 'I had to deliver that,' he insisted.

Severus debated the merits of instructing Draco on the potential consequences of his actions. *And what if the delightful Miss Carrow had disregarded protocol? What if she had taken matters into her own hands? What would I tell your mo...your parents?.* He decided the boy would probably not listen anyway. Severus unfolded the parchment. It contained an address he had never heard of, a spidery 'D. Malfoy' appearing just below. Nothing else was written there.

Severus opened his mouth to ask what the boy thought he was playing at, but Draco held up a hand and said quickly, 'Don't read it out.' He looked around again at their painted audience. 'You'll remember it?' Draco asked.

The Knut dropped.

It took Severus a moment to answer. 'Yes.'

'Good.' A tap of Draco's wand...Narcissa's wand...and the parchment incinerated itself in Severus's hand. 'Now I've passed on the secret.'

'You might have warned me before doing that,' Severus growled, irritated that he had only just realised the reason, aside from the obvious, that Narcissa had wanted him to make that Vow, why she needed her son's soul intact. 'And if I should ever come calling, will I find your family ensconced in this place?'

'No. It's yours.'

'But you are the Secret Keeper.'

'I promise not to call uninvited.'

Severus shook his head, unsure whether to be amused or disgusted. 'Who else knows the secret?'

'No one. Not even my parents.'

'Unless you tell them.'

'I won't. Not without your permission.'

'Can I trust you?'

'I give you my word as a Malfoy.'

Severus sank into the Headmaster's chair, his head throbbing. 'Can I at least trust you to get back to the dungeons without being seen?'

Draco smiled and cast a Disillusionment charm. 'I'll be careful, I promise,' said his disembodied voice. Severus had to admit he'd learnt it well.

Just like his father, pompous little show-off thought Severus.

Severus said to the empty air, 'Try to look properly punished when you see the Carrows tomorrow.'

'Yes, sir.'

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The house was in an uproar, the Dark Lord's entire army mobilising for the inevitable conflict. Time was running short.

In the chaos Severus pressed three small phials into Lucius's hand.

'What are these?'

'Antivenin,' Severus answered, 'containing a certain coagulant. It has not been field tested, but I am relatively certain it is effective. One for each of you. Just in case.'

(If only we had had more time)

'You don't think ... ?'

'No. I think it unlikely you would ever need it. But to be on the safe side, you should each carry one. Do you have any Blood-Replenishing Potion left over?'

'Yes.'

'Good. Keep that handy, too.'

Lucius nodded. 'Thank you,' he said. 'Do you...?' he began, but seemed to think better of the question.

Severus, who knew what his friend was asking, merely smiled. 'I'll see you soon,' he said and was gone.

Part V

Chapter 5 of 5

'I've spent a lifetime learning the ways in which wizards underestimate witches. There are certain advantages in being underestimated. But the simplicity of a weapon does not mean I won't use it.'

V.

Summer Again

1998

All eyes in the Great Hall were fixed on the young lion circling the ageing, wounded mantichore, wondering who would strike first...all eyes but Lucius's and Draco's.

She and Lucius had found Draco, Merlin knew how, and immediately realised something was wrong. Though he appeared unhurt, the look he gave her...remorse and shame mixed with his relief...made her ask, 'What is it?'

'Your wand,' he whispered. 'It's gone. Fiendfyre.'

Three things had happened almost at once.

First, she and Lucius exchanged a look, both of them knowing they were now all defenceless in the midst of a battle.

Second, she heard a wild, exhilarated laugh, both familiar and alien, and turned to see her sister fall.

Third, Potter appeared and challenged the Dark Lord.

Now she could feel Lucius and Draco tracking her movements, which went unnoticed by everyone else. For the shy girl who had faded so easily into the background, the cunning woman who knew how to keep out of the way in her own home, it was nothing to move unseen through a crowd of people. It was a matter of control, using only the mind to scatter one's own substance and make it ephemeral, imperceptible; it was nothing more difficult than a tightrope walk across a spider's web or keeping a family together. It was nothing, in short, that she had not done before. Lucius alone guessed her purpose and let her go.

She spared a glance at Weasley's wife and wondered if Severus had ever repeated to the Order of the Phoenix the words she had dropped like Sickles in a wounded moment. She blew her regrets away like a head of dandelion seeds and let the weeds take root elsewhere. She counted the steps, thirty in all, her ears open the entire time (*Severus Snape wasn't yours. Snape was Dumbledore's*), knowing that if Potter could not pull this off, her life was forfeit.

A mother's magic is wandless, wordless; a mother's summons must be answered. The empty-eyed shell who was no longer Bella did not need a wand, but the last of the Blacks did, and Bella *owed* her this much. Thirty steps there and thirty steps back, while the crowd watched the show, expectant breath held in hundreds of lungs. Father and son observed this with their eyes averted, so as not to give her away, and understood.

It wasn't the sight of Voldemort's body that told her she was free; it was the whisper of dying magic at her throat that announced her millstone had been lifted.

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Narcissa set down the morning Prophet, not knowing whether to laugh or Stupefy herself.

There was to be a truth-telling commission.

Shacklebolt was quoted, something about how Muggles had used such commissions to great effect after one of their dirty wars. As if anyone needed further proof that the new Minister was mad.

It had been two weeks since the final battle.

(Potter!)

Two weeks since she and Lucius had run panicked through the fire to find Draco.

(No...damn you, take your hands off me. Where is he? Potter!)

Two weeks since the Dark Lord made the ultimate capitulation.

*(Get me **Potter**, I said. He knows! He will explain)*

Two weeks since Narcissa had watched her sister killed like an animal by a blood traitor, a mother protecting her child.

(Listen to me, we need Potter. No, you are**not** taking him anywhere until I talk to Potter)

Two weeks since Severus's lifeless body disappeared from a deserted hovel in Hogsmeade...stolen and disposed of by Death Eaters, according to the Prophet.

(Potter! For Merlin's sake, **tell them**.)

Truth-telling commission, really. It was a charade, of course. And though she wanted no part of it, she knew they'd be asked to parade themselves before this commission and the attendant media, to make an adequate display of contrition. It was not her own fate that preoccupied her. The whole process could take months before they were called upon, and there was always the risk that Lucius and Draco would be considered enemy combatants, to be incarcerated until it was time for their testimony. Unless she acted now.

She pushed her breakfast plate aside, her food untouched, and took the Prophet with her up to her study. Later today she would sit down and pen three letters: One to Sextus, one to Shacklebolt, and one to Potter. She would run the first two by Lucius before sending them.

~~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Narcissa stood in the doorway of Bella's room, unsure what she was doing there.

The room was not exactly as Bella had left it; not knowing Miss Bella would never return, the elves had been in to clean. The curtains were open, and white-yellow shafts of summer light pressed into the room like mourners at an overcrowded funeral. Bella had been in the ground more than a week now, and her own funeral had been attended by exactly three people. Burying her, Narcissa found herself dry-eyed and curiously empty. Or perhaps only relieved, and thus guilt-ridden.

It was the guilt that now turned her into a trespasser in her own home, driven by a niggling memory of Bella in the safe room beneath the drawing room during a Ministry raid so long ago. The guilt mixed with the same awe she had felt as a girl in entering her big sister's space when Bella was not there. But she otherwise felt surprisingly little at violating Bella's privacy...she had offered Narcissa little enough of that over the last year.

Bella's personal effects were no longer concealed, there having been no need since the fall of the Ministry the previous summer, so the room at least appeared to have been lived in. The attached dressing room still contained Bella's clothes, which were few. The vanity table was uncluttered; on its top lay only a hairbrush and one of Bella's throwing knives. The bed's hangings were snowy white, dust-free and shining, the covers undisturbed. A light scent of bergamot still hung in the air, with a quiet sulphurous undertone, the scent Narcissa had come to associate with her sister. Narcissa ran her hand over the stiff coverlet and wondered how well Bella had ever slept here.

There were only so many places one could look. Narcissa began by trying the drawers of the bedside tables, which were stuck fast, as were the drawers of the vanity. Using Bella's wand, she cast as many opening spells as she could think of, and still the drawers did not open. But though they refused to budge, at least they did not release a curse, as Narcissa might have expected. She sat on the bed to think, casting her eyes over the room and considering whether to call Lucius, who knew far more than she about concealment magic. It was the throwing knife on the vanity top that gave her the idea.

She picked up the knife and pressed one wickedly sharp point into the pad of her middle finger and watched the blood form a large drop before she brushed it over the lock on the topmost vanity drawer on the right-hand side.

It was as easy as that.

Narcissa doubted whether anyone else's blood would have opened the drawer...Draco's perhaps, but then again, perhaps not. Inside the drawer lay Bella's wedding album, and on top of that, a small leather-bound book. It was thicker than she remembered. She picked it up and opened it to a random page, which was covered with rows of names and dates, and columns marked 'charges' and 'punishment(s)'. Narcissa recognised one or two of the names and felt a sickening vertigo. She turned the page, which contained more of the same columns. Similar pages took up half the book, but random jottings and doodles were interspersed throughout. Towards the middle, Narcissa came across a page that was blank but for the inscription:

Mother. 13th March, 1986.

Turning the page, Narcissa was surprised to find her own birth date written there, along with the words 'favourite flowers?'. She could not remember Bella asking about her birthday or acknowledging it in any way these last two years; she must have got the information from Draco and let it slip, deliberately or not, down a rabbit hole.

The miniscule puncture on her finger was already healing. Narcissa closed the book of everything she had never wanted to know and laid it on the vanity top, then shut the drawer and sat watching her reflection in the mirror, looking for traces of Bella in her blood and bones.

~~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

'I would ask the Commission now to consider what the Malfoy family has had to endure. You have all heard the evidence, some of it in Pensieve form, some from the diary of Bellatrix Lestrange, and of course from Lucius Malfoy himself. Mr Malfoy was not a willing participant in Voldemort's second insurrection against the Ministry. Yes, he was present in the Hall of Prophecy on the night of 20th June 1996; he has admitted to a list of charges stemming from that night. But as the Commission has heard, he was present there under duress. That, of course, mitigates the offences but does not exonerate him; however, as the Commission has heard, Mr Malfoy has paid for that crime, as he was thereafter imprisoned in Azkaban and held without trial for over a year, in violation of the law. According to the letter of the law, that alone was enough basis upon which to release him.

'Yet upon his release, he returned home only to be held prisoner by Voldemort himself. His wand was confiscated, his home occupied, his beloved wife and son also held hostage. Yes, he was in his own home with his family present, but he was still very much imprisoned. Death threats against his family were levelled regularly. As the Commission has heard, they were guarded very closely; they had hardly a moment's peace and certainly no privacy. Voldemort ingeniously employed Narcissa Malfoy's sister as their gaoler because he knew how strong was the pull of blood ties in this family and how seriously the Malfoys take the axiom of never raising a wand against a family member. The Commission has seen Pensieve evidence from Severus Snape himself...delivered to the Commission by the Minister for Magic...concerning what it means to be imprisoned in one's own home by Bellatrix Lestrange. Between the time he has spent in Azkaban and the time spent hostage in his home, Mr Malfoy has served more than double the sentence for the crimes he was originally imprisoned for.

'It is the Commission's stated end to uncover the truth about atrocities committed under Voldemort's rule, and in this endeavour Mr Malfoy has cooperated fully. He has opened his home to the Ministry's investigators, turned over to the Ministry all the evidence in his possession of what occurred in the house during Voldemort's time in power, including the diary of Bellatrix Lestrange herself. He has provided his testimony, corroborated by the evidence, of the horrors he witnessed and the torture he endured. His efforts have led to the identification of countless victims of Voldemort's reign of terror. It is because of the Malfoys that many other families can finally lay their loved ones to rest and begin to move forwards.

'I should also like to draw the Commission's attention to Mr Malfoy's state of health and the recommendation of the Commission-appointed Healer that he be allowed to seek treatment at a special facility. It is my contention that the Commission's and the community's interests would be best served by allowing the Malfoys leave to relocate for the time being, so that Mr Malfoy may attend to his health and his son may complete his education, which, as the Commission is aware, was brutally interrupted during Voldemort's takeover of Hogwarts School. Mrs Malfoy, who has already been recognised by this Commission for her contribution towards Voldemort's defeat at the Battle of Hogwarts, has agreed to serve as Bonder for her husband and son. The harm that would result to this family, who have already suffered so much, far outweighs any interest in keeping them within these borders.

'In sum, Mr Malfoy poses no danger to this community. He has provided invaluable services to a shattered society in hopes of helping it rebuild. Based on the evidence before this Commission, and in light of all relevant circumstances, in my capacity as Mr Malfoy's advocate, I now submit that he should be cleared of any legal obligations stemming from his 1996 arrest and be given leave to relocate with his family. I thank the Commission for its consideration.'

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Outside the hearing room, a quiet 'Malfoy' was spoken. Three heads turned.

Potter stood half in and half out of an office that led off the corridor, the door shielding him from their suspicion. It was immediately obvious which Malfoy he addressed. Draco lifted his chin, the way he used to greet Vincent and Gregory, and without a word he followed Potter through the door.

Narcissa looked at Lucius. 'What is this about?'

'We'll know soon enough, won't we?'

'What does that mean?'

She hardly knew how to read Lucius's expression, and she realised it was probably because there was no notable degree of anxiety there. In fact, he looked perfectly calm. He took her arm and threaded it through his. At that moment, Sextus stepped out into the corridor, determined and guardedly hopeful.

Draco could not have been gone longer than ten minutes. He stepped through the door quickly, without glancing back at Potter, who hesitantly trailed him into the corridor. He did not offer to shake hands, or even step close enough for any of them to extend theirs. He focussed on Narcissa and inclined his head in her direction.

'Thank you,' she said, 'for what you did today.'

'Thanks for what you did.'

After an awkward pause, he re-entered the office and shut the door.

'What did he want?' Narcissa demanded.

In answer, Draco held up a wand made of hawthorn, made by Ollivander and purchased just after his eleventh birthday. He smiled, as if he knew a secret.

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It was Lucius who had suggested they follow through with her plan, even though the original reason for it was now moot. She understood his reasoning, however, and ultimately she had agreed.

It took another three weeks after the hearing to pack all the necessities and close up the house while they waited for the Commission's ruling. She was glad of the activity; having something to do made the waiting easier. The day after they received the Commission's owl, Narcissa sat on the library sofa, surveying her work. Preservation charms on a library of this size required a substantial amount of effort, and it was repetitive but absorbing work: It was a matter of closing all the loopholes, ensuring that the charms protected against dust and damp and mites and doxies, ensuring that each volume was protected. She did not wish to return to find the library decimated.

Lucius found her there long after dusk.

'Looks like everything's in order here.'

'I think so.'

He sat beside her on the sofa and looked around. 'I can't believe we're actually leaving,' he said.

Narcissa could hardly believe it either, but reality had to be faced: The situation had not changed as much as one would have thought with the Dark Lord...she still could not think of him as Voldemort...dead and his followers scattered. Though she and her family were now finally the only occupants of the Manor, too many people knew its secrets and she lived in fear of attacks. Also, they had not been able to go out for being recognised and harassed, and their money could not buy so much as a wand here. She didn't want this for her son.

'It's temporary,' she said.

'Will you miss your study?' asked Lucius.

'I've set aside a room in the new house to use as a study. The one with the best view, of course.'

He chuckled and squeezed her hand. 'Tell me about our new home.'

She smiled at how like Draco he sounded.

'It's not as big as this, of course, but it's big enough. The house has stood for centuries. It's built in a square formation, with a cool, shady courtyard in the middle, and all the inner rooms overlook the courtyard. We have a fountain and gardens all around the outside. It hardly ever rains, so we'll have blue skies every day and gorgeous sunsets every evening.'

'It sounds perfect,' pronounced Lucius. This new attitude still surprised her, as he had been so resistant to the idea for the last year.

'It's everything we need.'

'I still don't think I can leave this place behind forever.'

'We can't, and we shouldn't,' agreed Narcissa. 'I want to return eventually, but just now ... it's best if we go somewhere we can live quietly for a while.'

He inclined his head and made a come-here gesture. In answer, she moved to his side and turned, tenting her legs over his lap, so that he could put an arm around her and she could lean her head against his chest. They were silent for a long moment, Lucius stroking her back, and she let her eyes drift closed. She had missed this.

Lucius said, 'Once, I thought I had lost you. That was a dark time.'

'You haven't lost me,' she assured him. It was a truth she had long since acknowledged, but saying it out loud was somehow liberating.

'I thought I had driven you away.'

'Don't be ridiculous. We're partners, aren't we?'

'Partners, yes.' He paused, drawing an uncertain breath. 'It's important that you understand something. If I ... If I thought that the best thing for you and Draco would have been to leave me behind, I would have let you go.'

She raised her head, stunned. 'Well, I refuse to let you go,' she told him directly, blinking back tears. 'I'm selfish that way.'

He smoothed her hair back from her face with hands that trembled all the time now, like an old man's. 'I'm rather fond of your selfishness,' he said.

She kissed him, feeling extraordinarily fortunate, and left it at that.

He asked, 'Tomorrow, then?'

'Tomorrow,' she confirmed. 'I've made an appointment for the Headmaster to meet Draco on Friday, and I'd like to be settled in before that. It will look better if we're already in residence.'

'Good,' said Lucius. 'I want him to be able to sit his N.E.W.T.s in the right environment. He needs to finish his education properly. Severus would say the same, I'm sure.'

'I'm sure he would.'

'I miss the old bastard.'

She nodded in agreement. Having finally allowed herself to consider the matter, there were things she wished she could have said to him. The last two years had left her with splinters of volcanic glass embedded in her secret heart, every misstep or misjudgement a separate acuminate fragment. Carrying them was a method of payment, or penance, a barter for the safety of those dearest to her.

Lucius continued. 'Severus. All this time I thought I knew him, and then it turns out he really was taking orders from Dumbledore. I never would have guessed.'

'Nor would I,' said Narcissa, who heard a certain acknowledgment in her husband's voice and chose to disregard it.

After a short silence, Lucius asked, 'Bed?'

'Bed,' she agreed.

ii.

Afterwards

It was no bigger than the house in Spinner's End, but he needed nothing bigger. It was an odd collection of eclectic furniture and whitewashed walls two feet thick that preserved the silence and kept the blazing heat at bay. (He dared not step outside between mid-morning and sunset, as the sun here could bake your brain in your skull and years could pass in the interim between raindrops.) It was isolated, anonymous, nondescript and contained a seemingly endless supply of books, tinned food and decent tea, though the water tasted of trace minerals from an aquifer buried so deep that only the most skilful use of charms could uncover it. In short, it was a place where only wizards could live, and he found himself glad of that fact every time he looked out the picture window in the sitting room at the breathtaking razor-back silhouette of mountains plummeting into a doe-coloured canyon. If Muggles could live here, they would have erected garish neon signs and soulless motorways over the lot.

She had thought of everything.

Surfaces here reflected light in ways they never could in England, and the light was often unbearably bright to his dungeon dweller's eyes. Now it slanted in late-afternoon lines through the kitchen window, revealing an army of golden dust motes before pooling around the chair in which she sat.

Of course, she had wormed the secret out of Draco...assuming it was ever secret from her to begin with. She'd at least had the good sense to owl him before appearing on his doorstep, but even so, he'd been shocked to open the door and find Bellatrix standing there. He went for his wand, a force of habit, before she smiled. He blinked and the illusion lifted.

Her eyes were blue, and she had said, 'Severus, how nice to see you.'

He had studied her appearance as he made tea. On second glance, Narcissa's resemblance to her sister was slight; it was only the colour of her hair and the shape of her nose that had tricked him. He wondered if the change meant anything.

He now cocked an eyebrow at her as he set the tea tray down. (Regrettably, she had not provided elves.)

'New look?' he asked mildly.

She looked puzzled for a moment but then reached up to touch the dark brown hair whose ends just brushed her jaw. She fingered a strand and then pushed it behind her ear, her hands unsteady, as if unsure what to do with this unaccustomed length. 'I just didn't want to be so ... recognisable.'

He sat. 'Surely here ...'

'That damned photo was reprinted in I don't know how many newspapers. Besides, it was time for a change all around.'

She had been captured on film leaving the offices of Britain's Post-War Truth-Telling Commission. In the newspaper he had seen, some idiot had captioned it 'The Chosen One's Saviour.' The same newspaper carried an editorial about the travesty of the Ministry's failure to try the Malfoys as war criminals. People could not make up their minds.

Severus turned back to the matter at hand, the reason for her visit. 'I suppose I should thank you for all this.' He gestured around the room, around the house. She must have noted that he did not actually thank her, and he wondered if she could guess why. He continued, 'But how did you know I would need a bolt-hole? I might have had one already.'

'Of course you didn't have. You were bound and determined to get yourself killed before you would ever need one,' she snapped. Then she softened, 'I know how to research property records, you know.'

He might have noted that the fact of his sitting here conversing with her was proof enough of his determination to live. Instead, he made a joke. 'I might have had one under another name.'

'Severus? I know all the tricks for hiding property.'

'And assets as well, it would appear.'

'Assets as well.'

Disinterestedly, he asked, 'You managed all this under his nose, under your sister's nose?'

'Not all of it, no. It all began ages ago, during the first war.' He must have raised an eyebrow. She breathed out quietly. 'It's a long story,' she said, 'but essentially Regulus's disappearance made me realise that all of us were vulnerable and that it was vital to have a backup plan.'

'And your backup plan included a couple of safe houses and some secret accounts to live off if you ever had to disappear?'

Narcissa answered his question with a question. 'Do you know why Abraxas Malfoy wanted me for a daughter-in-law?'

'Any number of reasons, I imagine.'

'Yes. Well, proper bloodlines aside, my father-in-law found out that I was good with figures. I took over my own family's finances when I was sixteen, although no one knew that at the time. Abraxas was amazingly prescient. He knew a conflict was coming and that a change in the government might endanger his family's wealth. He also knew that someone would have to keep Lucius in line. He was never interested in finances, and his father thought it would have been dangerous to turn the family's investments over to outside advisers. He was right. So Abraxas and my father came to a gentleman's agreement. Shy little Cissy, with her talent for figures and finance, would wed

handsome, outgoing young Lucius, thus ensuring the future of the Malfoy fortune and saving the Black family's honour. You remember my other sister, of course.'

Severus gave a barely perceptible nod. He had never actually met Andromeda but had certainly heard the story.

'The scandal of her marriage could have ruined us. It seems quaint now, doesn't it, that one daughter's foolish choices could ruin another's prospects for marriage.' She shook her head. 'Fortunately, the Malfoys weren't put off, although I doubt they would have stepped in had there not been something in it for them.'

'So you oversee the family fortune. That was your big secret.'

She gestured, palm up, and said, 'Simple as that. Of course, there was a flaw in the plan.'

'There always is.'

'Yes, because my backup plan required being able to disappear undetected, which, as you know, became impossible.' Her right hand moved upwards, reflexively, and he watched as her fingers traced her collarbone.

'Does Lucius know all of this?'

'He does now. I don't think he's quite forgiven me for not telling him earlier.'

'He'll come around.'

'If only it were that simple.'

Because Severus did not care to discuss what Lucius might or might not forgive, he said, 'Voldemort underestimated you.'

An incredulous laugh escaped her. 'His underestimation of you was greater by far,' she replied. Was that admiration in her tone? 'I'd much rather hear how you managed it.'

He was in no mood to rehash all that. 'Another time, perhaps.' Perhaps never.

Narcissa went on, 'In any case, I've spent a lifetime learning the ways in which wizards underestimate witches. There are certain advantages in being underestimated; because I'm a woman, I was less of a threat, and therefore not to be taken as seriously as a man...in war as in business. But the simplicity of a weapon does not mean I won't use it.'

'And Lucius?'

'Lucius is the only wizard I have ever met who never underestimated me. It's why I married him.'

He could hardly believe her nerve in saying such a thing, and to him of all people. 'I thought you just said you married him because of an agreement between your fathers.'

'That's what our fathers thought, too.'

Despite himself, Severus almost laughed. 'I was wrong about you,' he said.

'No. You only let yourself be distracted.'

'You used me.' It was not an accusation, merely a fact to which he had resigned himself. After all she was not the first, nor was she the most egregious offender, all things considered. His own lack of bitterness surprised him.

'Severus, no, you mustn't think that. I'm very sorry if you feel that way. I never meant to use you. I only didn't know how far I could trust you. I couldn't even trust my own sister. But you proved yourself. You proved yourself by not revealing the little titbits I threw you and I thought...'

'So you rewarded me with...?'

'No, Severus. That's not why I...'. She looked down into her lap, blushing. He had never seen a Malfoy blush. 'It was nothing to do with me rewarding you. It was never...I realised quickly that it was wrong of me for many reasons, obviously. I'm sorry for dragging you into it. It was incredibly selfish of me and I shouldn't have...I'm sorry.'

'You didn't exactly drag me,' he conceded. 'I went willingly enough.'

For a moment they were quiet. Then: 'What about you?' he inquired. 'Did you allow yourself to be ... distracted?'

'I did.' Her tone was depressingly kind. She smiled sadly. 'It won't happen again,' she said, as if apologising for having trod on his foot.

'With any luck, your husband won't find himself gaoled again.'

'That wasn't the only reason.'

He nodded, not looking at her. He did not need to hear more.

After they had discussed his plans for the future, both abstract and concrete (she offered to help him draft a business plan and he agreed to consider that offer), he walked her to the door.

'You'll stop by, then?' Narcissa asked. 'Lucius and Draco would love to see you.'

'Of course,' he answered. 'Give them my regards.'

He was careful not to shake hands, not to touch her, but she did not appear to take this as a slight. She stepped through the door into the burning sunlight and, with a fluid gesture, put on her hat. As was his habit, he remained in the shade. Narcissa turned back, galling and dazzling, her eyes and her thoughts shielded from him. He assumed she meant to bid him goodbye, but instead she said, 'Really, Severus, there were many reasons.'

Before he could respond, she turned on the spot and vanished into the light.

While any errors or deficiencies in this story are entirely mine, I owe a debt of gratitude to my beta reader, the incomparable [Amy Louise](#), who asked all the right questions, listened patiently to my long-winded answers, herded my commas and nudged me in the right direction.