

Masquerade

by severina

With Lucius in Azkaban, Narcissa finds herself reminiscing about their courtship...
until a masked stranger decides he wants Narcissa for himself.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 7

With Lucius in Azkaban, Narcissa finds herself reminiscing about their courtship... until a masked stranger decides he wants Narcissa for himself.

A/N: Not mine! Now A/U due to HBP (I wrote this awhile ago.) Please review!

Narcissa delicately adjusted her ebony-colored velvet mask as she gazed haughtily at the revelers surrounding her, looking down her short, straight little nose at her fellow purebloods.

Though the lady Malfoy, leaving rather unwillingly from her manor that eve, had been coaxed into making an appearance by none other than Mrs. Parkinson, mother of her darling Draco's supposed girlfriend, she found herself swept up against her will in the frivolity of the party, outwardly, an occasion to celebrate the Parkinsons' wedding anniversary, but, unspoken among the pureblood community, a festive occasion to rejoice in the long awaited return of the nefarious Dark Lord, Voldemort, champion of their kind.

But yet, mused Narcissa as she accepted a flute of champagne from the silver tray of a passing house-elf, what chance can we have in this war now, with so many of ours in Azkaban, my Lucius so prominently among them?

Her jade eyes, usually so cold and unfeeling, grew misty as she recalled her first meeting with him, in a ballroom much like the present one, packed to the gills with waltzing couples in the finest dress robes and scurrying house-elves carrying platters. She had been Narcissa Black then, standing dutifully with her mother and newly married sister, Bellatrix, both of whom were scheming away to make her an advantageous match with a wealthy man of untainted blood, when suddenly a commanding presence had burst into the room and descended the stairs between the crowds that parted only for him: Lucius Malfoy.

"I'm going to marry him," Narcissa had said behind her fan, interrupting the plots of her mother and sister.

"What are you about, Narcissa? He'd better not be a stinking Mudblood like your sister's... oh!" She followed her daughter's demure gaze to the man who was now slicing his way through the dance floor. "Malfoy, yes... splendid choice, my dear... but how? He's just become head of one of our wealthiest, oldest families, you know. He won't be an easy catch." Fortunately, Elladora had not been compelled to scheme further, for the man himself had approached her daughter, thus sealing her fate and securing her future.

Until now, sighed Narcissa inwardly, until the day that foolish, half-blood Potter boy's antics landed him a cell in that... that place for the gods know how long. The now thoroughly maudlin woman downed the rest of her champagne and briefly considered sending for a bit of Firewhisky. After all, her identity was concealed at least until the masque's end, when all would be far too gone in their cups to care that a lady had ordered spirits. Besides, Society was wont to be forgiving to their Mrs. Malfoy these days, as staunch a supporter of the Dark Lord's as any yet unable to do a thing to help his cause but give trivial facts to a psychotic old house-elf.

Turning her attention back to the crush, Narcissa found herself gazing at the marble staircase, so highly polished that it nearly glowed from within, silently wishing that she

could see her husband, if not beloved then utterly respected, descend in his black domino, wand sheathed like a Muggle's ceremonial sword, the serpents decorating his fine robes and the golden hair queued back leaving no questions as to his identity. Lucius had always treated her with the utmost courtesy in public, obeying the proprieties that had been ingrained in their kind since childhood, which belied the passion they had, quite fortunately, found in the bedchamber.

Suddenly, through her increasingly watery gaze, Mrs. Malfoy glimpsed a figure moving steadily down the stairs, ignoring the offended gasps of the partygoers he shoved aside on his way. This man too, Narcissa noted, was attired entirely in black and indeed a similar-colored domino covered most of his face. However, no silver filigree of Slytherin's emblem adorned his severe garments, his dark and oily hair was unbound and shoulder length, his nose hooked and distinctive. These features made him out to be something of a rogue and intrigued Narcissa with their vague familiarity. She could not fathom from where, but she seemed to know the man who was now striding purposefully to the lonely corner where she stood.

"Do I have the honor," he said in a low voice rich as chocolate and soft as velvet, "of addressing the lady of Malfoy Manor?" The man's piercing black eyes bore into concerned sylvan orbs that were as cold as his own.

"Yes." Narcissa gave a slight curtsy. "I am indeed Mrs. Malfoy. And whom do I have the honor of..."

The mysterious man cut her speech with a long finger to her petal-soft lips. "You will dance with me, Narcissa Black Malfoy." A statement, not a question. "Come," he said into her ear, breath hissing against her earlobe and close enough to set her earbob swaying. The orchestra struck up a waltz, Brahms as it were, so one of the man's large hands found her delicate, fine-boned grip and the other, the small of her back just above her small, shapely derriere. With this hand, he pressed the woman gently against his hips so that she could feel his arousal, already semi tumescent, beneath his severely cut dress robes.

With a shocked gasp, Narcissa looked into the stranger's unreadable eyes. Though a married woman she may have been, she and those around her had always strictly observed the dictates of proper behavior. "... sir... I cannot help but think that we have met on some previous occasion. Indeed, we must have done, as you certainly know me. I cannot help but feel a bit foolish."

"I knew your husband," he said simply as he guided her through a turn, sweeping them across the ballroom and discreetly onto the balcony.

"No!" she hissed, "You know my husband. I won't have the world talking of him as though he is... is... already dead!"

"Naturally, my lady." His lips curled in something of a sneer. "Merlin knows that Lucius Malfoy hasn't the gold to buy his way through our justice system and out of Azkaban."

Narcissa's pale eyes widened beneath her mask. "Tell me your name you arrogant, libertine bastard! You think to come here and insult my family under the shelter of a domino? I shall show you what I think of your cowardice! *Accio mask!*"

She waved the wand she had pulled from the folds of her deep green velvet gown before the mysterious man had time to react to her unexpected assault. The mask flew from his face to reveal the angry glare and hawk-like features of Severus Snape.

"Severus!" she said in the low sibilant tones of a Parselmouth, "so, you've returned to your roots have you? Come back to the purebloods after your betrayal in the First War? Fuck you, Severus, and my Mudblood loving cousin as well..."

"Such language for a lady, Mrs. Malfoy," laughed Snape sardonically, half amused by the woman's righteous indignation.

"I'll have you know that the Dark Lord has ordered your death... and just when I was looking for a way to help our cause. Yes, he shall be well pleased with me, Severus. *Crucio!*"

"*Protego.*" Snape had at least had the presence of mind to draw his own wand and harmlessly deflected Narcissa's curse to the floor. "Unforgivable Curses," he said in amused tones, "I see Lucius has taught you well."

"Traitorous bastard," she ground out through her gritted teeth as her face twisted with rage, "You haven't seen the half of it *Avada Kedavra!*"

Snape, already anticipating his opponent's rashness, leapt nimbly to the side and shouted, *Expelliarmus!*" Narcissa's wand sailed into the air, lingering only a second before he added as an afterthought, "*Accio wand!*" and deftly caught Mrs. Malfoy's wand in his free hand. "Now, now Narcissa," he sneered, "how would it look to your precious pureblood society if the Slytherin Seeker's mother killed her son's Head of House? Though I am grudgingly impressed at your mastery of the Dark Arts... It gives a man cause to wonder what else Lucius has taught you with such proficiency."

"W-why are you here, Severus?"

He pressed her against the shadowy wall of the balcony, tracing the contours of her cheek with his large nose and caught her tiny earlobe between his teeth. "To discuss young Draco's abysmal Potions final, of course."

"Fuck you."

"Why do you think, Narcissa? Because I want you. And now I can have you." Narcissa shivered at Snape's words, but, as he moved his hand to the curve of her neck then back again, barely brushing the swell of her breasts that rose high in her low cut gown, she ceased to resist.

"Malfoy Manor," she commanded, "Now."

"Patience, my dear, patience," soothed Snape mockingly, chuckling silently at the woman's imperious tone, "go and summon your carriage. I shall be there shortly after you. No need to Apparate and wake young Draco. Surely he wouldn't want to discover his mother in a compromising position with his Potions master?"

* * *

The brief ride to the manor seemed to stretch endlessly as Narcissa glanced out the windows in the vain hope of glimpsing Snape following behind her. Usually so cool and composed, she could not help but fidget in her plush seat, crossing and uncrossing her ankles and twisting her delicate lace handkerchief into sweat-dampened knots. Never before had Mrs. Malfoy contemplated an adulterous liaison to this extent. She'd had her passing fancies of course, as every woman does, Gilderoy Lockhart among them, but Lucius had never given her cause to be unfaithful. Narcissa, you foul little slut, she remonstrated herself, your husband is imprisoned for two months, and you're already meeting men as though you are a widow.

When Narcissa had sent away the house-elves, she waited timidly in the foyer and listened for the sound of hoof beats from Snape's elegant black thoroughbred, a Muggle method of transportation to be sure, but nonetheless a stealthy one. At last he approached, and dismounting, rapped softly upon the door, which opened immediately.

"Narcissa," growled Snape, his voice hoarse with desire. He pulled her into his surprisingly strong arms and cradled her head in his hand, bringing her face inches from his lips. "Tell me, Mrs. Malfoy," he taunted, "is the famous Lucius a good kisser?"

"I-I don't know," she quavered, "I've never kissed anyone else."

Snape's mouth curled into a triumphant leer. "Do you like it when he kisses you?" Narcissa nodded, feeling as ridiculously innocent as she had on her wedding night. "Does he do it like this?" Severus pressed his lips lightly to hers, flicking out his tongue to trace the sharp points of her teeth.

"Sometimes."

"Or does he do this?" He crushed his mouth greedily to hers, devouring her, pressing her into his taut body more firmly with each stroke of his tongue.

Narcissa shook her head wildly. "N-no... not like that." She disentangled herself from Snape's arms. "Severus, we should go up to my bedchamber. Someone could happen by... Draco, perhaps. I've threatened all the house-elves with clothes, but still..."

Snape nodded. "Of course... but Narcissa, forget your bedchamber. Let us use the master suite."

"Lucius' room?" She pressed her slim hand to her heart. "Oh, Severus, I couldn't..."

"Couldn't you?" He sneered. "Well then, I suppose we shall just have to stay here in the front hall..."

"Oh, all right!" snapped Narcissa, irritated at not being in control, "but hurry... and for Merlin's sake, be quiet!" Ignoring Snape's icy glare, she turned and beckoned him to follow her up the stairs.

She led him to the furthest suite back, the most private one in the house and slowly opened the ancient, ornately carved walnut door to reveal Lucius' enormous bedchamber, drawing him straight to the massive four-poster bed covered with heavy claret velvet hangings. Snape, not surprisingly, showed none of the awe of it that had set Narcissa trembling on her first night in Malfoy Manor. Rather, he captured Narcissa's lips with his own once again, tasting her, probing her mouth with increasing urgency and ran his hands, slightly roughened and scarred from cauldron burns, across her back, working at the buttons on her fine evening gown.

"Severus!" she gasped as he slid it down her body, letting it pool on the floor along with her delicate silk stockings.

"Better," he murmured at the sight of the nude woman before him, "much better." Reaching up, Snape removed the fashionable silver pins from the lady's shimmering golden hair, causing her elegant coiffure to tumble wildly down her back. "Now tell me, Narcissa Malfoy... what would Lucius do now?"

"Undress," she suggested coyly, all trace of apprehension gone, "take off your robes, Severus."

"Ah, but you haven't answered my question, Mrs. Malfoy. What would your husband do now? This?" He touched the sleek bare flesh of her back, drawing her to him and parting her thighs with one of his own so that he could feel her moist heat through the fabric of his robes. She moaned, clutching at his hair and pressing the pink points of her nipples against his chest. "Answer me, Narcissa."

"Perhaps," she said silkily against his throat, "or perhaps he would have me disrobe him." With agonizing slowness, Narcissa slid her fingers into the folds of Snape's garments peeling them apart until they were heaped behind him and his arousal unfurled directly into her soft belly. "Now," she continued, "we would go to bed." She slid back, feeling the slight roughness of the damask of the comforter brush against her, sending a quick jolt of excitement up to her abdomen.

Severus followed her, lying partially over her as he stroked the hot flesh of her inner thighs with one thumb, the other making lazy circles around her nipple. Finally, as his lips found her supple breast, his fingers found their way between her moist folds, stroking at the sensitive nub between them and slipping into the core of her womanhood. He laughed silently at her gasps and fevered tossing of her head, recalling that barely an hour before she had attempted the Death Curse on him. "Does Lucius do this to you?" he asked the writhing body beneath him.

"Yes! Yes... yes, he does... oh, Severus..."

"When were you last with him?"

"The... the day he was arrested... oh, gods, Severus, don't stop... he made love to me in his study..." She broke off with a gasp of pleasure as Snape settled himself atop her, nudging her thighs apart once again and settled his hard, blunt tip at the entrance to her passage.

"Now, Narcissa," he growled into her ear as he eased himself ever so slightly inside her, "we forget about Lucius for the evening."

"Fine!" she groaned, "Just please..." He surged forward with one powerful thrust, rhythmic strokes matching the pace of her bucking hips and possessed her with his mouth on her neck, her breasts, her mouth. Just when he thought he could bear no more, he felt her manicured fingernails dig into his back, her long legs wrap around his waist as her tight passage convulsed around him. With one final, deep push forward, Severus lost control, spilling his thick, warm seed into her and collapsing with a groan above her.

Narcissa buried her face into the hollow of his neck, flicking her tongue like a serpent to catch the salty taste of his skin. "I'm sorry I tried to use the Unforgivable Curses on you."

A rumble of laughter rippled through Snape's chest, but he was far too exhausted to respond. Slowly, he withdrew himself from her body and settled his greasy head against Lucius' pillow. When she thought he had fallen asleep, she heard him say, "I was sent on a mission by the Order."

"What?"

"Tonight. I was to gather information about the Dark Lord's plans for the imprisoned Death Eaters."

"I see." Narcissa pursed her lips. "And did you accomplish your mission, Severus?"

"No. All I learned tonight was how the most influential of the Dark Lord's followers likes to fuck his wife."

"But won't the others be angry?"

"Dumbledore is a forgiving man," he assured her, "and besides, they won't be nearly as hard on me as Society would be on you, my dear Mrs. Malfoy. Sleeping with the most traitorous of the Death Eaters in your husband's bed while your son slumbers peacefully down the hall? Tsk, tsk..."

"He's not down the hall, he's upstairs. Forget about it, Severus, I can take care of myself." Narcissa stretched out over the deliciously soft featherbed feeling strangely content as consciousness left her. One day Lucius would be free from Azkaban and could continue his fight against the Mudbloods befouling wizard-kind, but for now there were the vague comforts and bittersweet pleasures of limbo.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 7

The morning after her passionate interlude with the Potions master, Narcissa is faced with troubling questions from Draco...and even more bothersome ones from Snape.

Author's Note: Not mine, unfortunately. Please review!

"What's the matter, Mother?" Draco, dressed in Quidditch robes and carrying the scent of morning sunshine, strode into his mother's sitting room. "Are you ill?"

"Oh, Draco, it's you." Narcissa, still clad in her ivory silk nightdress and matching peignoir, peered with bloodshot eyes between the fingers that hid her face. "No, I shall be fine. Merely feeling a bit odd today."

Draco's pale eyes darkened with concern. "Would you like a potion for something? I can have the house-elves... "

"No!" cried Narcissa with a vehemence that startled the both of them. "No potions!"

"Oh." Her son was quite taken aback. "All right then. May I sit with you, Mother?"

"Of course, darling." Narcissa patted the seat of the ottoman before her, and Draco settled down, somewhat nervously. "My dear, handsome boy. Look at you." Smoothing her son's white-blond hair, sweat-dampened from the summer's heat, she gave him a small smile. "So very like your father. I do miss him terribly."

Not used to this sort of sentimentality from her, Draco gave his mother's arm a sort of awkward pat. "I know." His lips twisted into a bashfully pleased grin. "Am I really just like Father?"

"Oh, indeed." Having become embarrassed at her forthrightness of emotion, Narcissa attempted to lighten the mood. "And the mother of a certain Pansy Parkinson couldn't agree more."

Two rosy spots appeared on his pale cheeks. "Oh... right... er, how was the ball?"

"What, don't want to talk about your lady-love, then?" teased Narcissa gently. "Well, all right. It was a nice time... *Oh, that it was, you cheating bitch...*" I saw your Potions master." *And betrayed your father with him too.*

"Snape was there? With all the Death Eaters?" queried Draco incredulously. "Did you talk to him?"

"Well, it was a masque after all." Narcissa paused. "Yes, I spoke with him at length." *I fucked him senseless in your father's bed as well.* He mentioned something about an abysmal Potions final."

"It wasn't my fault! That Gryffindor idiot Longbottom spilled an Invigoration Draught all over my notes!" He scowled at her. "What are you doing, keeping tabs on me at parties now?"

"I'm your mother, Draco, it's my job. Now don't give me that look!" Straightening her spine, Narcissa glowered at her son. "You're lucky it's me and not Lucius whom you're giving that unbecoming stare."

"Were you and Father a love match?" he blurted out, the Pansy Parkinson-induced pink on his cheeks fast becoming red.

"That's a very personal question, Draco!" Narcissa reproved. "Whatever made you ask such a thing?" With pursed lips, she nonetheless continued in the hope of forgetting the likes of Severus Snape, if even for an hour. "Well, since you asked... not exactly. It's true that we were the match of the season, Black's youngest daughter and the new master of Malfoy Manor, and extraordinarily well-suited to one another, but I can't say it was love exactly. Not for me and certainly not for him... though he did nearly fight a duel over me." Finally the woman's eyes smiled as she recalled the antics of their younger selves. "I'm sure he would have won anyhow."

"A duel! Who was he going to fight?"

"Severus Snape," Narcissa choked in a strange, thin voice.

"Who?"

"Severus Snape. They were rivals for my hand."

"Professor *Snape*? The *Potions* master? But why?"

"Well, I'd wanted to marry your father since I clapped eyes on him at a party when I was just out of Hogwarts, but Severus and I are... were... old school friends. He was two years ahead of me, and I was always curious about him... " *But you had all your curiosity fulfilled didn't you, Narcissa, my girl?*

"Oh. Well how did you stop the duel?"

"I chose your father," she stated simply, "and honestly, between Lucius Malfoy and Severus Snape, it was really no contest. Snape is a second son, and even if he were not, Snape Hall is a crumbling old place barely fit for habitation. Gods, it was worse then than Kreacher tells me the House of Black is now. At any rate, I chose well with Lucius. He and Snape joined the Death Eaters to protect us purebloods from the Muggle taint, but Snape was a coward. That's why he's free now."

"But Father talked his way out of Azkaban before. He turned away from the Dark Lord, too."

"Draco, I'd just had you," Narcissa told him soothingly, catching his chin between her thumb and forefinger briefly, "so he was needed here. He had an heir to see to. Besides that, he went back to serve the Dark Lord, but Snape remains with Dumbledore as a blood traitor."

"But you're not, er, curious about Snape anymore?"

"*Draco Malfoy! Bite your tongue!*" cried Narcissa furiously, "have I taught you nothing about discretion? About propriety? Circe's wand, Draco, you're a *Slytherin*; you ought to have a bit more subtlety than that. And just for the record no, I haven't one bit of 'curiosity' about Severus, that is, Professor Snape any longer." *Especially not now that I've finally given in and let him do what he was finally bold enough to after all these years. Gods... Unforgivables aside, I put up absolutely no fight whatsoever.*

"Sorry, Mother," mumbled Draco, breaking into her thoughts.

"Oh." Narcissa had nearly forgotten his presence. "Just be more careful in the future. Well, come on then, Draco, go take off your Quidditch things and dress for breakfast. I shall be down in a moment."

Fondly, she watched her son leave but immediately buried her face in her hands once again as soon as he was out of sight.

Oh, my darling Draco, why must you burden me with questions about love today of all days? The morning after I finally learned the answers to my unasked questions about Severus Snape... Salazar's sword, the blood traitor bastard is even better in bed than I suspected, damn him. And now Draco wants to know whether I love his father? What on earth? Unless things with Pansy Parkinson are more serious than I'd thought...

"Mistress?" The squeak of Glaber, one of the Malfoys' dozen or so house-elves, interrupted her musings. "Is Mistress Malfoy wanting Glaber to help her dress?"

"Fine, fine," said Narcissa irritably as she raised her wand to summon her gown and stepped inside it so the servant could fasten the buttons in the back. "Summon my carriage straightaway after breakfast, Glaber, and when Draco goes out, have the linen changed in Mr. Malfoy's suite."

"Why does Mistress want Glaber to clean Master's room? Master is Azkaban."

"As if I'd forgotten that, you idiotic creature. Just do as I say and don't question it, or I'll give you more suits of clothes than you can count!"

"Not clothes, Mistress, please, not clothes!" the house-elf begged her with watery eyes. "Glaber is sorry."

"Glaber had best be sorry," Narcissa smoothed her powder-blue satin skirts and clasped a delicate diamond necklace around her throat. "Now get downstairs and fetch those thestrals from the stable. I shan't be long."

* * *

Mrs. Malfoy's palms dampened her fine white gloves as her carriage alighted in Hogsmeade later that morning, and she nervously straightened the short veil that was attached to the tiny hat perched atop her elegantly piled blonde hair and obscured most of her face. True, she could have just Apparated there and made the process far simpler, but she'd rather have her sojourn seem like nothing more than an innocent shopping trip, a plausible excuse to leave the house. She'd even had a house-elf accompany her there to complete her pretense.

The servant opened the door when they had reached Gladrag's Wizardwear and handed Narcissa down onto the crowded sidewalk. Unfortunately, the masses did nothing to conceal her, not with the Malfoy crest so prominent on her carriage door, but Narcissa did not worry overmuch. Favoring the other pureblood ladies with a cool smile, she drew herself up into a regal pose and strode into the shop.

Narcissa spent several bored minutes picking through rather unremarkable dresses and robes when she finally settled on a few items for her son. Though well aware that many young wizards, even purebloods, were dressing in Muggle clothes in their leisure time, the thought of seeing her Draco in jeans and a sports jersey was enough to bring tears to Narcissa's eyes.

She carried the items to the front of the shop, where she carelessly tossed a few Galleons onto the counter as payment. So distracted was she that she nearly handed the bag of robes to the house-elf, who eyed them with a look of extreme revulsion.

"Oh! Silly me!" she laughed mirthlessly to the shop assistant. "Though it's not that I don't need to threaten them with it at least ten times a day... " Having recovered her aplomb, Narcissa waved her wand to open the door and proceeded back into the sunshine. "Now," she hissed at Glaber, "you were lucky that time, but tomorrow I may not be in such a brilliant mood. Get in the carriage and stay there." When the door had opened, Narcissa cast a Banishing Charm on the new robes and sent them flying inside after the elf. With a snap of her manicured fingers, she had Apparated to the darkest, most shadowy corner of the Three Broomsticks beside a table occupied by none other than Severus Snape himself.

"Ah, Mrs. Malfoy, fashionably late as usual, I see."

Narcissa curled her lip at him, showing off her perfect white teeth, and sat without waiting for an invitation. "I believe you know why we're here, Severus." She pulled the veil even lower over her face.

"Well, my dear, I admit I wasn't at all surprised that you would seek out my company again so soon." Snape eyed the woman with unmasked desire, but his words were laced with sarcasm. "But now I am quite confused indeed, Narcissa. You've not even kissed me yet."

"Keep your bloody voice down!" Narcissa drew her wand. "You may remember that I know the Unforgivables."

"Naturally, Mrs. Malfoy, but I'm certain that Slytherins such as ourselves would not be so indiscreet as to use them in public. That sort of rash passion is so *very Gryffindor*, don't you think?"

"Indeed," Narcissa managed through her gritted teeth, "but since you mention rash passion, let us think on you for a moment. But where to begin? Ah, yes. A man who dons only a stupid velvet mask as disguise before proceeding into the thick of his enemies so that he can at last seduce the wife of one of their most prominent men..."

"A wife, I might add, who put up only a superficial fight with no real intent of actually denying me." The corners of Snape's mouth curved humorlessly. "A wife who quite obviously wondered what she had forgone all those years ago."

"Fuck you, Severus."

"Very original, Narcissa. I take it I've hit upon the truth? Otherwise you'd have a more compelling argument for me than 'fuck you, Severus.' Am I right? Judging from the way you were writhing beneath me last night, I rather suppose I am." Snape's features once again settled into a triumphant sneer.

"You're pathetic, Severus. You go to parties and seduce married women, and when you trounce their arguments against it, you sit there looking for all the world as though you just gave Potter a 'T' in Potions."

"I assure you, Mrs. Malfoy, that it is not ordinarily my habit to seduce other men's wives. Yes, I thought it prudent to Apparate back Hogsmeade this morning before you woke. If that's what this tirade is about..."

"No, Severus, indeed I was quite glad you'd gone. I merely felt compelled to tell you never to seek me out henceforth. First of all, I am married..."

"Yes, but now that you've long since given your dear Lucius an heir, you're rather free to pursue other fancies, are you not? As long as you are reasonably discreet, I don't expect he would mind."

"That's where you're wrong, Severus. Lucius would certainly mind an errant wife, even if she were 'reasonably discreet' as you say. He doesn't like to share, especially not with blood traitors."

"Ah, but he is in Azkaban, my sweet."

"Not forever," she said stubbornly, "and besides, I have no wish to betray him further. He's been a good husband to me; I owe him at least that. Anyhow, you are my son's teacher and his Head of House. Even if I were to have an affair, it couldn't be with you."

"You've already had an affair with me, Madam Malfoy, and the idea of my teaching your son certainly did not seem to bother you then."

"You're a second son and a blood traitor!"

"You were aware of my non-heir status when you nearly married me, Narcissa Black, and though you attempted the Killing Curse last night, I doubt my allegiance to Dumbledore was much of an issue when I was touching your..."

"Enough!" cried Narcissa. "Do you want the entire world to know? For a Slytherin, your subtlety seems somewhat lacking. Perhaps it is the blood traitor in you. Whatever it may be, I have no interest in it or you or any sort of illicit relationship. Good day, Severus."

"Go ahead, Narcissa, get back to Malfoy Manor. Just know this: I won't be giving up so easily. I've waited nearly two decades for this and can bide my time." He stood

along with her, bowing over her hand and removing the white glove from it by slowly tugging the fingertips. Rather than kissing the smooth white skin, he took her pinky finger into his mouth, teasing it with his tongue and sucking it while the flustered woman above him gave a shocked gasp of pleasure.

When Snape had replaced the glove, Narcissa gave him a malevolent stare that did not quite hide the flicker of desire that lingered in her eyes and swept out of the inn gracefully before Apparating into thin air.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 7

Narcissa learns some shocking new spells from Snape...until Draco happens by. Lucius becomes suspicious during her visit to Azkaban.

A/N: Not mine, sadly, except for the sexy new spells... and Basil Parkinson, if only for the sheer amount of time it took me to come up with a "manly" plant for his name.

Gods above, thought Snape as he stalked moodily along the path back to Hogwarts, who'd have thought that Narcissa Malfoy would be so bloody damned difficult to draw away from her husband? Lucius the Death Eater, the *convict*, the husband she married purely for wealth and position... If one didn't know better, it would seem that she loves him.

A cold hand, like the joy-draining clutch of the Dementors, seized his heart. No, Narcissa couldn't possibly be in love. Not if the lust he had seen shimmering in her eyes through that blasted veil was any indication...

* * *

"Well, I think it would be a splendid match, Meredith." Narcissa took a sip of tea from one of Violet Parkinson's heirloom teacups. "Millicent and young Crabbe seem extraordinarily well-suited." *If only because the both of them are so frightfully stupid...*

Meredith Bulstrode gave a satisfied smile. "Yes, well, I should hope so. The children are sixteen. It's rather past time to start planning these things, is it not?"

"Indeed," Violet agreed, "Basil and I could not be more pleased about Pansy and Draco, Narcissa. I imagine you and Lucius must be... oh. Right." She took a rather large bite of scone to cover the awkward silence.

"It's all right, Violet, we all know he's in Azkaban," sighed Narcissa. "Draco has been rather reticent about the matter anyhow. I've half a mind to slip Veritaserum into his pumpkin juice just to hear what exactly he intends. Honestly, I never thought he would make a love match, rare as they are. Funny though, he's acting rather odd lately, asking questions about love and Merlin knows, I can't answer them... at least, well..."

"Narcissa, dear, are you quite all right?" Violet's eyes were filled with concern. "I do believe you're babbling."

"Oh... sorry."

"No, no. I should never have said... never have mentioned... well, you know. You've just seemed a bit rattled ever since our anniversary ball."

"Have I?" asked Narcissa cautiously. *Gods, was Violet a Legilimens?* "I don't know why that would be. Perhaps it's merely nerves. My Draco and I are to visit Azkaban tomorrow."

"Salazar's blood, I'd quite forgotten. I do apologize for my rudeness, Narcissa. Please, have another cup."

"No, thank you." Narcissa stood. "I believe I shall return to the manor for a Calming Draught. Thank you for having me, Violet. Good day, Meredith."

With the muted snap of her gloved fingers, Narcissa had Disapparated from the Parkinson's informal drawing room with the intent of reappearing safely on the front steps of Malfoy Manor.

"Owww... what in the name of Asclepius..." The sharp thorns of the rose branches bit into the delicate dove-grey silk of her afternoon dress and pierced the creamy skin beneath. "I must really be losing my touch."

"Ah, Narcissa Black, the very image of the girl who tumbled through the hedgerows." Snape peered down at her from the top step, curling his lips in derisive laughter. "Although, my pet, I must say you needn't resort to Apparition to find yourself on top of me."

"Ohhh... *Serpensortia!*" Narcissa moaned as she launched a fearsome cobra snake directly at Snape's genital region.

With a flick of his wand, the man had reduced the offending serpent to ash. "A mere viper? You insult my intelligence, Mrs. Malfoy."

"Don't be ridiculous, Severus, there's really nothing to insult." Narcissa twisted against the needle-sharp thorns that crisscrossed her arms with cuts. "Get me up, now!"

"I'd thought to say the same to you." Snape's eyes gleamed rakishly. "Oh, I'll get you out, Narcissa, but it will cost you. I believe that *you* Apparated atop *me* after all. Besides, it's quite convenient to have you imprisoned thus. I hadn't looked forward to another duel with such a delicate flower." Raising his wand, Snape's wolfish smile intensified. "*Voluptantrices!*"

"Ohhh... gods!" Narcissa forgot completely about the thorns digging into her flesh as a warm feeling stole over her breasts, making twin peaks of her nipples. "Severus... stop..."

"Don't like that one, sweeting? Very well, then. *Diluentem.*"

The captive woman gave a strangled shriek as the warmth became wet and mimicked the feeling of lips and teeth covering her bosom. "What is this magic?" she asked weakly. "I've never heard any of these spells."

"You don't say?" Snape arranged his hawk-like features into an expression of mock-surprise. "So there are a few spells the great Lucius Malfoy hasn't mastered? Tsk... I don't think the Dark Lord would be pleased."

"Well I hardly think the Dark Lord is concerned about Lucius' ability to cast a breast-fondling spell!"

"*Delictate Cunnum,*" said Snape conversationally, choosing to ignore Narcissa's remark.

She gasped, hips arching up from their prison among the tangled branches, hands heedlessly gripping the bases of the rosebushes as the feeling of fingers plying her softness crept up the skin of her inner thighs. "Stop this at once, Severus! Anyone could happen byyyy!" She finished with a strange scream as Snape moved his wand to mimic his touch. "Let me out!"

Disregarding the fact that she was behaving with absolutely no dignity, Narcissa began to squirm, clawing uselessly at the air in a pathetic attempt to free herself before Snape could continue his sensual onslaught. She grabbed for her own wand. "*Crucio!*" Unfortunately, her aim was wide, and a large grey squirrel collapsed to the ground squawking in agony. "Oh, fuck it."

"My, my, but you are damned difficult to satisfy, Narcissa. You leave me no choice *Mulierem Ecfutuo!*"

The spell spread through Narcissa's limbs with alarming alacrity, sending waves of pleasure through her entire body, convulsing her, sending white-hot heat to her feminine core and forcing her to explode, tangling her hair in the roses as she flung it back in a wordless cry of ecstasy.

When she regained her sense of reality, Mrs. Malfoy raised her head slightly. "Get me out of this garden, you bloody bastard, or I'll have Lucius turn the Killing Curse on you."

"All the way from Azkaban? Salazar's sword, he's far more skilled a wizard than I'd feared! I must alert the Order at once!"

"Sarcasm doesn't become you, Severus."

"Mother?" Draco sailed toward the steps on his treasured Nimbus 2001. "Professor Snape? What are you doing here?"

"Draco!"

"Er, sorry. I mean, what brings you to Malfoy Manor, sir?"

"I had some *affairs* to discuss with your mother," said Snape in irritation with a pointed glance to his captive, "however, nothing that concerns you."

"Oh...is it about Father? Are they letting him out?"

"Excuse me, gentlemen!" Narcissa's voice drifted up to them. "I believe I am still stuck in the rosebushes."

"How did you get down there?" Draco leaned over the heavy stone balustrade and peered down at his mother. "Are you hurt? I thought I heard someone screaming..."

"Apparition mishap. And yes, these razor sharp branches driving themselves into my tender skin hurt a great deal. Perhaps you ought to let me up now, Sever... Professor Snape?"

"Of course, my lady," he said with a sneer so subtle Draco did not detect it. *Mobilicorpus.*"

Narcissa drifted up from the ground and onto the porch. "There now, Severus, was that so very difficult?"

"Certainly not, Mrs. Malfoy," he replied, "or may I use your given name as well?"

"Oh, go right ahead. I know you've no trouble with being overly familiar."

"I am not the one who called you 'Severus.'"

"Why in the name of Salazar Slytherin would you call *me* 'Severus'?"

"Mother? Professor Snape?" Draco's eyes had been snapping back and forth as thought he were at a Quidditch match. "What's the matter?"

"Draco!" Snape and Narcissa simultaneously remembered the boy's presence.

"Nothing, darling, nothing at all. It's just that my, er, cuts sting a bit. Yes, that's it. Why don't you go and have Glaber fetch me a poultice?"

"Right, yes, preferably something with essence of bitterwort. It will take the edge off the pain," added Snape.

"All right. And...do you want a coat, Mother? Your dress is rather... er... not really there anymore." Draco blushed as he said this, dropping his gaze to the ground.

"My dress... what? Oh, gods above." She made a belated attempt to cover her partially exposed breasts and stomach with her still-bleeding arms. "Well, run along, Draco."

Her son dashed into the house without further delay, and Severus broke into another round of silent, mocking laughter. "If Lucius were here, he'd be in a right state. His lovely wife, the paragon of female virtue, standing on the front steps in a tattered rag of a dress... before her son and his Head of House!" Snape could barely contain his mirth.

"If Lucius was here this would never have happened at all! You wouldn't have come up to me at the masquerade; I doubt you'd have even been there, seeing as how you were to gather information on the plans for the imprisoned Death Eaters and all. No, Severus, it would never have been. And as I told you last week, it can't continue. It simply can't, no matter how many unsavory spells you may know."

"I shall defer to your good judgment, Mrs. Malfoy. For now, that is. It seems ridiculous to seduce you with Draco on his way back. But never fear, your bed will not stay empty for long. Have a pleasant evening, Narcissa. Give my regards to Lucius tomorrow. Enjoy your visit to Azkaban." Before Narcissa could respond in kind, Snape Disapparated, leaving her standing dumbly on the front steps of Malfoy Manor.

* * *

The stark tower of Azkaban rose high above the trees and stood out clearly against the high cliff that it occupied and the murky water that surrounded it, an unmistakable emblem of gloom and despair. Draco bit his lip and fiddled with the sleeves of his robe as the Malfoy carriage began to descend.

Laying a reassuring hand on her son's arm, Narcissa murmured softly, with a confidence she did not feel, "You don't have to go in, you know. Your father will understand."

Likely he wouldn't, and Draco knew that as well as she did. "No, Mother, he expects me, and I want to see him, truly I do. It's just, well, *Azkaban.*"

"Well, he will certainly be glad to see you. Now come on, out you get. There's nothing to be afraid of; the Dementors have left. None of these guards can suck out one's soul."

Draco shuddered. "Thank the gods for that."

Narcissa and Draco passed through the heavy iron gate that protected the front entrance and gave their names to the wizard in charge, a gruff bear of a man by the name of Lucretius.

Lucretius grunted a direction at them and beckoned with his work-roughened hand. As he led them down the drafty, putrid-smelling corridor, the two Malfoys heard the piteous moans of prisoners from their darkened cells, the dripping of water down the craggy rock walls, and the chink of metal utensils upon the bars of the windows.

"Oh, sweet Merlin..." Narcissa whispered to herself as nausea threatened to overwhelm her.

Rolling his eyes, Lucretius gestured to a heavy wooden door. He was growing rather tired of showing around squeamish, gently-bred Death Eater wives and their spoiled children. When the door swung open, he disappeared down the corridor, leaving Narcissa and Draco to themselves.

Timidly, Mrs. Malfoy crossed the threshold into a cold, sparsely furnished room with doors lining three of the walls.

"Hello?" she quavered, "Lucius?"

A door on the far wall creaked open and out he strode, fine blond hair showing split ends, but still neatly queued back, black robes tattered, gloves less than intact, and leaning heavily on his serpent-topped cane.

"Father!" Draco flung himself at the man limping across the room, nearly knocking both of them to the floor.

Lucius' free arm slid around his son's shoulders, and neither father nor mother scolded the boy for lack of restraint.

However, Draco noticed his error almost immediately and pulled back from his father's embrace. "I'm sorry, sir. I forgot myself." He began to edge away, back toward his mother who was still rooted to her place near the door, but Lucius' cane appeared before him, blocking his way.

"Sit down, Draco." He looked into Draco's cold grey eyes with his own. "It's all right... this time. However, there will be no further emotional outbursts, is that clear?"

"Yes, Father." Draco hastily strode to an uncomfortable wooden chair next to the room's only table.

Lucius' eyes drifted back to the door where his wife still stood, quite on the edge of an emotional outburst herself.

"Hello, Lucius," she whispered, unable to trust her voice. "... we... you... hello." *"Oh, lovely opening, you twit. I'm sure he's waited two long months to hear those very words from his treasured wife's lips."*

The barest flicker of amusement drifted across Lucius' face before he spoke. "Narcissa. You look well."

"I'd better do, the amount of time this hairstyle took, not to mention the cost of the bloody clothes..." "Thank you, dear. Oh, and you as well," she lied too late.

"One needn't be a Legilimens to know that isn't true, Cissa," he said somewhat affably, "but it is an admirable sentiment nonetheless."

With a hesitant smile, she approached the man who had ceased attempting to limp toward her and wrapped her arms around his neck with considerably more care than Draco had, but Lucius surprised her by crushing her into his body, somewhat more gaunt than Narcissa remembered, and caressing her back with his unoccupied arm. Burying her face into hollow of his clavicle, she inhaled the musky scent of sandalwood, mint, and sage that still clung to him.

"Oh gods, Lucius," she whispered, "I've missed you so." Feeling Lucius stiffen in her embrace, she pulled back just as Draco had. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be overly emotional. Do forgive me." Without waiting to be told, she sat rigidly in the chair beside Draco's.

"Cissa? *Cissa!*" Bellatrix and Rodolphus LeStrange burst forth from one of the doors, looking far sorer than Narcissa had ever seen them.

"Bella!" she cried delightedly. "How lovely! How bloody stupid of them to put all the Death Eaters together!"

Bellatrix laughed delightedly. "Isn't it though? These Ministry oafs don't stand a chance."

"You seem in rather good spirits," remarked Narcissa carefully, "but perhaps you'd like a bit of this Invigoration Draught? You're looking a bit, er, wan."

With a chuckle, Rodolphus squeezed his sister-in-law's shoulder. "You always were a stickler for the proprieties, Cissy, but you might as well dispense with the tact. Gods, I'd swear you told poor old Lucius here that he's looking well."

Lucius glowered at his brother-in-law, who did not seem to care or even notice. "Speaking of proprieties, Rodolphus, you might greet your nephew. You as well, Bellatrix."

"Oh! So sorry, Draco, old chap. My but you're looking smart these days. Got a girlfriend, have you?"

"Hello, little Draco!" screeched Bella in her horribly patronizing baby-talk. "How are you and your charming friends? You got so big!"

With a glower that greatly resembled his father's, Draco kissed his aunt's cheek and shook his uncle's large, ruddy hand. "Hello, Aunt Bella, Uncle Rodolphus. I'm pleased to see you again," he mumbled.

"Well then," sneered Lucius, "Draco, you will go with your aunt and uncle. Narcissa, you will come with me."

Draco nodded. "Yes, sir." He was far too intelligent to protest, odious as the task may have been.

"Of course, Lucius." Narcissa rose from her seat with a face full of concern.

"Righto, Lucius, my boy. Perhaps we'll see what that devil Rabastan is up to..."

"Yes, do that," muttered Mr. Malfoy through gritted teeth. "Come along, Narcissa." Pulling her up from the chair by the wrist, Lucius dragged his wife into the room from which he had emerged and slammed the door.

"Lucius, what's the matter?" she asked fearfully, ignoring her husband's vice-like grip on her barely-healed arm.

"I may not be as talented as the blood traitor Severus Snape," he snarled, trapping her against the rough, slimy wall, "but I have some skill in Legilimency. And you, Narcissa, are going to tell me exactly what it is you're feeling so guilty about."

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 of 7

When confronted by Lucius about her affair, Narcissa makes a shocking confession.

A/N: The characters, obviously, belong to J.K. Rowling and not me, and the idea for Gilda Grindylow's Society Papers was shamelessly pilfered from the eminent Juila Quinn and her wily Lady Whistledown, so I suppose I don't own that either.

* * *

Narcissa shrank back against the filthy wall, not daring to meet the furious grey eyes that could discern her thoughts so accurately.

"G-guilty?" she ventured timidly, when his grasp became too strong to bear. "Whatever do you mean, Lucius?"

"Oh, you know precisely what I mean, Narcissa." Placing the serpent handle of his cane beneath her chin, he brought her gaze up to his own. "Don't make me delve any more deeply than I already have."

"Already have?" His wife's brows snapped together in irritation. "Is that the first thing you thought of when you saw me? Read Narcissa's thoughts to see if she's been having an affair?"

Lucius smirked. "An affair? Now we're getting somewhere. And with whom, pray tell? Anyone I know?"

"I never said I was... fine, Lucius. I am having an affair of sorts, but I... you see..."

"An affair of sorts?" Curling his lip, he narrowed his chilly eyes further still. "What exactly does an 'affair of sorts' entail, Narcissa? And, since you failed to answer me, with whom did you have this affair?"

"Severus Snape," she whispered with lowered head. "It was Severus Snape."

"The blood traitor, you say?" answered Lucius conversationally, releasing his grip on Narcissa's arms and stepping away from her.

"Yes! The blood traitor!" Narcissa sighed with relief. "Ghastly man, really. I've tried to be rid of him so many times..."

"I'm sure you have," he responded sardonically, "but allow me to imagine it... every time you try to bid him farewell he ensnares your foolish senses once again."

Squirming beneath her husband's mocking gaze, Narcissa studied the rough floor. "Lucius, please."

He said nothing at first, but merely limped the length of the small room and back again, running his fingers through his fine blond hair. Finally, gesturing to the narrow cot along the opposite wall, he commanded, "Sit."

Narcissa crossed the room in two steps and obediently lowered herself to the bed. Nervously, she twisted the pale gold velvet of her gown and forced herself to keep her gaze upon her husband. "You must know that it was never my intention to betray you, Lucius. Severus sought me out with the express intent of seducing me. He used... he used the strangest of spells on me."

With the force of a well-cast Patronus, he rounded on her. "Never your intention? And what were these 'strange spells' you speak of? The Imperius Curse? The Petrificus Charm?" When Narcissa shook her head, he continued, "Did I ever give you cause to betray me? Was I inattentive in bed? Did I bring scandal upon our house with indiscretions? Was I ever a poor husband to you?"

"No!" cried Narcissa, long-restrained tears forcing themselves onto her cheeks. "Never. You've always been a proper husband to me and a decent father to Draco. I made it clear to Severus that..."

"One of my oldest friends! Our son's Head of House!" Suddenly taken with a barely restrained fury, Lucius seized his wife's shoulder and hissed, "The *shame* of it, Narcissa, the *shame*! Do you realize..." He tightened his grip on her person. "Do you realize what a scandal this would cause if someone were to find out? Malfoy's wife fucking a blood traitor? Gods above, Narcissa, *what* goes through your idiotic mind?"

"Nothing, I don't know! Circe's wand, Lucius, I... I love you!" Almost immediately, Narcissa gasped, bringing her gloved fingertips up to her lips, realizing too late what she had said.

Pale eyes wide, he once again released his hold on Narcissa and sent his cane clattering to the floor. Few things in life were able to destroy Lucius Malfoy's composure so thoroughly, but his wife had caught him completely off guard. "Get out," he spat when he had regained his voice, "and do *not* presume to visit here henceforth."

Forgetting the shred of dignity that remained in her, Narcissa scrambled up from the cot and out the door, giving only the briefest of backward glances to her wrathful husband.

"Draco!" she called desperately when she had once again entered the common room. "Draco, we're going!" Seizing her son's slender forearm, she dragged him out of the room and back through the gloomy halls of Azkaban.

"But... but Mother!" he whined breathlessly even as he handed her up into the carriage. "Why did we leave so soon? I barely even spoke with Father. Are we going back?"

Ignoring her son's protests, Narcissa slumped into her soft velvet seat and buried her face in her hands *Oh gods, what have I done?*

Draco's astonished gaze fixed upon the silent tears that slipped between his mother's fingers and left dark marks on the fabric of her dress. Never before had he seen his mother cry or, actually, display any strong emotion. "Was it seeing Father in Azkaban?"

No, actually it was more that he discovered my affair with your Potions master, and I then proceeded to blurt out my darkest secret to him! Yes." Narcissa dabbed at her eyes with her handkerchief and began to collect herself. "Forgive me, darling, that was very undignified of me. Whatever was I thinking? Now, how was your visit with your aunt and uncle?"

"Fine," mumbled Draco, recalling the cheek-pinching and baby talk he'd endured from Aunt Bella and the winks from Uncle Rodolphus accompanied by queries as to whether he was "getting any" up at Hogwarts.

"I beg your pardon?" Even in her distress, Narcissa did not neglect her quest to make her son's life one unending etiquette lesson.

"It was lovely, Mother. Aunt Bellatrix and Uncle Rodolphus were most entertaining," he added with a hint of sarcasm that he never would have dared use had his mother been herself.

Narcissa nodded but did not respond further. Leaning her forehead against the cold glass of the window, she sat in silence for the rest of the journey, wondering just how she could have so thoroughly ruined two lives.

* * *

A week after the fiasco at Azkaban, Narcissa found herself struck with the overwhelming urge to talk to someone. However, she was completely at a loss for whom. No mother, no sisters available, not even any real friends, certainly not Draco, who had left for school anyhow... Indeed, the only person that came to mind was Snape, from whom she had heard nothing since that day in the rose garden. Resolutely, she took her quill from the writing desk, composed a short missive to the Potions master, crumpled it into a ball, and promptly tossed it into the fire. *Gods, I sound like such an imbecile in writing*

Narcissa glanced again at the fireplace, covered with cold ash that the deplorably lazy house-elves had yet to dispose of *Of course! Floo powder! Messy, nauseating Floo powder... Pity one can't Apparate to Hogwarts.* Taking a pinch of the stuff, Narcissa stepped onto the hearth, taking care to keep her rose silk skirts high above her ankles, and disappeared.

Spinning out of the green fire that danced over the stone, she spun out of the fireplace and into Snape's private chambers, into which the Potions master had only just entered.

"Ah, Madam Malfoy, what an unexpected pleasure," he drawled, smirking as she brushed ash from her fine gown. "Your visit to Azkaban was somewhat... less than satisfying, I trust?"

"It is terribly rude of me to stop by unannounced," began Narcissa, "but I've done something terrible... oh, gods, where do I begin? Lucius knows."

"Does he?" Snape seemed to take this information in stride. "Well, then I suppose he paid more attention to my Legilimency tutoring than he let on. But, Narcissa, forgive my boorishness, I've not even offered you a chair." Gesturing to a threadbare red velvet sofa, Snape sauntered over to a small sideboard. "A glass of mulled mead, perhaps? Rosmerta's finest, of course."

Ignoring the unattractive way it creased her forehead, Narcissa frowned. "Oh, well, yes, I suppose. But Severus, did you not hear me correctly? My husband knows that we... we... have formed an intimate connection."

In a complete departure from his usual persona, Snape threw his oily head back and laughed. "*An intimate connection?* Salazar's bones, I'd forgotten those ridiculous terms your set uses."

"Indeed." Stern disapproval was etched into Narcissa's features. "That would certainly explain your tendency to flaunt propriety. Do you realize how great a scandal this is? Ever since Andromeda was sorted into Gryffindor and then married that loathsome man, I've tried to escape the hiss of gossip. Now with Lucius in Azkaban, I can't even sit through a tea without enduring prying questions. Say that someone had seen us in the Three Broomsticks... "

"Funny that." Snape sat beside his paramour and took a sheet of newsprint from the inner pocket of his robes. "I confiscated this from Daphne Greengrass. Apparently, it's quite the thing these days."

Nearly tearing the thin page, she tore it out of his hands. "That's Gilda Grindylow's Society Papers!" With trembling hands, she perused the page of neat columns of carefully catalogued gossip concerning every aspect of wealthy pureblood life.

'An utter bore' is certainly, I should think, the term that most aptly describes the Zabini crush. Indeed, it is a wonder that guests did need to be Ennervated when the thing was finally through...

"I don't see anything. You bastard, trying to frighten me. The thing is... what I came here to tell you... "

"There." Severus tapped the bottom of the last column with a satisfied gleam in his black eyes. "Though I doubt it shall make as enjoyable reading for you, my sweet."

None other than This Author herself glimpsed the Queen of Propriety, a certain Mrs. M---- curled rather cozily in a dark corner of the Three Broomsticks with that irredeemable 'greasy-haired git' and Head of our favorite House, Professor S----. With her husband in Azkaban, the angel may be showing her human side at last in a bid for a bit of company...

"How *dare* the bloody woman!" cried Narcissa. "Spying upon me like that. Only a Hufflepuff couldn't figure out who she was talking about. Hmm, what Mrs. M---- has a husband in Azkaban?"

"And is rather too obsessed with society's strictures?" injected Snape.

"I can't believe you're being so flippant about all this. She might as well have forgone the dashes and written your name."

"Not necessarily. Perhaps you were, what was that... oh yes, 'curled cozily in a dark corner' with Pomona Sprout. She is a Head of House, is she not?"

Narcissa bit back a scream of frustration. "You don't understand, Severus. Lucius is going to be furious... moreso than he already is, if that's even possible." She moaned, downing the last of her mulled mead in one unladylike gulp. "The whole world shall know I've made a cuckold of him. He'll never forgive me, *Draco* will never forgive me. Whatever shall I do?"

Brushing his hand over the swell of her breast, Snape snaked an arm around Narcissa. "You surely don't think that no one else would have you," he purred and traced the shape of her ear with his tongue.

"No, Severus, we mustn't!"

He moved his hand to the low décolletage of her gown. "And why 'mustn't' we, Narcissa?"

"Lucius..." She shivered as Snape brushed the delicate fabric aside and found her nipple with his teeth. "You don't understand, Severus... I told him... oh, gods. I told him that I love him!"

"What?" barked Snape, abandoning his seduction. "Why on earth did you do that?" He felt the blood drain from his face before he could hide it.

Dragging her dress back into place, Narcissa looked at Snape with an expression of utter desolation. "He was so angry when he found out about us," she whispered, "so very, very angry. I've never seen him like that, not even when Potter lost us that house-elf or even when he lost the prophecy for the Dark Lord. I lost my head completely, I'm afraid, and blurted it out. Oh, he didn't look kindly upon *that*, I can assure you."

"No, I wouldn't suppose he would," murmured Snape thoughtfully, wondering what sort of idiot would scorn such a declaration from Narcissa Malfoy.

For what seemed like the thousandth time in one short week, tears began to creep down Narcissa's cheeks. "What an idiot I've been."

"Surely he knows you didn't mean it?" he queried, a touch hopefully.

"Oh, but I did." A look of surprise flickered in her watery eyes. "I just had it reasonably well-hidden until now. Not that it matters now. That dreadful Grindylow woman made sure of that. After he gets out of Azkaban... well, I don't know what will happen. Divorce would be more scandalous than everything else. We can't continue like this, I do know that. He is a Legilimens."

"I could teach you Occlumency." Snape handed her his black linen handkerchief.

"No." She drew herself up in the chair. "I must stop thinking about myself for a change. My poor Draco will be quite undone if he knows I've betrayed his beloved father. And as for Lucius, well, what more can I say? I'm a pureblood girl stupid enough to fall in love with her husband; I might as well try to mend the damage I've caused." Standing, Narcissa hastened toward the fireplace once again and took a pinch of Floo Powder. "I'm very sorry, Severus."

With a sigh, he followed her to the hearth. "I see your mind is quite made up, Mrs. Malfoy. But so, in fact, is mine." Leaning forward, he kissed her soundly until she disappeared, whirling in a flash of green fire.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 of 7

Bella dispenses sisterly advice when Narcissa receives an unexpected missive. Snape gets desperate and reveals his most bizarre secret.

I realize that the Lestranges weren't actually in Azkaban after Book 5 and definitely wouldn't have gotten out so easily anyway, so it's somewhat A/U. Luckily for Bellatrix, I needed to use her in a scene.

* * *

So little worth mentioning has occurred of late. Perhaps it is the war keeping gossip at bay. After all, who wants to be seen sneaking off with a Mudblood mistress in times such as these? However, we must persevere in our shallow pursuits.

Mrs. G----'s gown for the Flints' masque was the most dreadful shade of pumpkin-juice orange. Fortunately for her (and rather unfortunately for Mr. G----), this did not stop a certain Mr. L---- from sending her lascivious looks across the floor.

But honestly, let us not delude ourselves further. Who really cares about Mr. and Mrs. G----? The question on every pureblood's mind is: Where could the lovely Mrs. M---- have disappeared to?

-Gilda Grindylow's Society Papers, 30 October 1996

"Oh, honestly!" cried Bella, throwing the gossip sheet aside in disgust. "Who in the name of Hecate is this bloody woman? She's positively obsessed with you!"

"Indeed," remarked Narcissa calmly, taking a bite of her toast. "Although I'm not sure why she bothers. Her constant remarks on my supposed 'relationship' with Severus have done nothing to cause a scandal. It is obvious to everyone that I am the very soul of discretion."

Bellatrix hid a smile. "Of course you are, Cissy. Lucius is in Azkaban, as we've said *nauseam*. No one cares if you stray, particularly because you've given him an heir who is now sixteen."

"That's not true, Bella." Narcissa clasped her hands over her heart. "I care. Lucius certainly cares. So would Draco, if he were to learn the truth."

"Surely he's read *Grindylow*?"

"Naturally, but Severus and I have managed to convince him that she is wrong."

Grinning behind the rim of her teacup, Bella could not keep the amusement from her voice. "Severus and I?"

"Oh, shut up, Bella. As you well know, I've not spoken to, erm, Professor Snape for at least a month, and I have no intention of doing so in the future. Lucius shall surely be out of prison soon. They've released you and Rodolphus, haven't they?"

"Indeed. They assumed the Dark Lord would be too angry with us for losing the prophecy, you know. Though it seems they were wrong..."

"Well, why didn't they let Lucius out then? He was in charge! Surely the Dark Lord would be most upset with him."

"Oh, he is. But as Lucius is probably the best wizard of the Death Eaters, the Ministry has decided not to risk it for now."

With a sigh, Narcissa allowed her normally rigid posture to slump and lightly touched a hand to her forehead. Ever since her visit to Snape's dungeons, she had hidden herself away inside Malfoy Manor, where Bella had joined her after being released from Azkaban.

"Cissy, I know it's none of my business, but he told me what you said." Pushing back from her chair, Bellatrix moved around the breakfast table to embrace her sister.

"What?"

"Lucius. In Azkaban." She bit her lip. "It's nothing to be ashamed of, Cissa, being in love with one's husband. You know very well that Rodolphus and I were a love match."

"Yes, but you and he are so different from me and Lucius. He made it quite clear that he had no intention of marrying for love, which didn't bother me at all then. Really, I felt all that romantic nonsense was a bit unseemly. No offense to you, of course."

"None taken." When she had pulled her sister up from the chair, Bella led her into the drawing room. "But surely," she said when they had settled upon the sofa, "you've not given up on the idea? Naturally he would be angry about Snape, but it seems to me that he might one day..."

Whatever Bellatrix had been about to say was lost as a large brown and white owl swooped through the open window and alighted on the arm of the sofa. Narcissa took the parchment from around its leg with trembling fingers and sloppily tore it open. It was still rather early for mail, and this particular missive bore the stamp of the Ministry of Magic. Skimming the message with wild eyes, she let out a strangled gasp of anguish, her fingernails puncturing the edges of the paper where she clutched it.

Mrs. Malfoy-

The Department of Magical Law Enforcement has ordered your husband's release from Azkaban Prison, effective immediately. Please present yourself at the prison to collect him upon receipt of this letter. He is very ill.

-Percy I. Weasley, Junior Assistant to the Minister of Magic

"Oh, gods, Bella!" Two great tears trickled down Narcissa's pale cheeks. "They're letting him go."

Gently, Bella wrenched the mangled parchment from her sister's grasp and put an arm around her shoulders. "Don't worry, Cissa. I'm sure he's not as bad off as the blood traitor says. Just run along to Azkaban, and bring him home."

"Will you come?" quavered Narcissa. "He told me not to go back..."

Rolling her eyes, Bella stood. "I'm sure he wouldn't mind if you went there to get him out. Besides, I rather think you're lucky. You can rescue him from prison and nurse him back to health. He'll fall in love with you for certain!"

"Don't be silly, Bella. Lucius Malfoy isn't the type to take kindly to 'rescuing,' especially by his whoring wife. And as for falling in love with me..."

"Narcissa!" snapped Bella. "Stop being stupid and go! I have things to do besides stay here and coddle you while you play the recluse. There are things to be done for the Dark Lord that are far more important than your marital woes." With a snap of her fingers, she Disapparated from Malfoy Manor before her sister could utter another word.

* * *

Narcissa's unbound hair spilled over the hood of her traveling cloak as she hurried from the carriage and into the gates of the prison. Mere minutes after her sister had gone off in a huff, she had summoned her coach and thestrals, not even pausing to have Glaber set her hair.

Upon entering, she discovered that they had moved Lucius into a small cell near the front of the prison. Slowly, Narcissa approached him, lying silently on a low cot in the shadows of the tiny room.

"Oh, gods, Lucius," she whispered when she had drawn nearer. The once proud and arrogant Lucius Malfoy lay ashen-faced, grey eyes gazing blankly at the crags of the ceiling. His expensively cut robes were torn and slick with the slime of the filthy walls; his fine, soft hair was matted with dirt; and his once broad frame was gaunt. Disregarding her gown, Narcissa knelt down on the cold floor beside the cot and hesitantly traced his high cheekbones with her ungloved fingers. "What have they done to you?" Voice catching in a sob, she buried her face in her husband's robe.

"That's quite enough of that, Narcissa." Weakly, Lucius tried to push her away with his cane.

Taking a deep breath, she raised herself from the floor. "Very well. *Mobilicorpus!*" With a flick of her wand, Narcissa raised Lucius from the bed, and he drifted along behind her toward the carriage.

* * *

Ah, dear readers, it has come to This Author's attention that Lucius M---, Death Eater extraordinaire, has indeed been released from Azkaban! Though he has yet to reenter society, there is every reason to believe that Mr. M--- is spending his time not recuperating, but working fiendishly to regain the favor of our friend, Lord V---.

Does this homecoming indicate that the divine Mrs. M--- will once again grace our ballrooms? Or will her husband prefer to keep her locked away following that sordid affair with the dashing Professor S---? Only time will tell...

-Gilda Grindylow's Society Papers, 7 November, 1996

"Lucius M---? Lord V---?" Lucius tossed aside the paper in disgust. "Couldn't you have brought me something a bit more edifying than Gilda Grindylow's insipid gossip?"

"Sorry." Narcissa took the teapot from a silver tea tray and set a cup before Lucius. "I thought it rather amusing, actually. The bloody woman is obvious to the point of ridiculous."

"And rather interested in you as well. If I didn't know she was a woman, I'd say she fancies you."

Blushing, she rearranged the pillows at Lucius' back. "You seem better today. We'll have you back torturing Muggles in no time."

A ghost of a smile danced across Lucius' face. "Yes, well, I should certainly hope so." He gestured to his wife, who was currently combing the last of the snarls from his hair. "Though one could become quite accustomed to this." Unexpectedly, he reached up and seized one of her hands, pulling her down so that she was eye to eye with him. "*Legilimens.*"

The last two months sped before Narcissa's eyes: sending Draco off to school, Bella's release from prison, and most importantly, the final scene in Snape's rooms.

"Very good, Narcissa." His piercing gaze softened. "Very good, indeed." Lucius leaned toward her, seeking his wife's lips with his own.

Narcissa gave a gasp of delight. His mouth was hard and insistent, devouring her as she softened against it. Shyly, she ran the tiny tip of her tongue along his teeth, listening with satisfaction to his muted moan.

Boldly, she wrapped her arms around his neck, drawing him as close as she dared. Lucius' hands moved over her back, teasing the sensitive skin of her neck and moving down to cup the roundness of her derriere.

"Lucius," she whimpered when his teeth found her earlobe, "oh, gods, I love you..."

Abruptly, he broke away from her, leaving her shaking with unresolved need. "Yes, I recall."

I should really stop saying that... "Oh, Lucius, about that..."

Mercifully, a house-elf appeared in the doorway before Narcissa could finish. "Mistress has a caller. Does she want Tubby to send him away?"

"No, I'll go!" cried Narcissa, leaping from the bed and hurrying away so fast that she kicked the elf halfway down the hall and had barely composed herself when she reached the steps and descended into the grand foyer. "Severus! What on earth? You do know that Lucius has returned, do you not?"

"Indeed, Mrs. Malfoy. The entire wizarding world knows it." His eyes narrowed as he took in her kiss-swollen lips, flushed cheeks, and the tendrils escaping from her chignon. "I had come in the hope that Gilda Grindylow had persuaded Lucius that you were far too scandalous to keep as a wife." Tracing her moist lip with his finger, he continued, "Apparently, I was wrong."

"Yes, quite wrong. How could you be so foolish as to think that my husband would pay any mind to a gossip column?"

Snape pursed his lips. "Naturally. But you, perfect Narcissa Malfoy, I expected some reaction from you. You've never been one to sit in the face of scandal and do nothing. Your entire life has been dedicated to restoring the Blacks' honor after your sister's unfortunate behavior. Making a splendid, albeit loveless, match, giving him an heir straightaway, behaving so rigidly that..." He broke off in a sigh. "Gods, Narcissa, I thought you'd be tired of all this nonsense by now."

"I know you can't fathom it, egotistical as you are, but I'm happy as I am." Her eyes were dark with concern as she laid a hand upon his arm. "Give up, Severus, please. You're just torturing yourself."

"Happy?" sneered Snape. "Then I must have misunderstood that day you came to see me at Hogwarts. You are the same anguished woman whose husband resolved never to love her, are you not?"

Though her fingers clutched more tightly on the banister, Narcissa did not allow him the satisfaction of seeing her flinch. "Bella is right. I was being an imbecile. Whether or not he decides to fall in love with me is his choice, as is the decision to forgive me for allowing you to seduce me. Severus, the point is that I love him, not you, even though I'd prefer him to feel the same. I can't, however, say that I don't desire you, which is why it would be better if we avoided each other's company."

"I see." Snape held himself stoically, as usual. "That is the one thing I hadn't counted on, you loving Lucius. I rather thought you'd be easy to lead from his grasp, though I went to some extreme measures..."

"Including, it seems, feeding information to Gilda Grindylow." Eyes alight for the first time, Narcissa queried eagerly, "Does that mean you know who she is? Everyone will be so envious if I discover her identity first..."

With a humorless bark of laughter, Snape muttered, "Actually, I am Gilda Grindylow. Didn't it ever cross your vapid little mind that she began her column at the same time as we began our affair?"

"You? But..." The look of astonishment melted from her features, and she began to laugh. "Oh, Severus, I never dreamed you had a feminine side! How... Why in the name of Slytherin would you do such a thing? That was all to drag me away from Lucius?" Shaking with mirth, Narcissa sank to the floor. "Oh, gods, Severus, when I think about your catty comments about Amata Goyle's dresses! Did your friends honestly think you were spying for the Order at all those balls?"

"I... " Rarely was Snape disconcerted, but he now seemed quite at a loss for words. "Perhaps I went a bit mad. It does seem rather ridiculous now that I have you here laughing at me." Annoyance flashed through his eyes, and he hauled her up by the arms. "Though you may mock my methods, admit it, Narcissa, you would have married me if your sister hadn't gone off with that Mudblood."

Sadly, she gazed up into his cold, unreadable eyes. "I can't say for sure. You may have had a better chance, but only an idiot turns down Lucius Malfoy. I wish I could say at least something you wish to hear, but I simply can't."

With a jerky nod, Snape released her from his grasp. "Of course. Well, Narcissa, it seems as though you've finally gotten your wish. I shall leave you alone. But remember this: You couldn't resist me. You barely struggled that night at the masked ball. Go back to your beloved Lucius then." Closing in upon her, he added in a low, dangerous voice, "I'll always have the satisfaction of remembering what I can do to you, Narcissa." He took her in a heavy, drugging, possessive kiss, skimming his palm across her silk-covered nipples, noting with pleasure the way she peaked instantly at his touch.

"No," said Narcissa, stepping away with great effort, "this goes no further. But Severus... I always did care for you. You must know that."

"I do." After bowing over her hand, pressing it with the slightest flutter of his lips, he Disapparated, leaving Narcissa in the empty foyer.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 7

Bella's Machiavellian machinations give new meaning to the words "Slytherin cunning."

Ah, Gentle Readers, unprecedented though it may be, This Author has been forced to eat Her words! Only a short fortnight ago, She reported that the incomparable Mrs. M----'s scandalous ways had ceased and that the lady in question seemed to have dedicated herself to her husband's care. Indeed, that may be true, as Mr. M---- has since made a full recovery and is now undoubtedly working doubly hard in the service of the esteemed Lord V---- to prove his loyalty. However, as her husband's mind is occupied by such noble pursuits, it seems that our divine Mrs. M---- has once again taken up with the ever dashing and darkly handsome Professor S----, Head of the most revered of Houses and Potions Master equaled by none...

-Gilda Grindylow's Society Papers, 22 November 1996

Lucius scowled into his half-empty glass of Firewhisky as the muted chatter of the Hog's Head patrons flowed around him. Narcissa had gone to Juliet Montague's coming out ball and left him alone with his thoughts, not to mention his imaginings at what she would no doubt be doing once she met up with Severus. Therefore, when Rodolphus and Rabastan had owled him, asking him to come for a drink, he had agreed far more readily than he otherwise would have done.

"Why the long face, Lucius, my boy? Not wishing you were back in Azkaban, are you?" Rabastan chuckled at his own weak joke.

"Ah, no, look at him. If you ask me, he's been reading that gossip column again," said Rodolphus jokingly and signaled to the bartender. "Another round, Abe, and then another. This one had better be good and drunk. If he can still Apparate by the time we leave, I'll hex you into next week."

"Never fear, gentlemen, never fear." Aberforth Dumbledore hobbled over to the table in the darkest, smokiest corner of the pub and poured out a large measure of Firewhisky, followed by snifters of his signature drink, the Wailing Werewolf, a strong, but noxious mix of elf-made wine, butterbeer, sherry, and gillywater. "Half the people leavin' this pub are taken up to the Ministry on AUI charges... most of 'em splinched so bad ye wouldn't recognize 'em."

Though unsure whether that was something that would give one cause to boast, Lucius nonetheless raised his glass silently and drank half of his already curdling Werewolf in one gulp. Morosely, he slammed it back onto the rough-hewn oak table and glared at the darkness pressing against the smudged, sooty windowpanes.

"Gods, Malfoy, I saw you more cheerful in Azkaban." Rodolphus slipped another shot of Firewhisky into his brother-in-law's drink. "You can't tell me that ridiculous *Grindylow* is getting to you."

"A grindylow?" queried Rabastan in confusion. "Has the Dark Lord got you diving underwater? Be sure you take some gillyweed."

"No, you dolt, not a *real* grindylow. It's a gossip columnist that our wives read more greedily than Niffers in a gold mine." Lucius spoke for the first time. "I'd advise you to stay a bachelor, Rabastan; it's much easier on the nerves."

"Wish I could, Malfoy, but my brother here hasn't yet seen fit to reproduce. Leaves me little choice in the matter, what with the estate and all."

"Well, get to it, Lestrangle." Lucius gave a hollow chuckle. "But you're better off marrying some innocent fresh out of Hogwarts, preferably one who has never heard of Gilda Grindylow."

Snorting into his mulled mead, Rodolphus muttered, "Fat chance of that. Even Bella's caught up in it all. Following the story about Cissy, she is. Having an affair with Severus Snape, or so they say. Is it true, then?"

Lucius merely gave him a dark look and snapped morosely, "I'd rather not have to duel with my own brother-in-law." Abruptly, he stood, continuing, "So don't presume to question my wife's honor or so much as mention her name in this filthy place, or there will be hell to pay. The name of Malfoy is worth much more than that of Lestrangle." Sweeping his traveling cloak behind him, Lucius stalked toward the door and Apparated.

* * *

"Well?" snapped Bella, sneering at her husband and brother-in-law when they appeared in her sitting room. "How did it go? Which one of you Apparated him? He'd better have been damned near unconscious by the time you got him back to Wiltshire."

Rodolphus stepped forward timidly. "Erm, well, actually, Bella, my darling wife, neither of us Apparated him... It wasn't entirely necessary, you see."

"No, I don't see. If you'd done what I told you, he'd have left his legs behind at the Hog's Head. What in the name of the Dark Lord Voldemort happened?"

The two men flinched visibly. "Now, now, Bella, you needn't take the Dark Lord's name in vain! The situation was under control," spoke up Rabastan, "until my half-witted brother here went and insulted the man's wife."

Glowering, Bella said in a low, deadly voice, "Watch who you're calling a half-wit, Three-O.W.L. Lestrangle. And as for you, Rodolphus, what exactly did you say about my sister?"

"Nothing, dearest, nothing..." The cowering Death Eater took a few steps back. "I just mentioned that thing about her and Snape in that gossip column, and..."

"Malfoy almost challenged him!" Rabastan cut in excitedly. "It was a very near thing indeed, Bellatrix."

"Challenged him!" shouted Bella, delight immediately overtaking the scorn on her haughty face. "Oh, that's bloody brilliant! Gods, this is working even better than I expected. A challenge is far better progress than some drunken profession of love," she added under her breath and then, continuing in a normal tone, addressed her husband once again, "so he seemed in a sour mood, did he? Well, good. That's all he deserves for now, the wretch. Toying with my poor sister's affections like that! Well, I'll show him what happens to those who snub the sisters Black."

* * *

"Hush, Severus, we shall wake the house-elves!" whispered Narcissa desperately as Snape's heavy boot steps crossed the floor of the stone balcony outside her bedchamber. "Hurry up and get inside."

With a low chuckle, Snape moved deftly across the room and murmured, "Ah, now, if had a Sickle for every time I heard you say that... why, I'd be nearly as rich as Malfoy!" He sniggered mirthlessly.

"You're a bastard. What we're doing is horrible, Severus. I do love my husband."

"So we've heard. And horrible, you say? Hmm, your shrieks of pleasure have always seemed quite genuine, and although I quite take your meaning, I can assure you as the legitimacy of my birth," he said flippantly when he reached the large four-poster on the wall opposite the windows.

"Low as it may be," muttered Narcissa, pointedly ignoring his other comments. "Now, are you positive Lucius went out?"

"Yes, Mrs. Lestrangle told me that he was going for a drink with her husband. No need to worry for now, though he could certainly Apparate back to his room at any time."

Narcissa scowled. "Don't be silly. You can only Apparate *from* the manor, not into it."

"Hence my climbing your balcony like some Muggle teenager. Though I must say, it was good of Bellatrix to arrange all this. Even better of her to change your mind about me." Snape grinned wolfishly as he quickly shed his robe and dived under the blankets with Mrs. Malfoy.

* * *

With a contented sigh, Bella leaned back into the plush silver pillows and pulled the deep green velvet counterpane more tightly around her wiry frame.

"It was really quite brilliant the way you angered Lucius enough to issue a challenge. I vow, I'd never even thought of that myself! The only problem is that it's better that he challenge Severus, not you."

Rodolphus chuckled. "Indeed. But I wouldn't call it brilliance on my part. I merely played the jovial idiot, as usual, and wound up insulting his wife. Fortunately, it worked, because Lucius is possessed of a rather strong constitution and doesn't intoxicate easily. We'd still be there and out half the family fortune in Firewhisky if we'd gone with the original plan."

"Yes." Hesitantly, Bella agreed, not wanting to disparage her own idea. "I confess, I did not know that, but how could I have? Imagine! A lady in the Hog's Head! Gilda Grindylow would have a field day."

"I don't imagine she would, Bella," Rodolphus teased gently. "Not many of our wives become Death Eaters in their own right, either."

With a modest shrug, she quickly resumed their earlier conversation. "Lucius Malfoy deserted the cause when our master's powers were weakened, lost us the prophecy, got the Dark Lord's diary destroyed, and now he's tormenting my sister!"

"It's hard to know which is worst," Rodolphus put in dryly. "Surely not the lost prophecy?"

"Perhaps, but this is personal. So anyhow, I've arranged a tryst between Cissy and Snape tonight. With any luck, Lucius will come stumbling in just as Snape is skulking out."

"Forgive me, Bella." Twisting to face his wife, Rodolphus furrowed his brow and continued, "But did you only choose Snape because he's an old friend of Lucius'? I don't

know how far that will go, considering that man's questionable loyalties. Mightn't you have chosen some bloke from our crowd? I can hardly imagine Narcissa lying with a possible blood traitor."

Narrowing her eyes, Bella spat, "Well, you're not supposed to go around imagining it! Besides, I didn't select him; Narcissa did. If you read the papers, you'd realize that..."

"That I don't consider *Gilda Grindylov's Society Papers* a legitimate newspaper?"

Ignoring him, Bella went on. "That Narcissa and he had been carrying on an affair since the summer, until Lucius found out. She loves Malfoy, as she told him at Azkaban, which is why she and her little Dracling left so quickly. Therefore, she broke off her connection with Snape. Lucius was pleased about that, not because of any tender feelings he might have acknowledged for his wife, but because he was obeyed."

"Hmm... and now you think he's in love with her and just won't admit it?"

"Whether he is or he isn't right now is most certainly not my problem. What I'm saying is he will be after I'm done with him."

With a low snicker, Rodolphus waved the wand on his bedside table, extinguishing the lamp, and lay down. "Very clever, Bella. However, I shall see if I cannot persuade the Dark Lord to give you more challenging tasks. You must not have enough to do, as you sound like the meddlesome wenches in Muggle romance novels. At the very least, we're going to have to get you pregnant."

"What?" squawked Bella indignantly, prodding her husband's shoulder. However, he had conveniently taken a Sleeping Draught and was already snoring away. "Bastard!"

* * *

Contrary to Bella's belief, Lucius did in fact become quite drunk that evening. Upon returning to the manor after the debacle at the Hog's Head, he continued with the Firewhisky well nigh until dawn when he heard the hoof beats of a horse clattering down the lane.

Muggles? What on earth are they doing by the manor? They can't even see the place unless they're told it's here Lucius stumbled to the window and saw through his blurred vision a sleek black gelding cantering away, carrying none other than Severus Snape. *Damned wife-stealing blood traitor... what the hell's the matter with thestrals?*

"Tubby!" he slurred. "Tubby, get your worthless ass into my study!"

With a loud crack, the house-elf appeared before him. "Master, you is drunk! Is you so disappointed with Tubby, sir? It were the burned pudding, weren't it? Oh, Tubby is a bad elf! Bad Tubby, bad, bad, bad, bad..." The aggrieved elf began to dash its head repeatedly against a shiny black vanishing cabinet.

"Tubby!"

"Bad, bad, bad, bad!"

Snarling, Lucius gave the elf a sharp rap upon the head with the business end of his highly polished cane. "That's enough, elf."

Rubbing his head forlornly, he mewled, "Tubby deserved that, Master. He is sorry now for being a bad elf. Bad, bad, bad, bad..."

"Elf!"

"BAD, BAD, BAD!!!" Dents appeared in the formerly priceless cupboard.

Even in his intoxicated state, Lucius was able to tear the black leather glove from his hand with alacrity. "Do you want this, elf?"

"NO! Not clothes, Master, please! Kill Tubby instead! Master Draco always gives death threats to Tubby! Better than clothes, much better."

"I would like to retire for now." Lucius opened his eyes with effort, though to him the room was spinning out of control.

"Yes, Master, yes. Right away!" Tubby magicked his master up the small staircase in the back of the study that led straight to Lucius' bedchamber.

Unfortunately, Lucius was only blessed with a few hours sleep until he awoke at noontide with a brutal hangover and in an even fouler mood. The bright sunlight danced across the room, wriggling its way between the gaps in the bed hangings and searing his bloodshot eyes. His head felt as though a herd of hippogriffs had stampeded across it, pounding him with their hooves and sending their sharp claws deep into his fragile skull. As for the rest of him, well, he rather would have preferred the Dark Lord's punishments to the agonizing sensations in his tired bones.

"Lucius?" A faint whisper sounded from the corner of his room, near the door that connected it to Narcissa's. "Are you awake?" Soft footsteps, only discernible to his overly sensitive ears, made their way toward the bed. Wearing a simply cut gown of the softest bottle green wool, she cautiously settled down next to him, brushing the matted hair from his eyes.

"Cissa," he mumbled with some effort, still not fully coherent, "Cissa." Slowly, he raised his arms, still clad in his evening robes, and wrapped them around her waist, drawing her close and burying his face in the folds of skirt at her hip. As Narcissa stroked his hair, he promptly fell asleep once more.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 7

Bella's plan comes to fruition when Snape and Lucius face one another on the dueling field.

A/N: I'm the Heidi Fleiss of review whores! Pander to me!

* * *

Most assuredly, there can be no question that the crown jewel of pureblood society is the much-lauded Mrs. M----, golden goddess that she is. However, This Author must admit that she is sorely remiss in her praise of the lady's sister, the delightful Mrs. L----. No one serves Lord V---- more tirelessly, more faithfully than she! Not only that, but

the gossipmongers report that this delightful woman has taken it upon herself to become instrumental in arranging trysts between her incomparable sister and the immeasurable Professor S----! Working behind the back of Mr. M---- is not an enviable task by any means, so is it at all a surprise that she has decided to host a ball where the two lovers can fend for themselves?

--Gilda Grindylow's Society Papers, 3 December 1996

"Bellatrix Lestrange! What a delight!" Shunting Pansy forward in the receiving line, Violet Parkinson rushed forward to greet her hostess. "You don't come to so much as a garden party for ages, and then we find you holding the crush of the Season! With a gown in the first stare of fashion, I might add."

With visible ennui, Bella responded, "Yes, yes. My sister has impeccable taste. Do enjoy yourself, Violet. Hi, little sweetie!" she added, with a nod to Pansy. "Go on and play with ickle Drakiekins!" Without noticing Pansy's scowl, Bella turned to Rodolphus when the Parkinsons had moved off toward the dance floor and hissed, "Does the bloody woman think we're running a nanny service? That child isn't even out yet!" Turning back to her guests, she said silkily, "Severus! How very lovely of you to join us! I believe..." Lowering her voice, she leaned forward confidentially toward his curtain of greasy hair and whispered into his ear. "...that my sister was asking after you not ten minutes ago. She was by the lemonade table, I believe."

Snape gave a grim nod and dropped a kiss on her cheek. "Helpful as ever, my dear Mrs. Lestrange."

"I don't normally make a habit of helping blood traitors, Severus. My sister is determined to avoid the scandal of divorce and stay in that loveless marriage, but she oughtn't to suffer unduly for her sensibilities. I'm helping her; you're just reaping the side benefits."

"Narcissa often tells me that she loves Lucius," Snape returned quietly. "Every time we make love, in fact. I've been thinking of ending it..."

"Don't be silly." Bella's smile was positively reptilian, but Snape took no notice of that salient fact. "Her guilty conscience obligates her to speak thus. She cares very much for you, my traitorous friend. Carry on; she needs you as long as she's married to Malfoy."

Curtly, the Head of Slytherin House turned on the heel of his gleaming black boot and, dark robes flapping, strode purposefully toward the refreshment table.

On the opposite side of the room, Narcissa waved her delicate beribboned fan before her face a few times to stave off the stifling heat that already pervaded the room. Standing along the edge of the crowd, near one of the floor to ceiling windows that overlooked the magnificent gardens of Chateau Lestrange, she had an unobstructed view of the gracefully curved marble staircase that led directly into the center of the room. Uncertain though she was of just whom she was truly looking for, she nonetheless continued to watch the new arrivals make their entrances.

Suddenly, the heavy bronze door banged open so loudly, scattering squeaking house-elves and reverberating through the entire entrance hall, that all the revelers nearest it turned to stare, and even the musicians jumped, causing a slight hiccup in the quadrille they had been playing. Attired in his finest evening robes, hair neatly queued back, Lucius made his way down the stairs, shoving partygoers aside with his ever-useful cane, and locked his cold, arrogant eyes with his wife's. She saw them soften briefly, traveling over her shimmering gown, resting appreciatively on the soft curve of her breasts, and returning to her face as he finally reached her.

"You're looking very well, Narcissa." Bowing over her white-gloved hand, he kissed the inside of her wrist, still sensitive beneath the fabric. "Your divine beauty transcends words."

Biting back a laugh, his wife said, "Thank you for that most unusual compliment, my dear. I say, are you quite all right this evening? I rather thought you'd learned your lesson with the Firewhisky the other week. You don't want a repeat of that, now do you?"

Recalling how he'd got Narcissa to stay in his bed on the pretext of being too hung-over to know what he was asking, Lucius responded evenly, "I can think of worse things. However, I'm not in my cups. Is it a crime to speak flowery words to one's wife on occasion? Especially when your gown puts me in mind of a field of the ripest wheat at harvest time."

This time, Narcissa actually did giggle. "But, Lucius, my gown is blue!"

"Do you hear him?" demanded Bella as she and Rabastan crouched behind a caryatid. "That was supposed to be the line about *hehair!*"

"Merlin's balls, I meant your hair," came Lucius' voice from a few feet away.

"Oh, don't worry overmuch, Bella. How often does one get to hear Lucius Malfoy make an utter fool of himself? She's likely to be flattered that he's even trying."

"Whatever." Her mind had sprung ahead to the next phase of the plan. "Distract Lucius somehow. He's so embarrassed, he'll likely be glad to escape. Play a round or two of Wizard's Whist, discuss business, kill Muggles, I don't care. I'll intercept Severus. He's still looking for her, the idiot."

Chuckling, Rabastan moved away from his sister-in-law, over to the struggling Lucius. "Lucius, my boy!" his voice boomed. "That old devil Rodolphus has wagered fifty Galleons that you can't beat me in a game of Wizard's Whist. Fifty, I say! Care to prove him wrong?"

"I suppose it couldn't hurt. That's a foolish bet as it is. Here, get some of that mead, and I'll meet you in the card room." Turning to his wife, he added, "Beg pardon, Narcissa dear. It's not a wager a man can ignore."

"Of course, Lucius. Do enjoy yourself."

With a nod, Lucius surprised her by kissing her full on the lips before he turned toward the side room that held all the card tables.

As soon as his lover's husband had disappeared, Snape slithered out from between two columns and casually sidled up to her. "I trust you're enjoying yourself, Narcissa?" he asked with a condescending sneer.

"Quite," she returned with a haughty toss of her golden head. "I can't remember when I've enjoyed a ball so much."

Severus raised his eyebrows. "Oh really? I seem to recall that you had quite an... interesting time at the Parkinson's anniversary ball."

"Did I?" queried Mrs. Malfoy innocently. "Perhaps you ought to remind me then."

His sloe-eyed gaze darkening with heated desire, the Potions master bowed over the lady's hand. "Certainly, Narcissa. Will you do me the honor of a dance?"

Anxiously, she glanced at the closed door to the card room, and, satisfied that it would remain thus, gave a delicate curtsey to her partner. "I suppose, since you asked so nicely this time."

Without another word, Snape led Narcissa out onto the dance floor, sweeping her across the room in a fast-paced waltz and outside to the dark shadowy gardens with one particularly energetic twirl. Stealthily, the lovers made their way through the maze of hedgerows and into a moonlit grotto that Bella had had sculpted into dark, mossy stone taken from the ruins of a castle that bore an ancient curse. At once, Snape leaned down to capture Narcissa's lips with his own, molding them carefully, teasing and probing with his tongue.

With a soft sigh, Narcissa pressed her body more closely against his, wrapping her arms around his neck and shoving her peaked breasts, sensitive in their flimsy silk, against his broad chest. He lifted her off the ground, shoving her against the wall of the grotto, and she wrapped her legs around his waist, feeling his arousal even beneath the layers of flounce in her skirt. "Oh gods, Severus," she moaned, "you're a horrible, horrible man."

He smirked. "But yet, you can't resist me." His hands continued their journey down her back, squeezing her derriere and pushing her toward his hips.

* * *

"Lucius! Lucius!" Wearing a look of gravest concern, Bella dashed into the card room. "I've heard the most distressing rumor! Rodolphus has told me that there are Aurors in the gardens! Apparently, someone told them that all the Death Eaters would be here... probably that blood traitor, Severus Snape. Oh gods, I should never have invited that horrible man. Come on then, hurry. You're the best wizard of the lot."

Lucius leapt to his feet with alacrity. "I shall see to it right away, Bella. Aren't you coming? You are the best witch of the lot."

"Of course." Bella grinned evilly. "Wouldn't want to miss this." She and her brother-in-law swept out onto the portico, taking care not to draw any undue attention to themselves. "I believe he said they were down here, near the grotto," she informed him in a whisper. "Take care not to startle them or we'll be hexed into next year."

"Which Aurors?" hissed Lucius, drawing his wand.

"That awful girl I'm loathe to call my niece. Perhaps Shackbolt," Bellatrix improvised. "Just around this corner here. Don't strike too soon, now." She had no wish to be responsible for Lucius' turning the Killing Curse on her sister.

Peering around the corner, Lucius heard the sound of labored breathing and a few deep groans.

"Harder, Severus," moaned one of the Aurors, "yes, oh gods, yes..."

"Good evening, Severus. *Narcissa*." Grey eyes narrowing in disgust, Lucius leaned on his cane, coolly observing the guilty looks of the disheveled pair until his jealousy overcame his aristocratic façade. Seizing Snape by the neck, he shoved him back against the slimy stone wall. "So, you thought you could carry on with my wife, did you?"

"I've done so for several months now, and you haven't seemed to mind," answered Snape, ever sarcastic. "Why the change of heart, Malfoy?"

Narcissa's finely plucked brows drew together in anguish. "Oh, Lucius, I never meant to... you know that I love you..." She regarded him through wide, fearful eyes.

"It's nothing to do with you, Cissa. It's the blood traitor I'm going to kill," Lucius growled, tightening his grip on the greasy flesh of Snape's neck.

For a moment, something like fear flickered across the Head of Slytherin's derisive face. "Not your old school chum, Lucius," he said uneasily. "After all those holiday visits to Snape Hall?"

Lucius recalled for a moment how a falling piece of ceiling had nearly killed him one summer at the Snape family's decaying ancestral home. "Our friendship was void the moment you began fucking my wife."

"Was it?" Snape was back to his sardonic self. "Funny, that. I was told," he said slowly, with a significant glance to a rather triumphant Bella, "that your marriage was hardly one at all. That you spend all your time with whores in Knockturn Alley. That you..."

"Enough," snarled Lucius. "Lies, all of them. I love my wife and I..."

Bella and Narcissa let out delighted gasps, clutching at each other's hands. Snape's eyes at last widened in true fear, and Lucius drew back his hand.

"A wizard's duel, Snape. Two weeks hence, at dawn, in the meadow near Malfoy Manor. My seconds shall call upon yours," he spat, and turning on his heel, grabbed for Narcissa's hand. "We're going, Cissa. Thank you for your hospitality, Bellatrix." The Malfoys disappeared in the shadows of the hedge maze, leaving Snape and Bella alone.

"You," hissed Snape, "you..." Words had quite escaped him as he stuttered at the smirking lady Death Eater whose cunning had led to his almost certain death. Though excellent at dueling, Severus stood little chance against a jealous husband, no matter how much he himself adored the man's wife. "I shall make certain you pay for this treachery. Mark my words, Mrs. Lestrangle, I may die in this duel, but you won't remain unpunished."

* * *

A duel, a duel! The most exciting, the most romantic of episodes to be sure! There is nothing quite like two gentlemen with wands facing each other at dawn to battle over some slight to one's honor. In this case, a lady is involved, and indeed, any pureblood cannot be surprised that it is the beautiful, graceful Mrs. M----. Though This Author hesitates to discuss the particulars of this sordid affair, suffice it to say that Mr. M---- has finally decided to put a stop to his wife's passionate trysts with that dashing debonair, the genius of the Potions laboratory, the Head of the most revered, ancient House, Professor S----! Who shall emerge the victor? Only time will tell...

--Gilda Grindylow's Society Papers, 12 December 1996

A soft knock at the door of his study drew Lucius' thoughts away from the Muggle objects he was busily cursing. "Enter."

Hesitantly, his wife padded across the Oriental carpet toward his desk, shutting the ornately carved door behind her. Settling herself in a buttery leather chair, she spoke quietly: "Lucius, I must know, is it true what you told Severus?" She gazed beseechingly into his face.

"That I intend to kill him? Yes, that's very definitely true, Narcissa."

"Oh, er, yes of course. But I really meant when you told him that you... that you love your wife."

Lucius sighed. "I don't wish to discuss that," he informed her harshly, but his eyes were kind. "I need to look up a few jinxes for the duel tomorrow. I'll speak to you later." He made a gesture of finality with which his wife could not argue.

That evening, as Lucius slowly removed his robes and donned his black silk dressing gown and tugged at the black silk ribbon, letting his hair fall over his shoulders, his feet led him to the connecting door that separated his room from his wife's, and he knocked softly. "Cissa? May I speak with you for a moment?"

Narcissa's footsteps hastened toward the door, and she slowly pulled it open to reveal her surprised face. "Lucius? Are you all right?" Reaching up, she ran her fingers through his soft hair and timidly kissed his hard mouth.

Lucius groaned, pressing her against his body, letting her feel the taut muscles beneath his robe. Though he had never wished to admit it, the effect of his wife's rare beauty was undeniable. "Oh, Merlin, Cissa," he mumbled, tasting the sweet honey of her mouth, "do you know what you do to me?"

Reaching down, Narcissa teasingly stroked the hard length of him. "Oh, I could hazard a guess." She parted the folds of his dressing gown, skimmed her fingers over his smooth skin, and quickly divested him of the garment. At that moment, she realized that her silky nightdress was in a heap at her feet, so she twined her arms around Lucius' neck, pressing her breasts into the fine blond hair on his chest. Her nipples hardened instantly, causing Lucius to smirk.

"Tell me," he murmured huskily into her ear, "all about these trysts with the blood traitor. Was he a good lover? Not nearly as good as me, I assume."

"No, of course not," Narcissa moaned as Lucius lowered himself to the floor and captured her in the most intimate of kisses. "Not even close."

"You're not?" He looked up at her with a wicked gleam in her eye. "Then I must be losing my touch." Sliding his tongue between her wet, hot folds, he began to explore

her, only letting the idea that Snape had done the same bother him slightly.

Clutching her husband's long hair between her manicured fingers, Narcissa gasped, adding, "But... but he was very curious about how we m-make love... and he... oh, gods, Lucius!... used all sorts of sex spells."

Lucius slowly rose to his feet and kissed her on the lips again. "Sex spells? I thought only impotent old men used sex spells. Snape must be lacking for something." Sweeping his wife off the floor, he carried her toward the large, ornately carved bedstead where she had first made love with Snape... and Lucius. He laid her down on the luxurious cotton sheets where the elves had turned the bed down and swiftly covered her body with his own, pushing her thighs apart and abruptly entering her. They made love with wild abandon until they climaxed together and collapsed in a sweaty heap.

When Narcissa awoke the next morning, she found, much to her dismay, that Lucius had already gone, and a chilly breeze filled the vast bedchamber. Wrapping herself in a sheet, the woman rose and walked to the window to gaze out over the countryside. She stood for several minutes, staring at the rolling meadows beyond Malfoy Manor until suddenly a Thestral glided over the hill, carrying none other than her husband, clad in a dark green cloak and a simple silver robe and followed by Rodolphus and Rabastan.

"The duel!" she gasped as she scrambled to find her cloak. "Those idiot bastards!" Dashing into the hallway, as one cannot Apparate out of Lucius' bedroom, she disappeared with a *pop* and seconds later, found herself at the crest of the hill above the meadow.

Lucius and Snape stood a few feet apart, scowling at one another, while Rodolphus conducted the standard dueling procedure. "So," he said grimly, "do you wish to apologize for fucking his wife, Severus?"

"I have nothing to apologize for," sneered Snape. "His wife was an excellent lay."

Lucius' wand arm twitched, but his brother-in-law stilled him. "Just bow and walk twenty paces, the both of you. Then you can hex him, Malfoy."

The men gave each other curt nods and moved the required distance apart, finally drawing their wands. *Sectumsempra!* bellowed Lucius, waving his wand to cut a deep gash in Snape's wand arm.

Raising his injured arm, Snape prepared to cast his retaliation, *Cruc-*

"Noooo!" Narcissa dashed down the hill, shrieking, tripping over her cloak and silk nightgown in a most undignified manner. "Stop!" She flung herself into the middle of the melee.

"What the devil?" muttered Rodolphus. "Cissy! Move!"

"Salazar's blood, woman, are you trying to be killed?" Snape lowered his wand. "Lucius, remove your wife from the dueling field. I want her unharmed for my celebration when I've hexed you into oblivion."

"*Expelliarmus!*" cried Narcissa, jabbing her wand toward Snape, then Lucius. Both the men's wands flew from their hands, and they shot her icy glares. "Now then, if you would stop acting like fools for one moment! Please don't kill one another on my account. I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times: I love Lucius! Even if... please... you mustn't!"

"Cissa." Lucius spoke for the first time. "Please be calm." He strode over to her in a few long strides and clasped her shoulder in his strong fingers. "Do you think Snape a better wizard than I?"

"No, no, of course not, I was just anxious. I'm sorry I slighted your honor, I'm sorry I was unfaithful, I..."

Lucius placed his hand on her other shoulder. "Narcissa, I love you."

"You what?"

"I love you." He bent his head and kissed her softly. "I think I always have... but these past weeks, during your affair with this blood-traitor and some things Bella has said..."

"Oh gods." Narcissa's eyes glowed, and she wrapped her arms around her husband's neck. "Lucius, that's brilliant."

"Excuse me," snapped Snape, "but I take it you withdraw the challenge? Some of us have jobs to return to."

"Yes, and grotty bachelor's lodgings, too," taunted Rodolphus. "Oh... no offense, Rabastan."

"None taken," returned Rabastan cheerily. "You know, this all has me even more dead set against the married state. It's too bad about your lack of an heir, brother."

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about that," Snape muttered in the man's ear as he passed. "I've tampered with Bella's birth control potion. Added a Muggle substance called 'Cool-Aide' or something of the sort."

"Well, you did promise revenge," laughed Rabastan. "Good man, carry on."

Snape continued across the meadow alone to where his horse and Muggle-style coach waited.

Rodolphus Apparated back to Chateau Lestrange to check on his wife, who had felt strangely ill that morning.

Rabastan Apparated to Madame Delamour's House of Earthly Pleasure in Knockturn Alley.

Lucius and Narcissa made their way back up the hillside to Malfoy Manor, hand in hand, silently thanking Bella for her Slytherin cunning.

End Note: This was the first HP fic I ever wrote (I posted it on Pureblood first). I tend to OD on Regency romance, thus the semi-corny ending. Please leave kind reviews!