

Weight of a Constellation

by diabolica

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Author's Notes: This piece fits into the Misbehaviour 'verse, but one need not have read any of those stories to understand this one.

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September

When Narcissa awoke the first time, the room was full of strange light and the susurrant of rain on window glass. A man in black robes stood beside the bed, a white mask in his hand. Half-asleep, she smiled because he carried the scent of her husband, home at last. She breathed out her relief and listened to the sound of his clothing dropping to the floor, the rustle of his body sliding into bed.

Lucius's lips were on the back of her neck, his fingers skimming over her breastbone. 'Oh,' he whispered, 'I have missed you.' Narcissa curled herself around him and let his hands and mouth bury her worries and, later, let the weight of his body beside her anchor her as she drifted back to sleep.

The second time she awoke, it was morning and she was alone, legs tangled in the sheets.

Narcissa dressed quickly and headed for the dining room, where she found her husband already at the table. She dropped a kiss on top of his head before taking the seat across from him. 'Morning,' she said.

Lucius smoothed his hair and shot an affectionate scowl at her. 'Indeed it is. You're late,' he charged.

She blinked, wondering if she had heard correctly, and surveyed the contents of his plate. He appeared to have nearly finished eating, she noted hopefully. Narcissa asked, 'Did we have an appointment?'

Lucius poured her a cup of tea and regarded her with exacting eyes. 'You know what I mean.'

She spread her napkin over her lap and contemplated the tiny bell beside her plate, wondering how long she could plausibly go without ringing it. 'Darling, you've been gone for a week. I'd much rather hear about your trip.' Narcissa inflected the last word, spoken after the tiniest pause, with as much significance as she dared.

'Don't change the subject,' he said, then repeated, 'You know what I mean.'

She knew what he meant. Of course she did. She did not ask how. It was a way he had, of knowing the clockwork of her body better than she knew it herself. His ability to

predict her cycle to the day was leading her to suspect him of being better at Arithmancy than he had ever let on.

'Only by a few days,' she admitted. Ten days, actually. She had been over and over her desk calendar, marking little crosses and adding them up. Lucius smiled, an anticipatory light entering his eyes, and she knew she would have to stall. 'And where have you been for the last week?' she asked, knowing the question was futile, that he could not tell her even if he wanted to.

He acted as if he hadn't heard the question. 'Have you owled Gaia?'

'No,' Narcissa replied. He opened his mouth but, knowing what he meant to ask, Narcissa pre-empted him. 'It's too soon,' she said.

'But this is a good sign, isn't it?' He sounded like he was trying to reason with her, but she could hear the little-boy excitement under the surface of his logic. 'Don't you at least want to know ... one way or the other?'

Of course she wanted to know. But she was also very much afraid and refused to get her hopes up, which was why she could not mention the near imperceptible shift in her centre of gravity that had told her this time was different.

'It's only a few days,' she said. 'It could mean anything. Besides, the timing would be terrible.'

'What do you mean, terrible? When could be better?' asked Lucius, and Narcissa felt the mass of his longing settle on her heart.

She made a last attempt to steer the conversation back to her husband and where he had been. 'We're at war, Lucius. What kind of world is this to bring a child into?'

His eyes narrowed; she knew Lucius would never willingly use the word war in her presence, as if refusing to say it would allay her fears.

He said, 'What of it? The conflict will be over soon. We're almost there, Cissa.'

You've been saying that for three years she wanted to tell him. The darker part of her psyche wanted to ask, *What kind of father disappears for days at a time? What kind of mother lets him?* But the inside of her lip was caught between her teeth, and she could not speak.

'I've been late before,' she reminded him, 'and it came to nothing. Let's just wait and see what happens. There's no reason to get excited yet.' Distracted, she finally rang the little bell beside her plate.

'All right,' Lucius conceded as a peeled, raw apple, sliced into perfect eighths and arranged in a fan shape, appeared on her plate. Narcissa realised her mistake, but it was too late. His eyes moved from the plate to her face; his expression darkened.

They regarded each other for what seemed an interminable moment, then: 'Dobby!' he barked.

The elf appeared with a crack, cowering at Lucius's side. 'Yes, Master?'

Lucius gestured at Narcissa's plate, where the sliced apple lay like an accusation. 'Do you consider this a proper breakfast for your Mistress?' he asked the elf.

Dobby darted a terrified look at Narcissa. Lucius, whose gaze rested on the elf, relentless, did not notice the tiny shake of her head.

'No, Master. Dobby is very, very sorry, Master. Dobby will immediately serve Mistress a proper breakfast and then punish himself severely, Master.' Every sentence was punctuated with a low bow.

'Do that, Dobby,' said Lucius. 'Now.' As soon as the elf Disappeared, Lucius looked at his plate. 'One would think after four years, he would know ...' He rubbed at one eye, fingers tracing the arc of his brow bone. 'Does he do this every time I'm away?' asked Lucius, still not looking at Narcissa.

The apple rearranged itself on her side plate, and four triangles of toast and two poached eggs materialised on the main plate. Narcissa wanted to cry *Dobby's revenge*, she thought. *Mutinous little bastard*. He knew she hated poached eggs. And that she was in no position to contradict him now. Just as well that she had an excellent command of non-verbal vanishing spells.

She managed to sound unconcerned when she answered, 'Hardly ever.'

Lucius raised his eyes to her, revealing the lengths he was forced to go to in order to deceive himself. 'You're too soft on them, darling. If you let them off without punishment when I'm gone, it's that much more difficult for me to impose order when I return.'

She lowered her eyes apologetically, knowing she had no choice. Picking up a triangle of toast, she took a bite as if it were the easiest thing in the world. It practically dripped butter. Oh, that elf had so much to answer for.

Lucius watched her intently for a moment, then, dropping all pretence, he said, 'I thought you were doing better.'

The toast in her mouth turned to chalk and required a long time to swallow. 'I am,' she assured him when she could speak again. 'I'm doing very well. It's just ...' She paused, her mind running over the options left to deflect his attention, resenting him for cornering her and hating herself for the way she was about to manipulate him.

'... I just hate it when you're away.'

October

'You look well today,' she told Father when he met her in the hall. Every time she visited, her parents' home seemed smaller, and her father looked older. His posture now stooped, shoulders hunched, he seemed to be collapsing under his own gravity.

You're lying, his eyes said. His lips told her, 'New robes.'

'Very dashing,' said Narcissa.

Father huffed. 'Your mother orders them. It's not as though I need them.'

'They suit you. You look terribly dapper.'

'Stop trying to flatter me,' he scolded her gently as he offered her his arm.

She walked him to the drawing room, listening to the rattling in his lungs between his sentences, the creaking of his joints *He's barely fifty years old*, she thought. He chose a seat near the window where he could feel the day's unlikely sun and settled, cat-like, in the pool of light. Seated comfortably, he began to resemble his old self.

'I feel cold all the time,' said Father. 'It's these potions your cousin has me taking. They thin my blood.'

Narcissa asked, 'Would you like a blanket?' her hand already reaching for her wand.

'No. What did you bring me?' he asked, like a little boy on his birthday.

'The Prophet,' she teased.

He made a face. 'I despise the Prophet. If any newspaper knows less about what's going on in this country, I've certainly never read it.'

'Well, then, it's a good thing I brought today's *Voix de Magie* as well.'

He grinned. 'Good girl. Read me the front page.'

Narcissa smiled back and read him the headlines, letting him choose which story he wanted to hear first. He closed his eyes to the sun and listened to the sound of her voice as if it could carry him into the light.

When she had reviewed the day's news for him, Father asked, 'How is Lucius?'

'He's fine,' Narcissa responded. 'Just fine.'

Father nodded. 'I suppose he sees a lot of Bella and Rodolphus these days,' he said lightly. This was the closest he ever came to mentioning the Mark that bound almost all her loved ones to each other and to their master. Cygnus Black had always supported the Dark Lord's politics, if not his methods.

Seeing no way around it, she replied, 'He does.'

'See if you can't keep him at home more,' said Father. 'I'd like to meet one of my grandchildren before I die. Merlin knows your sister is in no hurry to oblige me.'

Narcissa hated it when he talked this way. Trying for levity, she told him, 'You're not going to die, Father. It's simply not allowed.'

Father looked her over, as if calculating the likelihood that she would understand his next words. A hectic flush spread over his cheeks; his skin was otherwise the colour of vellum. He said, 'I have dreams in which my parents, my aunts and uncles come to greet me. They shake my hand and invite me to sit; they wonder what's taken me so long. They're all dead, *ma petite*.'

Narcissa blinked hard. 'Stop it. You know it upsets me when you do this.'

'I know, *ma petite*. I'm sorry.'

She swallowed against the tightening in her throat, casting about for something to get him off this topic lest she start to cry. Her mind reached for the other thought that had been weighing on her, and the words tumbled out before she could stop them.

'I think I'm pregnant.'

That got his attention. He raised an eyebrow at her. 'Really? You're sure?'

'Fairly sure.' She almost laughed at herself. 'This is the sort of thing women discuss with their mothers, isn't it? Do you mind?'

He shook his head to indicate it was all right. He asked, 'You haven't told your mother, have you?'

'No. I haven't told anyone. Well, Lucius knows, but not because I told him. He just pays attention.'

Father nodded. 'He's a good man, your Lucius. He takes care of you.' His voice trailed off, his eyes unfocussed. Then he said, 'I would ask you not to tell your Mother anything until you are absolutely sure. She suffered terribly last year ...'

Narcissa nearly choked. '*She* suffered?' She could still remember Mother's exact words, which was why the two of them did not speak for six months afterwards.

'*Tranquille, ma petite*. No one is saying it was easy for you. You suffered; your mother suffered. She was frightened for you. *It was amazing how Father could still make excuses for her*, thought Narcissa, *after everything*. She said nothing, only tracked the progress of the light across the carpet. A moment later Father asked again, 'Are you sure?'

'No,' she lied, 'I'm not.'

'Just wait until you're sure.'

'Of course, Father.' She shook her head and tried to smile. 'I don't know why I said anything.'

He saw through her as he always did. He reached for her hand, his fingers curling around her palm...light, almost insubstantial. 'I do,' he said.

November

Narcissa and Lucius hosted the reception afterwards, as they had the largest house and it seemed half of wizarding Britain was likely to turn up for the funeral. The irony of a send-off for a Black being hosted by the Malfoys was not lost on the attendees. It was hours before they were rid of them all, and Narcissa, who hated hostessing duties more than just about anything, counted every minute. Lucius, cloaked in influence and the appropriate semblance of grief, kept a reassuring hand on the small of her back...*Parasites*, he demurred. *They're only here for the food...*and walked her through it.

She had never been very attached to Uncle Orion, nor were most of the funeral guests, she surmised. The elegy had been given by an Augurer who obviously never knew the man personally. In recounting the life of the deceased, he had used words like 'admirable', 'respected', 'pillar of the community'. Halfway through this drivel, Narcissa found herself wishing that Sirius would show up and make a scene, just to relieve the monotony. During the final prayer for Orion Black to live in the light of eternity, Bella had been overcome by emotion and was forced to excuse herself. Narcissa was probably the only person in attendance who knew the emotion in question was a fit of giggles. The committal was thankfully cut short by rain; the fact that at least four-fifths of the attendees should have been able to cast an Impervius Charm went unremarked.

Despite all of this, Narcissa couldn't help but feel sorry for Aunt Walburga who, at her husband's funeral, had no one but her dying brother to lean on, her sons having disappeared like smoke.

After Lucius had seen the last of the guests off, and Narcissa had kissed her parents' cheeks and sent them home, only Bella and Rodolphus remained. Narcissa sat in the drawing room with Bella, while Lucius and Rodolphus went up to his study to have a cigar.

Bella stirred from her armchair and looked at Narcissa. 'What a day. I need a drink. Desperately. What do you have?'

'Everything,' Narcissa said, waving a preoccupied hand in the direction of the bar. 'Shall I call you an elf?'

'No, your elves mix wretched drinks. Anyway, I need something to do.' Bella rummaged around behind the bar, coming up with a heavy blue bottle and a tumbler. A flick of her wand and Narcissa heard the ring of ice against glass. 'What are you having?' asked Bella.

Narcissa smelt limes and alcohol; she worried she might be sick. It took a moment before Bella's question registered. 'Pardon? Oh. Nothing for me, thanks.'

'What do you mean, nothing for you? Our dear uncle is dead, may he rot in hell. Have a glass of wine at least. Would you like something sparkling?' she asked, levitating a dusty green bottle and examining the label.

Narcissa leaned her head against the chair back. Her eyelids felt leaden. 'No, thank you,' she said.

'What?' Bella joked. 'You're not pregnant, are you?'

Narcissa's head snapped up.

Bella inhaled sharply; her eyes widened. 'You are! I was kidding. But you are.'

Narcissa was still processing the speed with which her sister had come to this conclusion when Bella said, 'I cannot believe it. My sister is going to bear the spawn of a Malfoy.' Drink in hand, she folded herself into her chair, as if Narcissa had done something shocking that required her to sit down.

'What is that supposed to mean, Bella? *I am a Malfoy now.*'

'You're still a Black,' pronounced Bella, gesturing pointedly with her glass. 'I can't believe you're pregnant,' she muttered.

Incredulous, Narcissa said, 'We've been married four years; it was bound to happen eventually.'

'Still.' Bella sipped her drink. 'Better you than me, I suppose.'

And this is why it's down to me thought Narcissa. Bella having no interest and Regulus having vanished, who but she was left to carry on the family line? The Black family tapestry was disintegrating, fragments of a constellation slowly winking out of existence.

'We are not having this conversation,' Narcissa snapped, then reconsidered. 'And what happened to "congratulations"? Or "I'm so happy for you"? Sisters are supposed to say these things to each other.'

Bella's lower lip jutted out thoughtfully. 'Are they?'

'Yes,' declared Narcissa.

Bella shook her head, as if sceptical of this information. 'Does Mother know?' she enquired.

'No. And she doesn't need to know yet.'

Bella lifted her chin to confirm her complicity. 'Wise choice.'

'I don't want her expectations ... weighing me down.' Narcissa felt suddenly inarticulate, as she often did when discussing her mother. 'I just want to carry this baby in peace for a while. For as long as I can.'

'Are you eating?' asked Bella.

Narcissa looked daggers at her sister. 'Pardon?' she asked, her tone suggesting imminent violence.

Bella switched tacks. 'No. I mean, you're taking care of yourself, I trust?'

'Of course I am.'

'I'm simply ... concerned. As sisters are supposed to be, so I'm told.'

'Thank you. I'm fine.' Narcissa had been following Gaia's dietary guidelines to the letter, though the amount of food she was required to consume seemed extreme, and some mornings she couldn't help scrutinising her reflection in the bathroom mirror longer than Lucius thought prudent. But the number of days was increasing when the added weight felt less like a burden and more like ... ballast, and she was determined that there would be no surprises this time around, if only because she could not give Mother another chance to say *I told you so*.

'I'm better than fine, actually,' declared Narcissa. 'Or I would be if ... well, you know.'

'I know,' Bella agreed. 'Father looks terrible.'

'He does. Quintus says he hasn't got long. You should go and see him more often. He asks about you, as does Mother.'

Bella studied the arm of her chair, avoiding Narcissa's eyes. 'I see him whenever I have the time.'

When his Lordship can spare you, you mean Narcissa wanted to say. Bella drew such importance from her position, Narcissa knew, that even family had begun to fade from her priorities. If Narcissa were honest with herself, niggling suspicions about Bella's work for the Dark Lord troubled her. There were things Narcissa could have asked her sister, things like *Uncle Orion didn't die of an infarct, did he?* or *Where is Regulus, really?* But those were doors she would rather not open.

To smooth things over, Narcissa said, 'I nearly choked when the Augurer started going on about Uncle Orion's charitable works.'

'It was awfully rich,' said Bella. She sipped her drink and then pointed her wand at the table beside Narcissa's chair. A champagne flute appeared. Narcissa picked it up with a surreptitious sniff: sparkling water.

Bella raised her glass. 'To the next of the Blacks.'

'The next of the *Malfoys*,' Narcissa corrected her, raising her own glass in a toast.

Making a show of looking resigned, Bella asked, 'It amounts to the same thing, doesn't it? Cheers.'

Narcissa nodded as they clinked glasses, a smile playing at her lips because her sister was right. She had been scanning the night sky for weeks and had already thought of at least one name that would befit both a Black and a Malfoy.

Tomorrow she might share it with Lucius.