

Watchers of the Skies

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A story about roads taken and not taken

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Chapter 1 of 1

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A/N: This story is one of the first few HP fanfics I wrote, for the first Femmfest (2009) on LJ. It's clearly an early work, but I think it holds up. Thanks for reading!

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"Then felt I like some watcher of the skies

When a new planet swims into his ken."

--John Keats, "On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer"

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Lily

I never knew why she chose that day or that place to talk to me. She had been gone from Hogwarts for five years by then, and I don't suppose I had given her a thought since she'd left.

I knew who she was, of course. Everyone knew Narcissa Black, even those of us who'd been gawky second-year Gryffindors when she had been the most elegant seventh-year girl in Slytherin. Well, in all the Houses, come to that.

Yes, we all knew that porcelain skin, that white-blond hair, that aristocratic pureblood nose. That unquestioning belief in her own loveliness, in her power over anyone she chose. She never expected not to get her way, and, so, of course, she did.

She certainly had her way with me. As I suppose I did with her.

"Lily Evans," she said, sitting down at my table in the Three Broomsticks.

It was a sunny Saturday in the September of my seventh year. Seventh-years were allowed to go into Hogsmeade on any weekend; we didn't have to wait for the official school trips. I had come by myself that day because I needed to think.

It felt like everything had been going pear-shaped lately: I couldn't sort out my feelings about James Potter, and poor Remus always looked so sick, and Severus...oh, god, Severus. He seemed more and more lost to me every day, hanging out with those unspeakable Slytherin bullies, reading all those evil books in the Restricted Section of

the library. Every time I saw him, he was mocking something or jeering at someone. He sneered all the time now, even at me.

And then there was this Dark Lord, Voldemort...he was getting stronger and stronger. Every day, we heard more reports of mysterious deaths and more stories about the persecution of mixed-bloods. There was going to be a war; everyone said so, even Dumbledore, or so I heard. The subject of Voldemort and purebloods was one of the few things that could make even James be serious; I'd heard him arguing with some Ravenclaws and Slytherins about the Ministry's proposed new blood laws.

I didn't know what to do. About anything. So I was just sitting there in the Three Broomsticks, holding a butterbeer but not drinking it, and suddenly she was there, too, pulling out a chair, saying my name, an odd half-smile on her pale face.

"Lily Evans."

"Narcissa Black," I said.

"You remember me." It wasn't a question; I'm sure it would never have occurred to her that someone might *not* remember her. "You're a seventh-year now?" she asked, which surprised me; I certainly didn't think she'd remember me well enough to know my year. She'd never spoken a word to me during her Hogwarts days; I'm not sure she ever even looked my way.

"That's right," I replied. What did she want?

"It's a gorgeous day," Narcissa said, stretching her thin arms above her head. "Much too nice to spend cooped up in that grim old castle. I used to escape as often as I could, too."

Was she making fun of me? "I'm not trying to escape Hogwarts," I said. "I like it."

I wasn't lying. It wasn't the school I was trying to escape, just some of the people and problems in it. But I wasn't about to explain any of this to a toffee-nosed Slytherin, especially not one who probably thought she was dirtying herself just by talking to a mudblood like me.

Narcissa looked at me, her lovely head tilted, that half-smile back on her face. "I don't believe you," she said softly.

It shouldn't have mattered to me whether she believed me or not, but I protested anyway. "I do love Hog..."

She waved these words away. "Oh, I'm sure you do. But don't tell me you're not trying to escape something. Or someone. I see it in your face. You look just the way I used to."

I was angry now. "I don't have to tell you anything. Why do you even care..."

She didn't react, just kept looking at me with that smile. It was getting on my nerves. "I think you should leave now," I said, too loudly, glaring at her.

Her smile deepened and lit up her face. There was nothing bloodless and ethereal about her now; for the first time, she seemed like a real, feeling person to me. Then to my shock, she reached out and touched my cheek.

"It was good to see you...Lily." Standing, she pushed her fair hair over her shoulder with a one graceful finger and headed towards the door. Just before she left, she turned and said, "Perhaps you'll be here again next week."

I kept myself sitting as tall as I could until she was out of sight; it was some Gryffindor instinct, I suppose, not to appear anything less than stalwart in the presence of an enemy. Which of course she was...how could a pureblood Slytherin be anything else to a mudblood Gryffindor?

But once the door shut behind her, I slumped back in the chair. What was this all about? Why had she talked to me? Why had she smiled so genuinely and, if I were honest, beautifully at me? And seemed so sympathetic and understanding?

What did she want?

What I said before was true: in the five years since Narcissa Black had finished at Hogwarts, I hadn't given her a minute's thought.

But in the week that followed our meeting in the pub, there weren't many minutes when *didn't* think about her.

Narcissa

She couldn't have said what prompted her to talk to the mudblood, and a Gryffindor mudblood at that. She was surprised she'd even remembered the girl's name.

No, that wasn't true. Narcissa Black twisted her pretty lips and shook a mental finger at herself. She wasn't being honest, and her own head was the one place where she tried to be. She *had* remembered the girl. Remembered the brightness of her hair and eyes. The spark of her personality. The bold way she had openly befriended a Slytherin boy, greasy little nonentity though he was.

Vivid. That's what Lily Evans had been, even as a child. And that's what she was now, grown up.

Narcissa was not vivid and had no desire to be so. As cool and fair and serene as Lily's namesake...that was how Narcissa saw herself. Like a splash of quicksilver, something liquid but metal, strong and self-contained, with a shimmer that everyone wanted to touch, but no one really could.

She knew exactly what her life was going. Her path had been chosen. Everything was planned; everything was set. She was going to marry pureblood Lucius Malfoy...their families had finalised the engagement only the day before she saw Lily. She would bear him an heir, and she would be the lady of Malfoy Manor, and Lucius would assume a Malfoy's rightful place of power in the wizarding world.

And if some of his associates were a little...dangerous, well...

Narcissa liked danger.

So she'd smiled at vivid mudblood Lily and said, "Perhaps you'll be here again next week."

Lily

I had no intention of returning to the Three Broomsticks on the following Saturday. None.

I didn't have time to be running into Hogsmeade. For one thing, I had agreed to go out to dinner with James Potter that night, and I wasn't at all sure it was a smart thing to do. But he'd really cleaned up his act in the last few months; said he'd got tired of "mucking things up" with me.

And it's true, he had been a lot kinder lately, less arrogant. Maybe that's what Dumbledore expected would happen when he made James Head Boy. But would it last? Once a toerag, always a toerag, that's what I was afraid of. Still, when he asked me to please give him a chance to prove how much he'd changed, I hated to say no. I'm all for second chances; how else will I ever make things right with Petunia and Severus?

And James did seem to be making a real effort: he'd even gone to Professor McGonagall to get official permission for us to leave the grounds in the evening, instead of just

sneaking off the way he normally would.

So I had no reason to go haring off to Hogsmeade at all, let alone go there for the chance to...what? Talk to ice princess Narcissa Black in a pub where I was sure to see someone I knew?

But then again, so what if I did see someone I knew? I wouldn't be doing anything unusual...just talking to a Hogwarts old girl. No matter what that Dark Lord wanted, there was no law against my talking to a pureblood, even if she was a Slytherin. No law yet, anyway.

And James Potter needn't think that I was going to spend my entire day getting ready for a date with him, either. I could certainly go into Hogsmeade in the afternoon if I felt like it.

So that's what I did.

Lily

She hadn't been there waiting for me, of course she hadn't. I knew without being told that Narcissa Black wasn't the sort of person to wait for anyone; she'd make them wait for her.

But I told myself I was *not* waiting for her. I was just enjoying another pleasant afternoon in the village, sitting at a sunlit table in the Broomsticks, having a refreshing butterbeer. If Narcissa Black chose to come in and sit with me, that was entirely up to her.

Her white-gold hair gleamed long and straight over her shoulders as she slid into the chair across from me.

"Lily," she said, again with that half-smile. She touched my hand so lightly that I wouldn't have been sure she'd even made contact...had it not been for the way my skin tingled where her fingers had been. I wondered if she'd used some sort of magic; I could feel a little jolt all the way to my chest.

We didn't talk much. She just sat there with a rather distant look on her face, and I was having a hard time thinking of anything to say. Finally I offered to get her a butter beer.

"That's sweet," she said with a laugh, and I could feel myself flush. I didn't like being patronized.

"I'm not sweet," I snapped.

She lifted her hair languidly and let it slip through her fingers like a cascade of cream. "Oh, dear, I've offended you. Please forgive me. I meant that *butterbeer* is sweet...too sweet for me, I'm afraid. But thank you."

Then she looked at me with a glint in her pale eyes. Leaning forward slightly, she whispered, "I prefer a different sort of flavour entirely."

She touched my cheek again and was gone. Without a word about being there next week.

I was relieved. Mostly.

Narcissa

Aloud, Narcissa would have denied being surprised that Lily had returned. To herself, of course, she admitted that she hadn't been completely certain that the other girl would appear; nor was she quite sure she even wanted her to. The mudblood unsettled her. Not in a bad way, true, but she unsettled her all the same. And Narcissa wasn't used to feeling in less than complete control.

That's mostly why she herself had gone back: she wanted to prove to herself that Lily Evans had no effect on her, that the previous week had been an aberration, a delayed reaction, perhaps, to the completion of the betrothal negotiations.

So she went to the Three Broomsticks, and she touched the Mudblood again with just the briefest of contacts...and she didn't know if she was pleased or not pleased to feel the same charge she had felt the week before, like a sparkle in her blood. If the girl had been a Slytherin, Narcissa might have suspected Dark magic, a controlling spell of some sort, but Lily was an oh-so-noble Gryffindor, someone unable to see that candour and stupidity were often the same thing, someone who thought that a heart worn on one's sleeve was somehow a badge of honour.

Narcissa tried to laugh at her, but Lily's green eyes flashed, and she tossed the dark red hair, and Narcissa found herself apologising. Not a serious apology, of course. But still, she offered it.

And then she decided to unsettle Lily, too. Just to even the scales a bit. So she whispered something that she hoped would be disconcerting. "I prefer a different sort of flavor entirely."

She didn't mean anything by it. Nothing at all. Nothing.

Narcissa left the pub in a swirl of ice-blue robes and satiny hair. She knew she would not come back.

But she did. They both did, and soon they were meeting every week, the pale Slytherin and the vibrant Gryffindor, sometimes in Hogsmeade, but more often further afield. Narcissa would Apparate them to Edinburgh or London, and they would wander the streets until they found smoky, anonymous little restaurants where they could sit and talk or, more frequently, sit and not talk.

Their only commonalities were a mutual distrust that sometimes flared into outright hostility and a mutual feeling of something else that neither would name, an alluring sensation that always made Lily think of showers of silver sparks from a wand and made Narcissa think of the jet of pure green light that was the Killing Curse. The most powerful curse of all.

Then came the evening when their light touches deepened, and their accidental brushes of arm and hip became purposeful, and when Narcissa suggested visiting the flat of an old Slytherin friend who was out of town, Lily did not say no.

It was dusk when they arrived; the flat was dim and hushed, and all seemed sepia-toned. Lily felt as if she had stepped into an old-fashioned Muggle photograph, and Narcissa thought of her curtained childhood bed, where she would sit concealed on long summer days, the afternoon sunlight diffused as it came through the russet hangings, turning the bedspace into its own copper-warm world.

They didn't speak as they headed to the bedroom or as Narcissa waved alight a candle or two, the flames just bright enough to add a golden edge to her pale skin and to bring out the auburn gleam of Lily's hair.

Their first kiss was feather-light and then it was deep, and each felt at first only surprise: Lily at the heat of the ice-princess's skin; Narcissa at the sweet softness of the Mudblood's lips.

"I'm going to marry Lucius Malfoy," Narcissa whispered as she slid Lily's cape from her shoulders.

"I know." Lily fumbled with the elaborate clasp of Narcissa's grey cloak. "I'm going to marry, too," she said. "James Potter"...although she may not have said that last out loud.

The pale pink of Narcissa's nipples faded imperceptibly into the ivory of her breasts, while Lily's dark areolas contrasted sharply with her own milky skin, but there was no difference in the soft electricity they both felt as they pressed their bodies together and traced nervous, eager fingers down each other's backs and thighs, no difference in the way their already-anxious hearts fluttered as the scent of arousal filled the air, no difference in the wondering pleasure with which each touched another woman's smooth wetness for the first time.

Then they felt like watchers of the skies, at once explorer and explored, each discovered and discovering, mapped by the other's stroking hands.

When, later, Narcissa whispered from the crook of Lily's neck that they could not do this again, Lily agreed.

There could be only one first time, and they would not meet again.

Or so they told themselves.

Lily

It was a blustery, cold Saturday in December, just the sort of day that made people want to stay inside close to the fireplace, and I hoped that I'd be able to set off for Hogsmeade unnoticed. But I'd been having a harder and harder time getting away from James and the rest of the boys. Now that James and I were spending more time together...he really had changed, no matter what Severus thought...they'd started to notice that I disappeared for a few hours every weekend.

"Why are you being so secretive?" James asked that day as he and Sirius followed me out of the Great Hall after lunch. "Why can't you just tell me what's up?"

"Why can't you tell *me* what's up with you two and Pettigrew and Lupin every month?" I countered, which shut him up, but only for a minute.

"I think I fancy a trip into Hogsmeade myself, Black, don't you?" he said, turning to Sirius. "Come on, let's get our cloaks and..."

"Don't be silly. I know full well you've got detention with Filch in ten minutes," I protested.

Yes, all right, James hadn't totally reformed. Being made Head Boy couldn't completely change the leopard's spots, I suppose. But he was much better this year. Really.

"We're skiving off, aren't we, Pads?" James said airily. "We..."

"Mr Black? Mr Potter?" It was Professor McGonagall at her most imperious, and for once that Scottish Voice of Doom sounded to me like the sweetest lullaby. "You gentlemen haven't forgotten this afternoon's detention, I trust?" She swept down on them like some green-robed bird of prey.

I smiled at her and got out of her way, and when I glanced back, James and Sirius were being marched towards the dungeons. "I must say, Mr Potter, I expected better of a Head Boy," the professor was saying as she drove them before her.

In another second, I was out the door and thinking it served them right.

So I was safely on my own for next three hours at least. And after this week, putting off James and Sirius wasn't going to be a problem.

Because this was the day I planned to tell Narcissa Black that I wasn't going to meet with her again. Not after today.

Not after this one last time.

Lily

The little episode with James and Sirius and McGonagall meant that I got to the Three Broomsticks later than usual. Narcissa was already there, and she was talking to an intense, pale young woman with hooded eyes and inky black hair.

Or rather, the black-haired woman was talking to *her*. Narcissa sat with her eyes cast down, saying nothing as the other lectured her, often stabbing her finger into Narcissa's arm for emphasis.

I stopped in the pub's little anteroom, not wanting to intrude, but I did anyway, by accident. From where I stood tucked in among hanging cloaks, the hiss of the dark woman's voice came to me clearly. I could even see them both once I arranged the cloaks just right.

"...what the *hell* you're playing at, Cissy? Out with some mudblood Gryffindor, the two of you sitting together in public like some common..."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Narcissa's voice was so low I could hardly hear it.

"Rodolphus saw you! He said you were...you were touching the mudblood's hand!" The woman swallowed hard, as if she were forcing back bile. "What if it had been someone from Lucius's family who'd seen you? They could break the betrothal, and who would blame them?"

"It's none of your business, Bella." Narcissa still spoke quietly, but she didn't seem frightened. She seemed to be used to standing up to this Bella.

Her eyes burning with rage, Bella grabbed Narcissa's wrist and twisted it. "It's the entire family's business. Not to mention our lord's. I know who that girl is, Cissy...your little mudblood. She's friends with that James Potter, the one who's been spreading propaganda at Hogwarts against our master."

"That's nothing to do with me," said Narcissa, jerking out of Bella's grasp.

The black-haired woman took a deep breath, obviously trying to calm herself. "I don't know what you think you're doing, little sister, and I don't really care to know. *Bytōu* need to know this: you are not going to embarrass our parents or the Malfoy family. And you will never *dare* upset our master. You will behave properly, and you will start by never speaking to this mudblood girl again."

She sounded so menacing that I slid my wand out, although I was sure I'd be no match for her. She was powerful, I could tell; she just radiated magic. But we needed some protection, and it wasn't as if I could hide myself; I'd never been able to cast a Disillusionment charm.

Then to my amazement, Narcissa laughed. "Oh, I'll behave, will I? Or else what?"

"Or else," said Bella, speaking carefully. "I will ensure that you are not allowed to leave the house until you're safely married to Lucius."

Narcissa scoffed. "And just how do you think you could manage that?"

"I will tell Mother that Minerva McGonagall seduced you while you were at Hogwarts. And that you're still seeing her and still fucking her. And I will prove it by showing Mother these."

She handed her sister what appeared to be two photographs. I couldn't see what they were pictures of, and I was glad. Not that I really thought Bella could be telling the truth about Narcissa and the professor. It was...No.

No. McGonagall and a student? It was just *not* possible. The world was *not that* screwed up.

All the same, I suddenly felt hot and sick, and I just wanted to get out of that pub. My meetings with Narcissa had been important to me; they had been...not fun, exactly...more like addicting, but they weren't worth this. I didn't need this Bella woman on my trail. She was twisted, I could feel it. "Dark" didn't begin to describe her.

Her eyes looked even more hooded now, and her pale face was split into a grimace that she seemed to intend as a smile. It was scary to see how much she was enjoying this. "If you fuck things up with the Malfoys, those photos will go to the tabloids, too," Bella said. "One way or another, I'll stop you and your mudblood, Narissa. And I'll take McGonagall down, too. As a bonus. Don't think I won't."

"Those pictures are fake. No one will believe them."

Now Bella was the one who laughed. "Do you want to take the risk? Fake or real, a lot of people won't care. They'll just enjoy the scandal. Mud sticks, little sister. And so does mudblood."

I was just about to give the Disillusionment charm a try and see if I could sneak out unnoticed when Narcissa stood up and shrugged into her cloak. "All right, Bella," she said. "You win. I don't care about the mudblood, anyway."

I noticed she hadn't returned the photographs to her sister, and Bella noticed, too. This time, her grin might have been appealingly impish if her eyes hadn't been burning so intensely.

"Go ahead, keep the pictures if they arouse you," she said. "I have copies. I can send them by owl to Mother and Dumbledore any time. Or to the *Wizard Weekly Sun*."

"I *said* you win." I'd never heard Narcissa speak so sharply. "Let's get out of here."

She stalked towards the back door of the Three Broomsticks, and after a moment, her sister followed, her face ablaze with triumph.

"Have you been stood up, love?" It was Madam Rosmerta, a sympathetic look on her face. She always took a personal interest in students' love lives. "I'll give that James Potter a piece of my mind when next I see him, if you like."

"No!" I said. I spoke too loudly, I think, so I tried to cover up. "No, um. . .that's all right. Thanks. It wasn't James. I...I was just supposed to meet a girlfriend."

"Ah," said Rosmerta comfortably, dismissing the "girlfriend" as no problem. "You'll get back to school and find she got held up talking to a boy she fancies. You mark my words."

"Yes, I'm sure," I said. "Good-bye, Madam Rosmerta. Have a good evening."

"Ta, love," she said, already heading towards a back table full of rowdy warlocks.

Outside, the street was deserted; the Black sisters were nowhere to be seen.

I knew I would never see Narcissa again, not as we had been. And I was weak with relief. I really was.

Narcissa

She offered no protest when Bella Apparated home with her and told their parents that she would stay for dinner, since she and Cissy had wedding plans to discuss.

The evening was uneventful. No one watching Narcissa at dinner, eating her usual little with her usual languid grace, would have sensed anything amiss with her. And even Bellatrix, following her to her room afterward, wasn't able to shake her seeming placidity. Cissy just rolled elegant pale eyes towards the ceiling when Bella tried to renew her earlier threats.

"Let it go, Belle. I told you...it's over. She didn't mean anything in the first place, the mudblood; it was just something different to pass the time. She turned out to be fairly boring, actually. And now that Lucius is back from his business trip, or whatever it was, I have more interesting things to do."

Bella tossed her black mane and stared at Cissy consideringly. Finally she nodded. "All right. I hope you're not lying, but be assured, I'll soon know if you are."

Idly, she lifted a lock of Narcissa's hair and ran it gently through her fingers. "But next time you want a bit of rough, little sister," she said, pulling the hair more tightly, "don't even think of finding it with some mudblood." She twisted the white-blond strands until she saw tears start to Cissy's eyes. "You don't want to find out just how much power I have."

"I'm not afraid of you, Bella," Narcissa said calmly.

Bellatrix yanked the hair viciously and smiled when her sister cried out. "You should be," she said.

Narcissa

Taking up with Lily Evans had been foolish from the start. Narcissa knew this. All right, it had been more than foolish. It had been dangerously stupid. Bella was right: Narcissa had been mad to jeopardize her future with Lucius and her place in the new pure-world order that Bella and so many others were working so diligently to establish. Looking for thrills with mudbloods was nowhere near worth the risk. Cissy agreed with her sister completely.

All the same, she had lied to Bellatrix. She was afraid of her.

And she *did* intend to see the not-at-all-boring Lily once more.

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The note came by owl, an ordinary owl that flew into the Great Hall in the ordinary owl-post way. The scrap of parchment contained just a date and time and the words "the flat."

Even when Lily applied for permission to go into Hogsmeade on a weeknight, she didn't really intend to keep the appointment. She was *not* going to go; she told herself so over and over. Not until she actually stood at the Portkey did she admit what she had known almost from the moment the owl had arrived: she wouldn't miss this meeting for the world.

When she arrived at the building, Narcissa was already there. As before, they entered the flat silently. This time it was dark and rather cold, and Cissy wanded a fire into the fireplace.

They stood, awkward and apart, in front of the flames.

"I saw you with your sister at the Broomsticks," Lily said finally, more to break the silence than to communicate.

Narcissa nodded, the firelight halving her hair. "I know. That's why I went out the other door."

"You told your sister you would stop seeing me."

"Yes."

"So why are we here?"

Cissy lifted a lazy shoulder. "I tell my sister a lot of things. They aren't all true."

"Is it true about McGonagall?" Lily rather surprised herself by asking. She knew it wasn't true; *it couldn't* be true.

"Of course not. That's just Bella's little joke."

"Her *joke*?"

Narcissa shrugged again. "She hates McGonagall because McGonagall didn't let her get away with much at school. And because McGonagall's a blood traitor...that is, I mean, in Bella's opinion, she is. And because I liked the professor, and she liked me. I was good at Transfiguration, you know."

Lily was shocked. "And your sister would destroy McGonagall's career and jeopardize your marriage? Just for that?"

When Narcissa spoke, her voice was almost admiring. "There's something you should know about Bellatrix: she holds grudges."

She smiled into Lily's green eyes and reached out to touch her, but Lily pulled back. "Aren't you afraid of being a blood traitor?" she snapped.

"I'm not my sister, Lily." But Narcissa lowered her hand.

"I...I'm sorry," Lily said, without being sure she was. "We can't keep on like this, though."

"No," Cissy agreed.

The fire crackled into their silence. Narcissa extinguished the flames with a wave of her wand, and in the brief moment of darkness between their dying and her softly-whispered "*Lumos*," she kissed Lily lightly.

They went outside together and parted ways in the road, each taking a different direction, watched only by the distant stars above their heads.

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Many years later, those same stars looked down impassively upon Narcissa Malfoy as she knelt in a dark forest next to the body of a green-eyed boy, a boy whose life she spared so that she could rescue her son.

But it was not solely for her own child's sake that she saved Lily Potter's.