

# A Problem Shared

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*Chapter 1 of 1*

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For the millionth time since last summer, Narcissa Malfoy wished her husband was home with her instead of in Azkaban. Especially since the people actually here with her were her sister Bellatrix and her brothers-in-law Rodolphus and Rabastan the chosen few who knew of the Dark Lord's plan to murder Albus Dumbledore. And the Dark Lord himself was actually sitting at her dining table! The only thing stopping Narcissa losing her head completely was the presence of Severus Snape. Although he hadn't looked at or spoken to her since she'd opened the door to him, the fact that he had Vowed to help Draco gave her the courage to get through this afternoon.

Lord Voldemort's voice cut through the oppressive silence in the Banqueting Hall. 'I have called you here, my faithful servants, to hear of Draco's progress so far,' he glanced at Snape, who inclined his head, 'and,' his eyes moved to Narcissa, who quailed, 'to discuss what needs to happen next.' Turning back to Snape, he leaned his elbows on the table and steepled his fingers in a gesture eerily reminiscent of Dumbledore. 'Report. How is Draco faring?'

'He is resistant, my lord. I have offered my help on several occasions, and it has been rejected. He seems to feel accepting my help would diminish him in your lordship's eyes. I will, however, persevere.'

'I see,' said Voldemort, and his voice turned still colder. 'It seems Draco needs... encouragement. Perhaps if I were to move in here, Draco might be persuaded of my desire for him to succeed in his task.' His snake-like eyes bored into Narcissa, who understood that he meant to hold her hostage for her son's success.

Forcing her dry mouth to work, she said, 'I would be honoured, my lord.'

'In that case, I shall inspect my new home. Starting with,' and, for the first time ever, Lord Voldemort looked faintly embarrassed, 'the facilities.'

Narcissa sprang to open the door. 'Of course, my lord.' As she ushered him up the stairs, she lowered her voice to tell him, 'Second door on the left, my lord.'

Reluctantly, she went back to the Hall where Bellatrix was looking daggers at Snape, he was regarding her with cool indifference, and Rodolphus and Rabastan were looking like the first person to open their mouth would get a smack on the jaw. All Narcissa's smooth hostess skills deserted her. Offering yet more elf-made wine didn't seem like a good idea with tempers running high, even though she herself could do with some Dutch courage. She sat, twisting her wedding ring round and round her finger while the stand-off continued, and was just considering making tea nobody wanted simply to escape into the kitchen, when the tension was cut by a blood-curdling scream from overhead.

Everyone jumped up as if their chairs had been electrified, and as one they charged up the stairs, to be met by the most incredible sight. Lord Voldemort, the most feared Dark wizard ever, was cowering against the wall, and advancing on him, the weak, guttering candlelight flashing off his spectacles, was James Potter. Bellatrix let out a shriek, Rodolphus and Rabastan stared stupidly, and Snape's face became strangely blank.

Narcissa clapped her hand over her mouth. She realised what must have happened. In the Dementor-induced gloom (which pervaded the Manor just as it did the rest of the country), Voldemort had become disorientated and opened the door of the airing cupboard instead of the bathroom. Malfoy Manor being several hundred years old, there

were many dark corners and antique cupboards, sideboards and wardrobes, which frequently became infested with Boggarts.

Even as Narcissa stifled her gasp, Voldemort choked out '*Riddikulus*'; and James Potter turned into Bertha Jorkins. The Death Eaters looked on aghast as Bertha became Fabian Prewett, Gideon Prewett, Emmeline Vance, all of whom advanced steadily, menacingly on the whimpering Dark Lord.

Calmly capable, Snape aimed his wand at the Boggart, which exploded.

With the disappearance of his tormentor, Voldemort seemed to regain his composure, and for the first time realised he was not alone. His snake-like face turned coldly furious, and he pointed imperiously at Narcissa. 'Go and find another Boggart,' he commanded. 'Now that you have intruded upon my fears, you will each show me yours.' He glared around, daring anyone to contradict him.

'Master,' burst out Bellatrix, 'we had no thought of intruding. We simply wished to help!'

'Enough! I do not need *help*! You.' He turned on Narcissa again. 'Go!'

She hurried off to search the Manor, leaving behind a far more loaded silence than there had been downstairs. Minutes passed, and the Death Eaters stood awkwardly on the landing, none of them meeting the others' eyes.

Once again, the impasse was broken by a desperate wail; once again, they followed the sound, this time to their hostess's dressing-room, where they found her kneeling on the floor in front of the wardrobe, cradling her dead son in her arms. Her sister, her brothers-in-law and Snape rushed forward.

'Stop!' They pulled up short at the fury in the Dark Lord's voice. 'Do not crowd it. I will not have it confused!' The others backed away nervously.

'Get up, Narcissa,' said Voldemort coldly. He was fully in control now that it was others being humiliated and terrorised rather than him, and as Narcissa laid Draco's body to the carpet, and slowly, shakily got to her feet, he turned a disapproving face to her. 'Then you don't believe Draco is up to the job?' he sneered. Narcissa didn't answer, just backed away, closer to Snape, her eyes never leaving her son's body.

'Rodolphus, forward!'

Bellatrix's husband crept to the centre of the room, looking terrified. With a pop, Draco's corpse turned into the last thing any of the others would have expected a child's doll. An antique china doll, with sharp white teeth and staring eyes, true, but still an inanimate and harmless object. Rabastan began to laugh wheezily at his brother, who squeaked '*Riddikulus*!' The Victorian doll turned into a clown, and Rodolphus squawked in renewed terror.

Ignoring this, Voldemort said lazily, 'Snape. Let us see whether you, too, have less courage than a mere child.'

Snape walked forward, carefully avoiding the sobbing Rodolphus cowering on the floor. His mind was in a whirl. There was no way he could reveal what his Boggart turned into. Ever since he had discovered how Lord Voldemort had taken Trelawney's prophecy, his worst fear had been the death of Lily Evans. The fact that Lily was now dead did nothing to change the form of his Boggart. Once, he had found one under his bed at Hogwarts. When Dumbledore had discovered him, he had been inarticulate with grief, curled up beside his bed with the love of his life cold in his arms. Thank Merlin it had been Albus who had found him. It would have been impossible to explain, otherwise.

But now, it would be downright dangerous for the assembled company to see that. Severus thought furiously. He had no idea whether Occlumency would work on a Boggart, but it was his only chance. Taking a deep breath, he shut his eyes and concentrated on something for which there could be a plausible explanation. When he opened them, he exhaled in relief. It had worked. Albus Dumbledore was advancing on him, a look of utter disappointment on his face.

'Snape!' Voldemort's voice was a menacing hiss. 'Why should you be afraid of that doddering old fool?'

'Because, my lord,' replied Snape calmly, 'if he should ever learn that I work for you, and that my repentance was sham, I should no longer be able to spy on him, Hogwarts or the Order of the Phoenix.'

'I see. At least you do not disgrace the title of Death Eater. Well, I do not think you will need to worry about Dumbledore for much longer. Will he, Narcissa?' Not even bothering to see the effect of his veiled threat, he motioned to Bellatrix, who darted forward, eager to obey her master.

A shocked gasp issued from every throat. There, on the floor, lay The Dark Lord himself.

Dead.

There was a horrified silence.

The living Voldemort took a step towards Bellatrix. 'How dare you,' he hissed. 'I am immortal!'

'My lord! I meant no disrespect! I am your lordship's most devoted servant. Without you, my life would have no meaning!'

'Your fear has no meaning,' shrieked Voldemort, reaching for his wand. 'I cannot die! I cannot be killed! I AM IMMORTAL!'

Narcissa grabbed her sister by the shoulders and swung her around. 'How dare you berate me for disloyalty to The Dark Lord, when you are guilty of the greatest treachery possible?'

*'If I had sons, I would be glad to give them up to the service of the Dark Lord,'* screamed Bellatrix hysterically, turning the argument to her advantage.

'And if *my* husband were here, he would not be afraid of a child's toy!'

'If your husband were here, that would mean he had not failed us last spring!'

Having no answer to this, Narcissa simply drew back her hand and smacked her sister in the face, Bellatrix responded by grabbing her hair, and the next moment both women were rolling on the floor like a couple of wildcats.

Rabastan, meanwhile, was roaring at his brother, 'Call yourself a Death Eater? You're a disgrace! I'm ashamed to call you brother!'

'You weren't exactly rushing to tackle the Boggart. What are you afraid of? A puppy? A kitten?'

Rodolphus too got a smack in the face from his sibling.

As Voldemort drew his wand and shrieked, '*Crucio*!', and the sound of screaming filled the Manor, Severus Snape crept quietly away from the chaos. If anyone was to be punished for his Boggart, Snape had expected it to be him. He really hadn't expected the Occlumency trick to work, but thank Merlin it had.

As he Apparated back to Hogwarts, he thought of the Muggle adage, "A problem shared is a problem halved". In this case it seemed the problem was doubled, and he was just glad to get out of there before it trebled.

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A/N: From on old SND prompt by Muse Amusant. I took as the basis for Voldemort's Boggart, Dumbledore's line to Harry in HBP: 'Have you any idea how much tyrants fear the people they oppress?'