

## The Point of No Return

Narcissa Black sat silently at her vanity, enduring her sister, mother, and a pair of house-elves fluttering about her. Her eyes were fixed on the mirror, which showed her a slender witch dressed in a white peasant blouse stiff with red embroidery and a black skirt with an inch of lace at the hem, brushing the tops of the invisible slippers which gave the impression that she was barefoot. Her blonde hair fell freely down her back, and her blue eyes were deftly outlined in dark pencil, making them seem enormous and wondering.

*The eyes of a maiden, an innocent peasant girl who knows nothing of love or lovemaking, nothing of intrigue or heartbreak or sacrifice.*

*Would I could be so in truth.*

But innocent no daughter of the House of Black could afford to be for long, and a maiden Narcissa would not be for much longer. Before the clock struck twelve tonight, she would be a bride, and a wife soon thereafter if the stories she had heard about her affianced husband were true.

*And I see no reason to doubt them.*

The thought of that husband-to-be, surely adjusting his cloak and mask at this very moment in some other room of the house, brought the faintest of frowns to Narcissa's face. If someone challenged her about it, she could easily say one of her slippers was rubbing her heel or her shoulders were growing chilly in the air of an evening in mid-January.

*Both of which are true, and neither of which begins to approach what is wrong with tonight.*

She closed her eyes. If this was to be her last evening as a free woman, it seemed fitting to spend it thinking of what she would have done had she been free to follow her heart.

*At last I understand you, Andromeda... too late, too late, too little and too late...*

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"I do not *fancy* Sirius' friend!"

She was fifteen years old, standing in a corner of the Slytherin common room, glaring at Andromeda with her hands planted on her hips. "To begin with, he is two years younger than I am—add to that, he is a Gryffindor, and he is *Muggle-born*—how in the world can you possibly believe—"

"Keep your voice down," Andromeda urged. "Cissy, I have no objection, you know that. I'm only warning you that if you keep making it this obvious, other people are going to start noticing."

"I have made nothing obvious, Andromeda, because there is nothing to make obvious!" Mindful of her sister's dictate, Narcissa spoke softly, but she was still careful to give each word its proper cargo of disdain. "Can you honestly think that I would jeopardize my chances to marry into one of the finest magical bloodlines in Britain..." An admiring glance towards the fire, where Lucius Malfoy sat studying for his N.E.W.T.s. "... for a half-grown boy with no magical ancestors at all, who spends half his life bathing and the other half joining in the antics of our blood-traitor cousin and his gang of rabble?"

"Gang of rabble or not, Narcissa, whenever those particular four Gryffindors walk into a room, you turn into a snow-maiden." Andromeda folded her arms. "Either you know something about one of them that terrifies you, or you fancy one of them, and I have a sneaking suspicion it's the latter. If it were Potter or Lupin, you wouldn't be nearly so upset about it—"

"I am not upset," Narcissa hissed between her teeth.

Andromeda raised her eyebrows. "You do a marvelous impression of it, then. As I was saying, you wouldn't react as you're doing if you'd found James Potter or Remus Lupin unexpectedly intruding on your thoughts. Potter is a pureblood, though I admit he doesn't act much like one, and Lupin may be half-blood, but he's respectable, even if he does look ill more often than not. And somehow I doubt you have conceived a mad passion for our cousin Sirius. So that leaves only the last of their party—"

Narcissa shut her eyes. "'Dromeda, please," she whispered, the childhood nickname coming unbidden to her lips. "Don't say it."

A murmured spell, and the brush of air past her cheek. "We're private now," Andromeda said. "We likely should have been from the beginning, but I didn't want people wondering too much what we're up to. I think I've done this properly—there's a Disillusionment on it, as long as no one was looking straight at us when it went up they'll see us talking about innocuous things—Cissy, please, just once tell me the truth. You know I won't be making the social round after I leave school, not once Mother and Father find out about Ted."

"I refuse to add to my parents' shame," Narcissa said stiffly. "A pureblood House may be disgraced by an alliance with the blood you mean, but it shall not be ours."

“What are you—oh, of course, you mean Potter and the sister of that boy you’re not at all interested in.” A moment of silence which felt suspiciously like Andromeda restraining a chuckle at her own dry tone. “I’ll agree that might be a match someday, but is it really a disgrace? She’s an excellent witch, quite pretty in a striking way, both intelligent and kind from all I hear, and adjusting to our world with surprising ease. Why does it matter who her parents were?”

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*It was the first time anyone had asked me that question in so many words, and I had no ready answer. Narcissa felt the strokes of a brush through her hair, though it had long since lost any vestige of tangle. And thinking about it only caused me more confusion.*

*I could not deny that my sister was right in her description of the girl in question. Any pureblood family in Britain would have been glad to claim her as a daughter. Some of them might have been willing to exchange their own born daughters for her. But once I had admitted so much... once I had acknowledged that, judging by appearances or magical prowess or any standard but blood status, there could be no shame in a marriage between James Potter and Lily Evans...*

A knock on the door sent Narcissa’s thoughts scurrying for cover. Rivvy ran to see who was there, hastily smoothing her pillowcase as she went. Bellatrix straightened Narcissa’s left sleeve as their mother pinned a red rose to her right, and Kreacher slid the brush through her hair one last time and set it aside.

Lucius was revealed as the door opened, white-blond hair spilling over his shoulders, hand resting on the hilt of the sword he wore at his waist. The ruffled white shirt and black trousers of his role suited him, as did the wide-brimmed hat and black cloak, held to his right shoulder and left waist by a red cord. His sculpted white half-mask did nothing to obscure the proprietary look in his eyes as he regarded Narcissa. She bit back several angry remarks—*We are not wedded yet* and *Kindly cease undressing me with your eyes* chief among them—and rose from her chair.

“I would assume the guests are gathered?” she said, astonished at the calm in her voice.

“They are.” Lucius held out his arm, and she took it. “And already I have heard a multitude of compliments on the unusual festivities you chose for our wedding, dear Narcissa. A fancy dress ball—not only that, but everyone to come as a character from a story they thought it unlikely the other guests would know—”

“I have been bored at far too many weddings.” Narcissa made her tone distant, as though she discussed the weather of six months ago on the other side of the world. “I vowed that when I wed, I would make an attempt to supply my guests with some topic of conversation other than my robes, the food, and the family trees of myself and my husband.”

*Perfect truth—I did so vow, as a girl—but also a lie, a lie of omission. You hear what I say, but you never look beyond to hear what I do not...*

Her fingertips resting on Lucius’ arm, they proceeded to the stairs.

*You trust me, Lucius. You believed me when I said I had read an old Spanish tale in my childhood, one which made a deep impression on me. You listened as I spoke of Aminta, a gentle witch raised by villainous Muggles, and of Don Juan, a lonely wizard who foolishly seeks satisfaction among Muggle women but can find no joy until Aminta’s magic completes his life. You agreed that we should dress as those characters for our wedding, and told the story far and wide, bragging about the ingenuity and romantic spirit of your betrothed.*

*You never stopped to think that I might have had some other motivation for my actions than wishing the night I am married to be memorable.*

Narcissa bent her head to catch the scent of the blossom pinned to her sleeve, reflecting with a tiny smile the irony that her own mother should have placed it there.

*If she knew the depths of degradation, as she would phrase it, into which flowers like this one led me...*

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*‘Meet me outside the Restricted Section of the library at seven o’clock tonight.’*

Narcissa read the note again, and a third time, but the words in the familiar, dark handwriting did not change. The red rose around which the note had been wrapped lay atop her empty plate, mute testimony to its sender’s identity.

*What I know of it.*

On the first day of her sixth year, she had returned to her dormitory tired and dispirited from three difficult classes, wanting only to sleep. When she had pulled her bedcurtains back, a delicious scent had greeted her. Across her pillow lay a single red rose.

None of her dormmates had any idea who could have left the gift, and Narcissa stopped short of reporting it to Professor Slughorn. What harm, after all, could a flower left on her pillow do?

Three days later, after a particularly trying Potions lesson which left her in tears, another rose appeared, this one with a note attached: *‘Chop roots coarsely and leaves finely.’* The absurdity of potion-brewing hints alongside what seemed to be a lover’s token gave her some much-needed laughter.

But the advice worked.

From that day on, she waited for the roses. They came at irregular intervals, but never more than once a day or less than once a week. The notes with them became more common and grew longer, and just before the Christmas holidays, her Ghostly Admirer (as he signed himself) told her in a

few terse words that a note left on a certain window ledge on the fifth floor would reach him.

She wrote him her first letter that night, and left it on the ledge before departing for home the next morning. In the evening, an owl tapped on her window. In its beak it carried a letter and a tiny ceramic rose on a ribbon.

*'This rose holds a homing charm,' her Ghostly Admirer wrote. 'When we are not in school, you may use the ribbon to tie up a letter to me and give it to any owl, and the bird will know where to bring it. Please forgive my cowardice, but you are so beautiful and I so far from it that I fear to show you my face or tell you my name, lest you grace me with your presence and I die of it.'*

For that sort of flattery, Narcissa found, she could forgive nearly anything.

She and the Admirer had carried on their correspondence through terms and holidays ever since that day, learning ever more about one another, about their families and their friends, about their joys and their sorrows, about books and music, which were a shared passion between them. Strangely enough, they seemed to know few of the same authors or composers, and could therefore recommend their own favorites to one another with abandon.

*It is not strange at all,* said a harsh voice in the back of her mind. *You know what it means. Why do you never face it?*

Narcissa stroked the rose's stem between its thorns. "I will face it," she murmured to herself. "Tonight, in the library."

Laughter rang out from the other end of the Great Hall, four distinct sounds. One laugh was bright and carefree, a second quiet and hesitant, the third loud and barking. She knew them all, could place names to them, as could most of the school. But it was the fourth laugh which held her ear, low and throaty as it was.

*My heart is quite thoroughly ridiculous. I am engaged in all but name to a highly acceptable young man, and it insists on falling in love with two other boys at the same time, one for the way he writes and the way he cares about what I feel, the other for the way he laughs and the way he looks. The first one tells me himself that he is ugly and unfit to be near me, and I know well the second one is unattainable—nothing I told my sister two years ago has changed, he is still younger than I and still a Gryffindor and still Muggle-born...*

But Andromeda's counter to her arguments still stood as well, and had grown from supposition to reality. The constant friendly bickering between James Potter and Lily Evans had finally flowered, as everyone had suspected it someday would, into romance.

*Though if they did not have her twin nearby, to tell them each about one another, I wonder if it would not have taken some years more.*

And then she was on the subject she generally tried to avoid. The boy who had, to her embarrassment and shame, become her silent obsession over the past two and a half years.

*The twin brother of Lily Evans. Fraternal twins, obviously, but they are seldom seen apart except when he is with his three closest friends. "The Marauders," as they are sometimes known. Her eyes skimmed across Remus Lupin, James Potter, and her cousin Sirius before lighting on the object of her thoughts. And I would wager money that at least half the trouble they make is his idea...*

Sleek black hair tied back in a neat ponytail, teeth flashing white against the tanned skin of his strong-featured face, Russell Evans laughed again in response to some jest of Sirius'. Narcissa shut her eyes for a moment at the sound of his deep chuckle, summoning her discipline to keep her expression calm.

*He is nothing to me,* she reminded herself. *He does not know me, except as part of Sirius' litany of relatives he dislikes. And what a son of the Potters may do, a daughter of the Blacks may not. I bear the best and purest magical blood of these isles in my veins, and it is my duty to mingle it only with other lines like itself.*

*I will meet my Ghostly Admirer in the library tonight and thank him for two years of kindness and friendship. I will bid Russell Evans a silent farewell at breakfast tomorrow. And then I shall return home and prepare to marry Lucius Malfoy, and forget them both.*

But even as she vowed it to herself, Narcissa had a sinking suspicion that it might not be so easy.

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The guests all applauded as Narcissa and Lucius passed through the wide double doors at the top of the stairs which led down into the ballroom of Malfoy Manor. Lucius stopped, accepting the praise as his due, which gave Narcissa a moment to take in the view. She wanted to savor every moment of this night.

*Though for other reasons than I might have, had I never gone to that meeting in the library, or had I never received a note wrapped around a rose's stem at all.*

The ballroom was on the first floor of the house, its vaulted ceiling arching two stories above them, painted with scenes of clouds and frolicking cupids. From its center hung an enormous crystal chandelier, which flung tiny rainbow reflections against every wall. Glass-paned doors lined one wall, leading out to small balconies, warded against the weather, to which a man and a woman could remove if the heat of the room and the exertion of dancing became too much. The polished wood floor was barely visible, covered as it was with costumed wizards and witches, all of whom seemed to be looking at her.

*Of course they are looking at me. I am the bride. Or will be in a few short hours.*

How strange, she thought dizzily as Lucius led her down the stairs and the orchestra began to play the preparatory measures of a song she knew

that she knew but could not recall the title of, how strange that time should behave in the same way before an event that one dreaded during an event one had longed for, and conversely, that it should do the same during that dreaded happening and while one was doing the longing...

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Not even while she was waiting her turn to be called for her practical N.E.W.T.s had Narcissa experienced time moving this slowly. Three separate people had asked her if she were expecting a letter, two had wondered if she were brewing one final potion before leaving school, and one wag had inquired if someone had put her under Imperius to check her watch every thirty seconds. She had left him trying to work out how to get his face back from the clock's dial she had hexed it into.

But now, now it was seven o'clock, and she was standing outside the door of the library wondering what on earth she was doing here.

*For all I know, I have come to meet a wheezing third year who got his older brother to help him write the notes. Or a doddering professor who will hint that I remind him of his long-lost love. Or even an actual ghost...*

And she would never find out if she remained in the corridor.

Narcissa nerved herself up and entered the library.

The lamps on the end of every other bookshelf brightened as she approached and dimmed again as she moved on, bound for the roped-off section in the back to which Madam Pince grudgingly granted the older students access when they could prove need. Narcissa herself had entered it only four times, each time with a specific book in mind, but one of the girls in her year still had the marks from where a book she hadn't been meant to touch had viciously bitten her nose.

*Some people never can accept that rules are there for a reason.*

A discreet cough broke into her musings. She looked up.

The dark figure lounging against a bookshelf without a lamp was too large to be a third year and far too solid for a ghost, and not even the newest professor would have the air of youthful defiance this wizard gave off. The set of the shoulders was all wrong for it to be any of her own Housemates, though, or the other students she had met in the course of the pureblood social season.

*Of course he's not a pureblood, sneered the harsh voice she had heard earlier. When you had to tell him why "The Fountain of Fair Fortune" was thought unsuitable in your household—even what "The Fountain of Fair Fortune" was—did you truly think he could be a pureblood, or even half? No, imp-wit, you know what your Ghostly Admirer is, and you always have. And in a moment, you will have to face it..*

"You came," said a deep, hesitant voice. "I didn't know if you would." A hand spotted with healing burns rose into the light, holding a red rose between two of its strong fingers. "This is for you. One last gift, before you go on your way."

"I much prefer this to your leaving it on my grave," Narcissa answered, grasping the rose farther down its stem. Her heart was hammering wildly, and had been from the moment she had heard the voice, but somehow her own tones were calm and clear. "Since I hope not to die for some years yet."

"I hope that myself." The young man released the stem of the rose, but did not lower his hand immediately. "There is the war to consider, but you are a pureblood. You should be safe."

"And if I choose to place myself in harm's way?" Narcissa challenged, turning the rose to display its whip-like stem, festooned with thorns. "If I decide the Dark Lord is the best hope of wizardkind, and answer his call? He will accept a witch as readily as a wizard. My own sister stands at his side, and he asks her for advice before he asks any other."

"I find it hard to believe you would do such a thing," said the dark voice, its owner's hand falling to his side again. "Your mind is far more alive than most of those around you. You, of all people, should be able to see that the first step down that path can never be completely undone."

"I might not wish it undone." Narcissa moved deliberately towards him, invading the tiny cocoon of shadow he had woven about himself. "I might enjoy myself on that path, and find my life's true fulfillment there."

"You might." He matched her step for step, she moving into the darkness, he into the light. "Tell me, is your sister a better person for serving her Dark Lord? Wiser, stronger, happier? Do you enjoy her company more, and take every opportunity to be with her?"

"Is that not a rather personal question?" She turned, as did he, their movements in perfect opposition as though choreographed. "Besides, Bellatrix is a grown woman, married and busy about her own affairs. She would not welcome my intrusion into her life."

He curled his lip under. "Which is another way of saying that you're afraid of her, that you don't want to be near her. With what I've heard of her, I'm not surprised."

"Don't you dare insult my family!"

"Why not? You've insulted mine enough." He stared down his nose at her, and she fought not to shrink back from the glare of those hard black eyes. "Oh, yes, I've heard what you say, first-hand and second. 'Mudblood scum,' you call us, my sister and me, and that when you're feeling generous. Would it truly make so much difference if we had a witch for a mother, or a wizard for a father?"

Narcissa set her shoulders back. "I have not said such things with any meaning behind them in years," she said sharply. "How could I, with such a striking counterexample always before my eyes?"

“But you still say them.”

“In the circles in which I move, they are expected. And necessary, if I am to keep from being suspected in the matter of our correspondence.” She saw him flinch, and softened her tone. “While I am on the subject, thank you for your letters. They have always been welcome, both for their practical aspects and for...” The words she had been about to use deserted her, and she spread her hands silently instead.

He looked sidelong at her. “May I guess?” he said.

She inclined her head.

“For the knowledge that you were not alone.” He turned his face to one of the lamps, regarding the light with a steady gaze. “For the illusion that you had one friend who would never desert you.”

“Was it only illusion, then?” Narcissa tightened her grip on the rose, hissing under her breath as a thorn stabbed her palm. “Is this a final farewell?”

“What else can it be?” His voice was level, as though he were merely asking a friend for ideas about a potion he’d been told to identify. “We live in different worlds. My birth bars me forever from yours, and your breeding makes me think you wouldn’t care for mine. Shall we say our goodbyes and part as friends?”

She scowled at him. “Are you so eager to be rid of me?”

“Rid of you?” He turned towards her again, his eyes more intense than before. “Is that what you think I want?”

“What else can I think, when you will not so much as take my hand?”

He raised one dark eyebrow. “I wasn’t aware you’d offered it.”

Narcissa flushed, and quickly thrust her free left hand out of her masking shadow. “Here,” she said, more roughly than she had intended. “It is offered.”

“Offered.” His voice made a song of the word. “And accepted.” Tanned fingers closed around hers.

A gasp sounded, and it was not until the rose quivered in her other hand that Narcissa realized it had come from her. Her skin tingled, chills ran up and down her spine, and her heart seemed overlarge for her chest.

*What is this—what is happening to me—*

Whatever it was, he felt it too. His eyes had widened, his breath came more quickly, and his arm was drawing back now, pulling her gently forward, step by step into the boundary between light and darkness. “Has anyone told you how beautiful you are?” he said in a bare whisper of a voice.

“Not...” Narcissa swallowed. “Not lately.”

“Is every man in this school blind?” The question was asked of the air above her head.

“Not blind, but respecters of another man’s property—” she began.

“Property!” he interrupted, his face blazing into sudden fury. “Is that how you see yourself? As *property*? To be bought and sold, with no more say in the matter than a book or a blossom? I thought you had more sense than that—no, not ‘I thought,’ I *know* you have more sense than that, Narcissa! You are no man’s property, and no woman’s either, except your own!”

“What a lovely world it would be, were that true.” Narcissa tried to keep her tone light, bantering. “Alas that it is not.”

Her Ghostly Admirer took a step closer to her, looking down intently into her eyes. “Would you like it to be?” he asked softly.

She drew breath to deny it, and saw in his face that he knew she would be lying.

“I haven’t much to offer you,” said Russell Evans, lifting his other hand to stroke the side of her face without taking his eyes off hers. “But if you were willing, I would be honored to show you that world. Show you what it’s like to live, just to live, without status games and backbiting and pretending you’re best friends with people you loathe.” He smiled crookedly. “I won’t pretend the world I come from is perfect. It has many flaws. But I think you should see it for yourself before you make a decision you can’t take back.”

“It is already too late.” Narcissa coughed on the words, and had to stop to catch her breath before she went on. “My choice is made.”

*My choice was made in the moment I realized my heart’s two desires were one and the same.*

“I understand.” Russell inclined his head to her, his eyes acquiring a shielded look. “I will say good night, then.” He started to turn away, releasing her hand.

“No, you do *not* understand,” Narcissa snapped, desperation and desire making her bold. “Come back here and kiss me, you fool!”

Russell went very still, then pivoted in place to face her once more. “As my lady commands,” he said in his darkest tones, and caught her hand in his again, pulling her ruthlessly from shadow into light and crushing her against him as his lips fastened on hers.

Some portion of Narcissa's mind registered dimly that this made sense of all the stories heard of love, before she was too busy with what she was doing to think about anything else.

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*But someone saw us there. Someone passed by, or hid there deliberately, and saw and heard—what? Too much, whatever it was.*

Narcissa paced a slow circle around her current dance partner, grateful for the lessons of her childhood which meant she could tread these particular measures without conscious thought. Her mind was too busy with bitter whimsy to have room for such trivial things as dance steps.

*Do I truly love him? Did I ever? If I loved him, should I not have been willing to accept the hospitality he offered me, on his own family's part and that of his friends? But no, I dissembled and demurred, I convinced him that it would be better not to cause a scandal, that I should return to my family until we were both old enough to marry...*

*And I have reaped my reward.*

She had no sooner walked into her family's house than her father had summoned the wand from her pocket, and her mother slammed and locked the door behind her. Bellatrix had stepped out of the drawing room on the left, regarding her younger sister with folded arms. "I hear you prefer Andromeda's example to mine these days, Cissy..."

*My heart nearly stopped at that.*

*And there have been days since when I wished it had.*

Her parents and sister had scolded her roundly for the treacherous and childish folly of befriending a Mudblood, as though she were four years old and had been caught trying out her father's racing broom or sniffing at the most dangerous of her mother's potions ingredients. But that had only been embarrassing and infuriating. It had been the next topic of conversation which had left her seriously considering desperate measures.

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"I will not lose another daughter to degradation of this kind." Cygnus Black punctuated his words with a thump of his fist on the table. "You *will* wed Lucius, Narcissa. I command it."

Narcissa met her father's eyes evenly. "I am of age. You can command nothing of me."

"We can make obedience the less painful option, then," said Druella, her eyes flickering from her youngest daughter to her eldest. "Bella, dearest? Do you want to tell your sister about our surprise for her?"

"Of course, Mother," Bella purred. "Tell me, Cissy, this Mudblood boy of yours... it would be terribly tragic if anything happened to him, would it not? Or his sisters, or his parents? The Dark Lord does so love making examples..."

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Narcissa had not bothered with pointless protestations like "But you can't" or "You wouldn't dare." Death Eaters, she knew, could and would dare. Would, in fact, enjoy their work.

*And Russ, and both his sisters, along with their parents, would die.*

*I could not allow that.*

So instead of pretending she had a choice about being sold, she had set herself to making sure the price was appropriate. The contract awaiting her signature and Lucius' included, just below the section detailing her duties towards her husband and his powers over her, the additional notation that if any member of the Evans family were harmed by Death Eaters or their Dark Lord, the contract was void and Narcissa a free woman once more.

*Of course, Russ has told me repeatedly that his elder sister, the Muggle, is no great ornament to the world, and it would be an easy task to bribe one of the less intelligent Death Eaters to attack her...*

She shook her head sharply. *Enough of that. I have made my bargain and I shall live up to it. Besides, if I know my father and his mind for the law, he will have written the contract to prevent precisely that from happening. He would not risk leaving me any loophole, no matter how small.*

The current song came to an end, and she curtsied to her partner, who wore a fur suit and the mask of a wolf. He bowed back, then betook himself into the crowd without speaking.

*Likely he appreciates his costume's warmth on such a chill night.*

She knew her choice of a date had set people talking—wedding in the winter was supposed to be an unlucky omen for the marriage, which would be as cold and lifeless as the day on which it had been contracted.

*But the third Sunday in January was what I wanted, and the third Sunday in January was what my parents saw no reason not to grant me.*

Narcissa allowed herself a small smile, as wintry as the weather beyond the warding spells on the balconies.

*The more fools they, if my riddle has been read aright. And if it has not... then my wedding day will accurately reflect what my marriage, and my*

*life, will resemble.*

A hand touched her shoulder, and she turned. "Cousin."

"Cousin." Regulus Black, dressed in the tunic and patched cape of a character from one of the lesser-known Beetle stories, bowed in return to her curtsy. "May I have this dance?"

"Of course." Regulus might be barely into his teens, but he was tall for his age and a fine dancer. As well, he was unexceptionable, due to their family connection. No one would spread tales about them if they shared a dance.

They took their places, and the music began.

"Congratulations on your marriage," Regulus said awkwardly after a few seconds of silence.

"Thank you."

He moved his hand farther down her arm as her sleeve attempted to cover it. "You don't seem very happy."

Narcissa eyed her cousin. "What reason would I have to be unhappy?"

"I don't know. Only... I've heard..." Regulus looked up and met her gaze. "Cissy, no one's making you do this, are they?"

"Why would you think so?" Narcissa asked lightly, hoping the boy would take her widened eyes as evidence of surprise at his question—*which they are, but not in any way I can tell him about...*

"I... someone said..." Regulus' cheeks were warming. "Someone told me this might not be what you really wanted. That Aunt Druella and Uncle Cygnus are pushing you into it somehow."

"Come now," Narcissa reproved, "do you truly think my parents would do such a thing?"

Regulus lifted his eyebrows. "Maybe?"

Taken by surprise, Narcissa laughed aloud. "Take that for your answer, then," she said. "Maybe."

Regulus shook his head. "If they weren't, you'd say so. So they are. But no one's supposed to know about it." His words were crisp with anger, but he kept his tone low enough that the music would mask his words to anyone but Narcissa. "And you can't tell me why, or anything else about it."

Narcissa nodded very slowly.

"I understand." Regulus gave her a small smile. "Whatever it's happening, I'm sorry that you won't be happy."

"I will find happiness," Narcissa assured him. "Life is almost infinitely flexible in that regard."

Regulus inclined his head, and they finished the dance in silence.

Her final curtsy dipped, Narcissa took a seat to one side of the dance floor, watching Regulus head in the direction of the gentlemen's retiring room. Several wizards begged her hand for a dance, but she excused herself on the grounds that her feet were tired. In truth, she needed some time to think over what she had said to her cousin.

*Will I find happiness, married to Lucius Malfoy? What will life be, in such a union?*

She would be left generally alone, she knew that much. When Lucius did not need a hostess for a party or an account-keeper for the doings of his manor house and its estates, she would have her time to do with as she pleased. Her becoming a Death Eater herself would please him, but she could be excused from active participation so long as she did not interfere with his. And once she had produced an heir, he was likely to seek other beds than hers.

*Whether I want him to or not.*

In other words, in exchange for some occasional tedious work, a few unpleasant episodes in the bedroom, and the tacit approval of the murder and torture of Muggles, she would have a life of luxury and leisure. She had read the marriage contract, and nothing prevented her from taking a lover of her own so long as she was discreet about it.

*Mother's idea, I would wager. She always was progressive about such things.*

Without her consent, her mind spun backwards in time to a letter received over a year ago, in response to her query about her Ghostly Admirer's views on love and marriage.

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*There are many sorts of love, read the small, neat handwriting. The love of a brother for a sister, of a child for a parent, of a friend for another. I have experienced all these in my time, but the love you mean I have never felt on my own behalf. I have heard about it, of course—who has not?—but judging by what my parents have told me, both of their own experiences and those of others, I think the common belief may be somewhat mistaken.*

*True love for another person is, in my opinion, preferring their good to one's own. It is wishing that they might have what is truly best for them, while caring very little or not at all about what is good for oneself. This, like any emotion, can be taken to extremes, but in the proper proportion and with the proper recipients, it is in itself a reason to continue living...*

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Narcissa sighed heavily. With such a definition before her, it was hard to argue the point any longer.

*I love Russell Evans. And unless he has greatly deceived me, he loves me in return.*

*And thus, I shall prefer his good to my own, and spend my life keeping him alive.*

But for one moment, she could allow herself to imagine what could have been.

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Rain hammered on the roof of the cottage, flowing down the windows in rivulets. Not that anyone noticed, with the objects of greater interest within the room itself.

"Dada!"

Russell chuckled and bent to peel the black-haired child off his leg. "Yes, that is who I am," he agreed. "And who are you?" He prodded the boy in the stomach, eliciting a giggle. "What's your name?"

"Danny!" the boy proclaimed. "And Mama!" He wriggled free of his father's grasp and ran to the sofa on which Narcissa sat, watching her men amuse themselves. "Mama," he declared, climbing up beside her. "Hug."

"Manners," Narcissa said, holding up her hand to stall the boy. "What do we say?"

"P'ease?"

Narcissa melted at the sight of the hopeful hazel eyes. "Very well." She opened her arms, and Daniel Casper Evans tumbled into them. "And then we will have storytime and bed, so that you will be well-rested for your aunt and uncle and cousin to come tomorrow."

"Yay!" Danny put his arms around her again and squeezed, laying his face against her collarbone.

Narcissa dropped a kiss onto the top of her son's head. *Such a sweet child. Troublemaking when he wishes to be, of course, but with such a father, what else can one expect?*

Looking up, she surprised an expression on Russ' face similar to the one he had worn on their wedding day, and on the day Daniel was born. It was comprised of equal parts 'Dear God how beautiful' and 'What have I done to deserve this?'

*And, of course, I have seen it on one other occasion.*

*At the moment in the Hogwarts library when I first gave him a certain command...*

Russ blinked and came out of his trance at the sound of her laughter. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing," Narcissa said merrily. "Come here and kiss me, you fool."

Smiling, Russ sketched a bow. "A fool for your love, my lady, I hope I'll always be." He crossed to her side, seated himself, and leaned over Daniel to obey her.

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Narcissa lowered her head, squeezing her eyes shut and ordering her tears away. *I have made my choice, she reminded herself. Perhaps I do not deserve this fate, but I brought it upon myself and I will not weep for it. What must be, shall be, and I am strong. I can endure.*

She tugged her handkerchief free from its place inside her sleeve, blotted her face with it, and lifted a seemingly serene face to the ball.

*Let no one say a daughter of the House of Black would not do her duty.*

A flash of white caught her eye. Lucius was threading nimbly between couples and groups, coming towards her from the direction of the orchestra. His eyes were fixed on her, so firmly that when his cloak snagged on the sword of a wizard costumed as a Muggle soldier, his hand went to his left shoulder and twitched the cord to free it without looking.

Narcissa frowned. Something seemed wrong, but she could not pinpoint it.

"It is almost time," Lucius said as he reached her side. "Are you prepared for our special dance, my only love?"

"Special dance?"

"A surprise for you, to keep the night exciting. I chose the music for it myself." He deftly unpinned the rose from her sleeve. "I see you come prepared."



"Prepared..." Narcissa trailed off as Lucius stroked the flower down her bare arm, raising a shiver of pleasure behind it. "I do love surprises," she said, stepping closer to him and looking up into his half-masked face. "Particularly dances. What sort of dance will it be?"

"A tango. The dance of love." He brushed her cheek with the rose, sliding an errant strand of hair back into place. "Fitting, is it not? First we shall dance, and then we shall sign our names to the contract, and after that..." Gray eyes slid up and down her figure appreciatively. "We shall discover what it means to belong to one another, to prefer one another's good to our own, and none shall part us ever again."

"Truly an outcome to be wished," Narcissa murmured, lowering her gaze demurely to hide the flush in her cheeks.

*How has he learned to make my body respond so? I have never felt such desire before when we were alone together, not even when he has kissed me...*

*And why did his words sound familiar?*

Lucius led her into the center of the floor, the other couples clearing the way for them. Taking her into his arms, he nodded to the orchestra, which began to play.

Narcissa devoted her attention to her steps for a few moments—it had been nearly a year since she had last danced a tango—and the song was halfway through the first theme by the time she could listen to it.

*But it is familiar. Naggingly so. It had words when I last heard it, though. Words about desire and seduction, about the fire of passion...*

"So clever of you," Lucius whispered into her ear. "To choose costumes for us from a tale with a song written for it already."

Narcissa almost missed a step in shock.

*Of course. Of course. How could I have mistaken it?*

*But how could Lucius have found it out?*

She glanced at her partner, and found his eyes already on her face, his smile lingering maddeningly between reassuring and mocking.

*Either he has discovered the true origins of our costumes, and will be furious with me for insisting he dress as the fancy of a mere Muggle, or...*

Firmly, she removed the "or" from consideration. It was not possible, and she would not think about it.

*Lucius commands considerable respect among the Death Eaters, not all of whom are as pureblooded as they pretend to be. One or another of them likely told him what a fool I was making of him, and he has chosen this way to tell me that he knows.*

The "or," though, refused to be completely removed. Had she not chosen these costumes for its possibility, it whispered to her? Had she not hoped, deep in her heart, that it could be true?

Dismissing the thought again, Narcissa spun in response to Lucius' cue.

*Whyever this song was chosen for tonight, it is perfectly suited to the situation...*

At last the violins sustained their final quavering note, and Narcissa sank into her deepest curtsy, matching her partner's bow. "You dance divinely," he murmured to her under the applause of the spectators. "Or perhaps angelically."

"As do you." Narcissa forced her voice to remain calm, her face impassive, despite her furiously racing heart. "Shall we pass our point of no return, then?"

He offered her his arm. "I do believe it is time for that, yes."

The orchestra played a deep series of chords, in a time suited for a processional, as Narcissa and Lucius approached the small table to one side of the dance floor. The marriage contract and the Contract Quill lay upon it, and her family was ranged behind it, to serve as witnesses. Narcissa took the quill into her hand.

*For you, my love,* she vowed silently, and set point to paper, signing her name without revealing any outward sign of pain as her signature cut through the flesh of her hand. After dotting the l's, she handed the quill to Lucius. "For you," she said softly. "My love."

"Thank you." Lucius stepped forward to the table, then glanced up at the Blacks and the Lestranges. "Must you stand so near?" he inquired in his most sardonic tones. "I have been able to write my own name since I was quite a small child."

Narcissa restrained her laughter at the haste with which her parents and sister retreated. Lucius bent down, signed his name swiftly, and laid the quill on the table, rolling up the contract and tucking it into an inside pocket of his cape. "And so let it be done," he said softly. "Now, then." He looked up at her father. "I believe you have my wife's wand?"

Her father's answer was lost to Narcissa in the sound of those two words.

*"My wife," he said.*

*I am a married woman now. For better or for worse, my life is joined to that of this man—of my husband—forever.*

And her husband was turning around, holding out a familiar object. Narcissa accepted her wand and swiftly slid it away into the slender pocket in her skirt designed for it.

*As though he expects trouble, and wishes me to be armed...*

She thrust the thought away. In a few moments, they would be alone and she would know. Until then, she could not allow herself the luxury of hope.

The wizard she had just married took her hand in his and started for the doors on the other side of the ballroom from the main entrance. "I hope that you will share with me your love and your lifetime," he said softly as they walked.

"That I will lead you and save you from solitude?" Narcissa countered, unable to stop herself smiling. *Nothing is sure, not yet, not yet, but I believe I know..*

"Why, yes." The man beside her smiled behind his mask. "And that you'll say you want me to remain beside you."

Narcissa drew herself closer to him and tucked his hand against her side. "Anywhere I go, I hope you will go too," she answered.

"As do I." Her husband stretched out his hand to open the door.

"STOP!" thundered a voice from the other side of the room.

Narcissa whirled. At the top of the main stairs stood a disheveled and furious Lucius Malfoy, pointing at the man beside her.

"Impostor!" he bellowed. "Unhand my wife!"

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"Your wife, m'sieur?" said Narcissa's husband smoothly, stepping in front of her. "I doubt that heartily. It is not your signature on the contract beside hers, nor is it your hand which has returned her wand to her. You have no claim on her."

"Such spirited words." Lucius stalked down the stairs, a path clearing between him and his doppelganger. "Wasted, all of them. You have tricked and deceived your way into this; she will never be yours."

The man standing in front of Narcissa shook his head, chuckling deep in his throat. "You are too late, Malfoy," he said coolly. "She already is."

"Puppy," Lucius spat, drawing his wand. "Insolent brat. Show me the color of your magic if you dare!"

"If you insist." The other wizard flicked his wrist, and his wand appeared in his hand. "To first blood, or to the death?"

"First blood is all that is necessary." Lucius laughed, the sound reverberating around the room and sending the watchers crowded around the edge of the dance floor a pace back from where they had stood. "By the terms of that same contract you named, all I need do is harm you to render it null and void, and my bride once again mine for the claiming. After that..." Another laugh. The prisms in the chandelier clinked against each other gently. "We shall see how merciful I feel. Perhaps I will let you live. To witness my wedding night."

"How kind of you," Narcissa's husband said in his driest tone, then leaned back toward her. "I make you free of your magic," he murmured under his breath. "You may find..." Four whispered syllables. "...a useful spell." Disguised eyes flickered upwards and back again. "Then seek a room with windows, and signal to me."

"I understand," Narcissa breathed, her hand on her wand.

Her husband turned away and strode towards the center of the room, his eyes steadily ahead. Lucius circled to his left, forcing his duplicate into the identical motion as he reached the center of the room. No one moved, except the shufflings of those who could not see the mirrored duelers well and sought a better vantage point.

*And no one at all seems to think I am important.* Narcissa conjured a box and climbed onto it, gaining the height she would need to gauge the perfect moment. *We will see how long that lasts.*

*Long enough, I hope.*

Two wands flickered silently, two spells shot out. They collided in the center of the space between the pair and ricocheted, one into the floor, the other over the heads of the audience, who ducked and shrieked. One dueler looked dismayed; the other smiled grimly and beckoned his opponent nearer.

*Windows. Windows are important somehow.* Narcissa watched the duelers circling, circling. *I must strike when my love is near the windows.*

*But which of them is which?*

In the next instant, she knew.

In the instant after, she struck.

*"Sectumsemptra!"*

The heads of the crowd turned, as with one accord, to her as she shouted, to her as she shouted, then followed the spell from her wand upwards, to its destination.

The chain of the chandelier.

Women screamed. Men shouted. One Lucius Malfoy stared upwards at the falling tower of glass and flame. The other snatched open a hinged window and dived over the railing of the tiny balcony beyond.

Narcissa leapt down from her box and darted out the door, locking it behind herself.

There were other doors, she knew. She would be pursued. But—an ear-shattering crash behind her—perhaps not swiftly.

*Or not swiftly enough, at any rate.*

Up the stairs she fled, through a maze of hallways, until at last she found a small room with only one door. She dashed inside, locked the door with two separate spells, and reinforced the walls around it. Then she turned to the window, opened it, and pointed her wand into the night, ignoring the cold wind. "*Lumos*."

Barely three breaths later, a flurry of black wings filled the space. Narcissa backed away as a bird the size of a large cat, with a long, stabbing beak and a beady eye, perched on the windowsill. Part of its face was oddly shiny, she noticed, as though something had coated it in metal or ceramic...

She smiled. "A useful trick," she said. "How long have you been able to do it?"

The raven fluttered to the floor of the room and blurred upwards into a human form. "A year and a half," said Narcissa's husband, closing the window and locking it with his own wand. "My friends call me Quoth."

"Yes, I've heard them at it. Is this the source of the other nicknames you toss around as well? Moony, and Padfoot, and Prongs?"

"Padfoot and Prongs, yes. Moony... is another story, and one I think we should approach in the morning." He turned to face her. "For the moment, we have something to discuss..."

Narcissa forestalled the discussion by rendering both discussers temporarily unable to speak.

"How are you disguised?" she asked when they were finished. "Is it tied to the mask?"

"It is." He ran his hands through her hair. "Do you wish to unmask me, my Angel of Music? It seems only right, as we've passed the point of no return..."

Narcissa slid her fingers under the mask and pulled. As it came free, the pointed features of Lucius Malfoy blurred and slid before her eyes. The nose developed a hook, the cheekbones lost a bit of their sharpness, and the skin darkened. Hair which had been the next thing to white turned as black as though she had dipped it in ink.

"Should you scream at the sight of me?" Russell Evans murmured to his bride, pulling her close.

"Only for joy." Narcissa leaned up and kissed him again, stopping only when they both needed a rest. "What did you want to discuss?" she asked, laying her face against his chest.

"I guessed, from what I heard of your preparations from this ball, that you hoped for me to rescue you." Russ seemed to pick his words carefully, as though he were seeking safe footing in a swamp. "And from what Lucius said, I can presume what they were holding over your head to ensure your cooperation."

"Your safety," Narcissa confirmed. "And that of your sisters, and your parents. I insisted it be included in the contract, that they could not harm you."

Russ sighed. "What can I offer, compared to that?" he asked quietly. "You are more than I could ever deserve..."

Narcissa freed a hand and swatted him on the ear.

"Ow!"

"Do I have your attention now, Russell Evans?" Narcissa demanded. "You came alone into your enemy's house, impersonated him and stole his bride from under his nose, dueled him so strongly that he could not stop his fear from showing on his face, escaped from him and at least a hundred of his partisans—and you feel that you do not deserve me?"

Russ' lips twitched. "Well," he said. "When you put it that way."

Pounding feet in the hall outside made them both swing around to look at the door. Russ pulled out a pocket watch and consulted it. "Excellent," he said. "I think we can hold them for two minutes, don't you?"

"Easily. Why?"

"Because this..." Russ tapped the mask Narcissa still held loosely in one hand. "... is a Portkey. Set for midnight, which is now less than two minutes away. So if you will allow me, madam..."

He slid one arm around her waist, pulling her away from the door, and grasped the mask with his other hand.

“Did you think of everything?” Narcissa leaned back into her love’s comforting strength.

“Not by myself.” Russ kissed the back of her head. “James was the first to hear that you wanted a costume ball for your wedding, and Remus convinced me that you would not have chosen these particular costumes if you were not hoping for my help. Lily helped to make the costume and enchant the mask. And Sirius...” He laughed. “Sirius wrote to his brother.”

“Regulus? What does he have to do with this?”

“As little as possible,” Russ said dryly. “But he greatly disliked the idea that you might have been forced into a wedding against your will.”

“So he would dislike the idea of my marrying a Muggleborn!” Narcissa twisted to look up at Russ. “How did you convince him to help you?”

Russ chuckled once, dryly. “Let us say, for the moment, that I have my ways. Finally he agreed that, if you would tell him yourself that you were being coerced, he would help me free you. I can only assume that you did, since he opened the window which allowed me in downstairs.” This chuckle had more life in it. “I must remember to practice my Stunning Spells. Lucius woke up far too soon.”

“It does not matter now,” Narcissa said, closing her hand more firmly around the mask as the door shuddered to the impact of a spell-blast from the other side.

“No,” Russ agreed, changing his grip so that he held both the mask and her hand at the same time. “It doesn’t.”

The mask glowed blue under their fingers.

The door blew in, showering half the room with splinters.

Narcissa wiggled her fingers at her furious parents and a livid Lucius as the Portkey activated.

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The usual collapse at the end of Portkey travel was more enjoyable than usual on this trip, Narcissa found, for the dual reason of a bed to collapse onto and Russ to collapse with. Not to mention, he took shameless advantage of her lips being so close to his...

A knock on the door of the small bedroom in which they’d arrived threw them apart. Cursing under his breath, Russ stalked to the door and flung it open.

“This,” he said to the sandy-haired boy on the other side, “had better be good.”

The boy extended a hand, in which reposed a folded note. Russ snatched it from him and opened it.

Narcissa sat up and straightened her hair, smiling tentatively at Remus Lupin. He returned the smile, then brushed at the left side of his head. Narcissa did the same and found a large tangled knot there. “Thank you,” she mouthed, and he inclined his head gravely.

Russ looked up from the note and coughed once, drawing Lupin’s—*though I suppose I should use his first name, if we are to be friends*—drawing Remus’ attention, then. “I understand,” he said almost without sound. “I will... deal with it.”

Remus grinned once, then nodded to them both and withdrew. Russ closed the door and returned to the bed. Putting his finger to his lips, he handed Narcissa the note.

*You have a closet full of voyeurs. I promised not to say anything.*

Narcissa pressed a hand over her mouth to stifle a giggle. *Yes, I think I will be very good friends with Remus Lupin...*

Stepping carefully, Russ made his way over to the closet and pulled open the door.

The closet was empty.

Narcissa frowned. *Was Remus lying? Or—*

Russ grasped a handful of what appeared to be air and pulled. As he did, it became silvery fabric, and a yelp and a muttered curse heralded the sudden appearance of a pair of boys Russ’ own age.

*Both of whom I know, and one of whom I knowvery well.*

“How kind of you, Cousin Sirius,” Narcissa cooed to the sheepish-looking boy on the left. “You wanted to come and witness my wedding night! But I thought you were moving away from the more foolish pureblood traditions, and that is surely one of the most foolish there is...”

“Do I need to remind you that you want to marry my sister, James Potter?” said Russ sharply to the even more sheepish-looking boy on the right, the one clutching a camera. “If you are not out of this room in five seconds, you will have nothing left with which to do so.”

“But if you’d just let us—” James began.

“We were only going to—” Sirius tried to say.

“Four,” said Russ, drawing his wand.

James dropped his camera. Sirius yanked himself free of the closet.

“Three.”

The boys made a mad rush for the door.

“Two.”

They both tried to get out at once and stuck in the frame. Narcissa didn't bother to restrain her giggles this time.

“One.”

James exploded out into the hall, followed by Sirius. Russ started to follow them, then glanced back at Narcissa. “I'll only be a moment,” he said. “Just to ensure we're not disturbed again.”

“Thank you for that.” Narcissa leaned back on the bed, still half-laughing as she heard the sounds of spellfire and confused shouting begin in the hallway.

*Whatever else I may say about my newlife, it will certainly never be dull.*

A knock sounded on the doorframe. “May I come in?” said the red-haired girl standing outside the room.

“Of course.” Narcissa sat up and drew her wand, pulling out the chair at the room's small desk. “Please, sit down.”

“Thank you.” Lily Evans seated herself, looking curiously at Narcissa. “You're not hurt, I hope?”

“No, not at all.”

“Look, I just wanted...” Lily flushed a bit. “What I mean is... I know where you come from. The background, that sort of thing. And I wanted you to know, you don't have to have much to do with me, or with our parents. Russ' and mine. He'll still want to see them, to see me, but we won't be insulted if you choose not to come along. We'll love to have you if you do, but if not, if it's going to upset you to be around us, it's perfectly all right if you stay away.” Her blush deepened. “I just wanted to put that out there. And hope I haven't mortally insulted you.”

Narcissa shook her head. “I am not insulted,” she said. “Grateful for your candor, yes. Insulted, no. But...” She took a deep breath. This was the true point of no return. “Your forbearance, though very kind, will not be necessary. It mattered to me once what sort of blood others bore. It matters no longer.” She held out her hand. “Sister.”

Lily smiled widely and met Narcissa's hand with her own. An instant later, Narcissa discovered herself engulfed in a fierce hug.

“Sister,” Lily whispered.

*A sister indeed.* Narcissa returned the embrace with a will. *A sister to take Bellatrix's place, and parents in place of my own, if they are anything like the children they have raised. And I will have Andromeda again, and Sirius, and my love's other friends, and perhaps even Regulus will join us one day...*

When the girls let each other go, Lily hurried from the room, pausing in the doorway only long enough to beam over her shoulder and wave once, then to hug Russ as he reappeared. She whispered something to him as she released him, and he watched her down the hall with a curious expression on his face.

“What is it?” Narcissa asked as her love closed the door of their bedroom once again.

“She complimented my choice.” Russ came over to the bed and sat down on its edge. “I wish I could say the same for her, but I'm sure James will grow up someday. If he gets the chance.” He smiled at her. “But we'll have no more need to worry tonight. I told them that anyone snooping around here won't get to help me take revenge on the person who told your parents about our meeting in the library.”

“You know?” Narcissa gasped. “Who was it?”

“I doubt you know him. He's our yearmate, the fifth in our dorm, and he always tries to follow us around.” Russ made a face. “He drives me mad. Toadying up to anyone who has better magic than he does, which is almost everyone, and spending more effort trying to cheat on exams than he would if he just studied.”

“Oh, one of those,” said Narcissa in disgust. “What is his name?”

“Pettigrew. Peter Pettigrew.” Russ' face set in lines of implacable fury for a moment. Then he looked at her, and the expression vanished as if it had never been. “But I'd rather not think of him tonight. Tomorrow, yes, tomorrow we can decide what to do with him...” He undid the cord on his cloak and tossed it aside. “But tonight, my only love, is our wedding night.”

“So it is.” Narcissa stretched luxuriously. “So it is.”

Disrobing a piece at a time, learning about one another slowly, the Evanses sought and found new ways to give the other pleasure, escalating all the time, until at last they lay exhausted in the darkness, limbs entwined.

“Would you like a story before you fall asleep, Cissy?” Russ murmured.

"Yes, please," Narcissa answered in her best little-girl tones.

"All right. You had asked why Regulus helped us, when you know his views on Muggleborns." A soft sigh. "This story explains it, but I warn you, it is far from pretty."

Rearranging her hair, Narcissa nestled her head against Russ' shoulder. "I am listening."

"More than ten years ago, in a village which shall remain nameless, there lived a family," Russ began, his voice hesitant, as though he did not often say these words. "A Muggle man had married a witch, and they had one child. A boy, six years old, already showing evidence of strong magic." He sighed again. "The Muggle was terribly jealous of his wife and his son, but he could not admit it to himself, so he pretended that he thought they were freaks and called them that. Loudly, often, and with such force that he came to believe it himself. And eventually, he decided that such freaks could not be allowed to live any longer."

Narcissa blinked, a suspicion beginning to dawn in her mind.

"He stole his wife's wand from her pocket, then attacked her with a knife." Russ' tone was flat; he might have been reciting dates for a History of Magic examination. "She might have been able to save herself if she had tried, but her attention was on her son. She threw him to safety with wandless magic, and screamed for him to run, just before her husband stabbed her. And the boy did run. He ran to the only safe place he knew, the home of his one friend, a witch his own age." A harsh laugh, devoid of any real humor. "Her parents called the authorities, but by the time they arrived, the boy's father had already killed himself as well as his wife."

"This sounds like a story I know," Narcissa said, searching for Russ' hand by touch and finding it groping for her own. "The sort pureblood parents tell their children to assure them Muggles are brutal and evil."

Russ snorted. "Humans as a whole have the ability to be brutal and evil, all the more so when they feel inferior. But I interrupted you. Tell me more about this story. Who were you told it was about? Were there ever names?"

"Yes, there were names." Narcissa squeezed her husband's hand. "The witch was Eileen Prince, and her Muggle husband... Snape, I believe. Tobias Snape. But the story I heard claimed he had killed their son Severus as well, and yours seems to be saying the boy lived..."

Russ laughed, a true laugh this time. "Oh, the boy lived, my love. And where he could have learned to hate Muggles because of what his father had done, fate decreed that he should learn to love them instead. You see, although his friend was a witch, her parents were Muggles, and they made a decision that still humbles me with its generosity." He stroked her hair gently. "They took that frightened little boy into their home and into their hearts. They loved him like a son. And, a year before he and his friend left for Hogwarts, they signed a document that made him legally their son, and his friend's sister."

"Of course," Narcissa breathed in wonder. "Regulus agreed to help you..."

"Because, by birth, I am half-blood," her love finished. "I hope you're not angry that I didn't tell you sooner."

"Allow me to repeat what I told your sister earlier." Narcissa turned her head on the pillow and kissed her husband on the chin. "Blood matters nothing to me now. My own family and the people they believe fit to associate with, purebloods all, treated me like a slave, a piece of property that they could dispose of as they saw fit. You and your friends, despite the occasional lack of propriety, treat me like an equal, a fellow human being. And I know which I prefer." She scooted up in the bed and kissed him again, taking a bit longer with it.

"Saying James and Sirius lack propriety is like saying the ocean lacks dryness," muttered Russ when his lips were free.

"Then we shall have to teach them. We, and Lily, and Remus. Does he have a girlfriend, or Sirius? They might be able to help."

"Strange you should mention it." Russ pulled the sheet up and over them. "Did you know you have a half-cousin in Hufflepuff?"

"No. Do I?"

"You do." He kissed the side of her head. "One of Orion Black's forays into the world of Muggle women left a souvenir behind. She's a fourth year now, her hair has a life of its own, and she seems interested in our Moony. And he seems interested back, for once. We should only have to lock them into three or four more closets before he gets the idea."

Narcissa laughed. "What about Sirius? Is he still kissing everything he can reach?"

"Yes, but this year he's doing it to get on his Beating partner's nerves, even if he doesn't know it himself." Russ slid his foot along Narcissa's bare leg. "I wonder why only James and I knew our own hearts?"

"I care less about why and more that you did," Narcissa cut in, and made sure Russ could not pick up the thread of the conversation in the traditional wifely manner. His response caused matters to escalate, and by the time either Evans was able to speak again, quite some time had passed.

"So?" Russ asked when they had their breath back. "Have I proved myself your husband yet?"

"Oh, certainly." Narcissa smiled into the darkness. "We may even have a physical expression of it. In nine months or so."

"Hmm." Russ caressed her cheek, stroking her jawline tenderly. "A boy first, do you think, or a girl?"

"Boy," said Narcissa decisively. "He will be beautiful, he will make trouble, and we will name him Daniel."

"Yes, dear," Russell murmured.

Life, Narcissa decided, was very good.

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