



illuminations de
noël
by femmequixotic

The streets have changed little in the past few years. The storefronts are different, I suppose, and traces of snow outline their windows at the moment, but the Société Générale Bank still dominates the corner, Muggles still crowd the kerb, and one of Paris's ubiquitous artists still kneels beneath the centaur, sketching its shadow onto the asphalt.

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Warnings: Semi-epilogue compliant

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Photo by Mr Atrocity

i.

This is the way my marriage ends: with two column inches in the society section of the *Daily Prophet*, tucked between an account of the Parkinsons' annual Christmas ball and the announcement of Percy Weasley's engagement to Audrey Trumble of the Leicestershire Trumbles (whomever the hell *they* might be).

"You're a fucking bastard," my wife snaps, throwing the traitorous paper at my head. It falls short—which only infuriates her more. The doors of her wardrobe slam open with a flick of her wand, shaking the photographs on the wall and sending a Dresden shepherdess on the bookshelf racing after her frightened china flock. Clothes fly across the room and land in piles on the rose-embroidered duiponi coverlet. A black silk stocking drops to the floor.

She's not wrong, I'll admit. There are a great many reasons for conferring bastardhood upon me, of that I'm quite aware. However, until now, none of them have affected my marriage.

Astoria shoves her favourite robe into a valise without her usual sartorial concern, her back to me. I (wisely, for once) refrain from pointing out that three hundred and twenty Galleons worth of French silk will be crumpled within moments. Instead, I choose to say, somewhat blankly, "I didn't know she was watching."

I pick up the fallen stocking. It's a sheer web against my fingers, fragile and delicate. I've become oddly accustomed to the trappings of femininity in the four years since our wedding day—a stray bra in my laundry, phials of perfume and other puzzling—yet pungent—philtres in our shared bath, a tube of lipstick left on a side table. There's a part of me that doesn't want to lose the familiarity of them.

"Draco." Astoria's shoulders slump; her head drops forward. A wisp of auburn hair, loose from the chignon at her nape, curls around her throat. I can see the faint smattering of freckles across her pale skin just above her collar. She takes a breath, exhales shakily. "You promised you wouldn't humiliate me."

Guilt washes over me. It's not an emotion I'm comfortable with. Our marriage has always been for convenience; I shared Astoria's bed long enough to get her pregnant as per our agreement, then I moved into my own suite across the hall. It's an arrangement that has worked well for us: I have the heir my father required of me, Astoria the social status her family craved, and, to our great surprise, we found that we actually enjoyed one another's company. My wife may not be the love of my life, but she is my dearest friend. Or was, at least.

"I didn't know," I say again, and the words are just empty as they sound. I should have known. I should have been careful. It was stupid to let Boot press me against the wall of the alley behind Quality Quidditch, to let him kiss me where anyone might see, much less that bitch Skeeter. A string of lovers on the side for years and one idiot moment of weakness ruins it all.

Astoria turns on me, her mouth a thin tight line. It's not my preferring men that upsets her, I know. She's been aware of that since before we took our vows. I'd no intention of saddling myself with a wife who would be horrified by the idea of me curved over the back of another man. But I'd promised discretion. I'd promised never to embarrass her, never to make my preferences obvious, despite them being an open secret among the circles in which we move. Society will turn a blind eye to that which it is allowed to ignore, we both know quite well.

I've never doubted that I was of a bent nature, not since the first time I coaxed Vince into sucking me off in fourth year. I like men; I like cock. I've no objection to women or to sleeping with them—I fathered my son the usual way, after all, and spent half of sixth year in Pansy Parkinson's knickers to Vince's dismay—but when it comes to sexual pleasure and interest, I'd rather there be a man in my bed.

"Seven owls I've had already this morning," Astoria says, and her blue eyes are bright. She blinks and looks away. "All kind and solicitous and terribly, terribly sorry, of course, about this horrid little *rumour* and all the while the only thing they want to know is whether or not I've known you've been out buggering."

I take a step towards her; she holds a hand up to stop me.

"It's not as if I want my intimacies splashed across the *Prophet*." Sullen petulance creeps into my voice, much to my annoyance. But *honestly*. She may be humiliated, but I'm the one who's been outed by that wretched cow. Beetle. Whatever. The point of the matter is that wizards of my sort—and witches as well—are looked at askance by our society. Even bloody Dumbledore was dead before anyone would speak of his lovers. I wrap my arms around myself with a shudder. All these years later and I still lose sleep over that night on the Astronomy Tower.

"Don't." Astoria closes the valise with a snap. "Don't you dare make me sorry for you, Draco. I'll hate you, and I don't want to."

The clock in the hallway chimes half-eleven. It echoes in the silence. Essy has Scorpius in the back garden, bundled to the nines, only his nose and eyes showing, most likely indulging in his favourite rainy day pastime of puddle jumping. He'll be hungry soon. I'm supposed to be at the Ministry this morning, working on the official response to the latest trade regulations on Gobstone manufacturers that the German del-

egation is sponsoring at the next magical trade summit, but I had Floo'd my assistant after breakfast to tell her I planned to work from home today. Antigone's response had been unsurprisingly subdued. She goes through all the papers before I arrive after all, setting the significant ones out on my desk for my perusal. I've been waiting for Shackbolt to owl, demanding my resignation on moral grounds. So far he hasn't. I'm not entirely certain that's a relief.

I lean against the bed post. The carving is rough against my fingertips as I trace mahogany curlicues and sheaves of rice. "What are you going to do?"

Astoria sits on the edge of the bed with a sigh. She stares blankly at the fireplace across the room. A small fire crackles in the hearth; late morning light gleams on the painted tiles beneath the mantel. Moss-green vines and pink roses twist their way around the fireplace and up the walls; a garland of evergreens and fairy lights is draped across the mantel. The bare trees and wet streets of Mayfair are a grey blur through the windowpanes.

"Go to my sister's for now, I suppose." She makes a face. Her relationship with her family is strained at best, and Daphne always had been a supercilious little bitch, even in school. Not to mention she's been furious for years that Father chose her younger sister over her to be my bride. I can only imagine the glee she'll have at Astoria's public humiliation. My stomach twists.

"You could stay here."

"No." Astoria plucks at the edge of her sleeve. Her nails are perfectly manicured. We're silent for a moment until she sighs and looks at me. "I don't think we can keep doing this, Draco. It's not fair to either of us." She gives me a faint smile. "I've always thought it was stupid of you to hide. You shouldn't have married me anyway. You cared for—"

"Astoria," I say, tightly, and she looks down at her hands. It's a subject not spoken of between us. I'd known my duty, and when my father summoned me back to London, the arrangements for my marriage made, I'd accepted it. I'm a Malfoy, first and foremost.

The fire pops.

"I'll want to see Scorpius, of course," she says finally. "I know the nuptial agreement gives you custodial rights, but he's my son—"

The mattress dips as I sit next to her. "Have your solicitors speak to mine." She nods and blinks quickly. Her eyelashes are wet. I run my hand through my hair. "I want Christmas. Mother, after all..." I trail off and Astoria nods again. We both know how my mother dotes on her only grandchild. "She'd be disappointed."

"New Year's then for me." Astoria brushes her knuckles across her eyes, laughing softly. "This is ridiculous." She sniffles. "I should be glad to be rid of you, you awful poof. The sex was wretched."

I slip an arm around her and pull her close. "You don't have to go," I say into her hair. She shakes her head, her palm against my chest.

"No one would believe us now," Astoria says into my shirt. "I'm tired, Draco. Perhaps it's selfish of me,

but I've no desire to spend years listening to them whisper about us—or watching them pity me."

I don't say anything.

Astoria pulls away and looks up at me. Her blue eyes are sad. "And I want to be loved. You can't give me that."

"I love you," I protest and she shakes her head.

"Not the same." Dark smudges beneath her eyes only accentuate her pale skin. She looks fragile, like a spun glass figurine that's been broken, then repaired back together. I don't know that I've ever noticed that. "You love me, but you're not *in* love with me. You can't be, and I accepted that before we stood in front of the vicar. But as much as I love you—and I do—this isn't enough for me now." She hesitates, then touches my cheek. Her fingertips are gentle. "Or for you."

I sigh. I know she's right, as much as it terrifies me. "Perhaps."

Astoria kisses me, a soft brush of her mouth over mine, and she steps back, suddenly awkward. "Essy will have Scorpius in shortly. I should lunch with him..." Her bottom lip trembles; she catches it between her teeth. She touches my arm and then she's gone, the door closing behind her.

This is the way my marriage ends: not in shouted words or angry recriminations, but with bittersweet sadness and a curious, guilt-ridden relief.



Mother is not best pleased.

She arrives at tea time, annoyed at being forced to leave the Manor midweek. Mother has no great love for London; since Father's death two years ago she's preferred the quiet of Wiltshire.

Her gloves are barely drawn off before she invokes him. "Your father would be furious with you."

It irritates me, as she knew it would. My entire damned life has been defined by Lucius Malfoy.

"Undoubtedly." I take her cloak and hat and hand them to Essy. Mother smooths her hair down.

Scorpius shoves between my legs, nearly throwing me off balance. "Nini!" he shouts in glee, reaching for Mother. She picks him up indulgently. One sock has been discarded God knows where—my only hope is that Essy can find it—and his shirt is untucked, the wrinkled white tail hanging out from beneath his rucked-up jumper. Nearly three now, he's reached a stage where clothes are the bane of his existence. I fully expect to see him wandering the townhouse in pants by evening.

Mother busses his cheek and carries him into the sitting room. One of the kitchen elves has set the tea tray up; steam curls from the Limoges teapot Aunt Andromeda gave us for our wedding. Sandwiches and scones are stacked around it.

"Pour," Mother says to me. "I have the distinct certainty tea is required for this discussion." She takes her favourite of the damask armchairs closest to the fireplace. The winter chill bothers her more now, seeps

into her joints and bones. Essy appears with a cashmere throw; Mother drapes it over her legs as Scorpius chatters in her ear about his puddle jumping experiences of the morning, his arms wrapped around her neck.

I pour the milk and tea into two teacups, adding a little of both into a saucer to cool for Scorpius. A sugar cube for Mother, two for me, and I hand her cup to her, then pour Scorpius's tea into a smaller teacup from the set I'd used as a child. Poking about with the tongs, I find a fragment of a cube in the sugar bowl—more than that and my son will be bouncing off the walls all damned night—and drop it into his tea. Scorpius squirms off Mother's lap with the *I want, please thank you* that I've expected. By the time he reaches my knee, I have his cup ready for him. He takes it in both hands carefully—he's been scolded more than once for shattering them—and sips, smacking his lips loudly.

Mother watches him over the rim of her teacup with far more amusement at his lack of manners than she had for mine at his age. I smooth my son's hair back from his pale forehead and wonder again if this overwhelming protectiveness that surges up in me every time I look at him is what my father felt when he saw me. I'm not entirely certain.

Scorpius hands the cup back to me; I give him a biscuit in exchange and he wanders off to lie beneath the Christmas tree in the corner. He's fascinated by the fairies sparkling in its branches and has spent hours since the elves decorated it stretched out under the thick green branches, staring up at the shining lights in delight.

"So." Mother sets her teacup aside. She crosses one leg over the other. "You've caused quite the little scandal today."

I settle back in my chair, suddenly exhausted. The milky Darjeeling is sweet-tart against my tongue. "It'll pass."

"Everything passes, Draco." Mother takes a watercress sandwich from the tray. She pulls the top layer of thinly sliced bread back and examines it with a frown before taking a bite. Mother has no great opinion of our elves' culinary skills. She chews slowly, finishing the sandwich before she speaks. "This is far from the worst the Malfoy family has experienced. However, I think it would be wise for you take an early holiday this year. Let the gossip die down."

I don't want to. I don't care what they're saying about me.

I set my teacup in its saucer. "Scorpius, no," I say just as my son reaches up into the tree to catch one of the fairies. He gives me a sullen glare, but he rolls on his stomach, his chin propped on his balled fists, his blond hair falling into his eyes. It needs cutting again—he looks like a girl, for Christ's sake—but I don't have the desire at the moment to engage in that particular battle. He kicks his feet against the Aubusson; his heel knocks against the side table and rocks it—which he damn well knows annoys me, the little brat. I catch it before the tea tray topples onto him. "I said, stop."

Scorpius sighs. The fairy flutters past him and perches on a branch just above his head, twinkling down at him tauntingly. Scorpius sticks his tongue out at her. She snaps her wings and stamps her tiny foot against the branch. Fir needles tumble down on his head. My son howls in frustration.

"Harry Potter's wife is close to birthing that new child of theirs," Mother muses.

I pull Scorpius away from the tree and into my lap.

"No." He kicks at me, sending his other sock sliding off his foot. When I don't release him, his fist smacks at my hand. "I say *no*, Papa."

I swear beneath my breath. I love my son. I do. But I haven't the patience for toddlerhood. Despite his struggles, I hold him tight, locked in the interminable battle of wills that defines father and son. His mouth puffs out at me; his eyes narrow. I'll lose. I always do.

Mother taps her finger against her lips. "Rumour has it that she should have begun labour last week."

There's no use asking how she knows. She just does. Scorpius squirms off my lap and crawls across the floor back to the tree. Fir needles stick out from his blond curls. I pretend I don't notice, glancing instead back at Mother. "I don't see what difference that makes."

"Really, Draco." Mother purses her mouth at me. "Once that happens it will be all anyone can talk about for weeks."

A flare of jealousy twists in my stomach. I loathe Potter and everything he's had handed to him. Saviour of the bloody Wizarding World, bah. You'd think the entire country's brains had fallen collectively out of their heads when it came to him. Every time I see him in the Ministry, followed by that cadre of pathetic hangers-on, I want to deck him.

I'm not that stupid, however. I know my place and what's best for my family. And antagonizing Potter's idiot coterie is beyond foolish.

"What do you suggest?" I can't keep the annoyance out of my voice. "Somehow I think demanding that Ginevra drop her whelp for our convenience is a bit much even for the Malfoy family."

"Go out of town for the fortnight. Or longer. I'll cancel my New Year's ball."

I sigh. "I don't want to spend the rest of December in Wiltshire, Mother." The Manor has held unpleasant memories for me since the war. I avoid it. Father had been beside himself when I'd left six months after Potter killed His Lordship. I've not returned since.

"Not the Manor. Paris." Mother meets my gaze evenly and I know exactly what she's suggesting.

"Absolutely not."

She hesitates. "I've already Floo'd him, Draco," she says softly.

For a moment I think I've misheard. Surely she wouldn't have...

I'm wrong.

"Severus agrees." Mother is careful not to look at me. I'm quite certain *that's* not what he had to say about the matter.

"No," I say flatly.

"You're being ridiculous." Mother's brow furrows, which tells me exactly how perturbed she is with me. Mother is terrified of wrinkles. "After Christmas, you'll come back—"

"I'm not going." I can feel my heart thudding in my chest. My hand shakes; I set my cup and saucer down. I haven't been to Paris since I left five years ago. I haven't seen Severus since he slammed our bedroom door on me and warded it shut, the bastard. As if it wasn't just as much his fault as mine that I was leaving. "I hate France."

Mother looks up at me. Her eyes are cool, but sympathetic. "You didn't when you were living there."

"That was different." I brush a lock of hair back from my face, tucking it behind one ear. Even if I wanted to—which I *don't*—I can't go back. Not after what he said to me before the door closed. He'd been so angry. *I'd* been so angry. I swore I'd never forgive him. Christ. This is utterly mad. "Mother—"

She catches my hand. "Go, Draco. Take Scorpius."

I see my escape. "Astoria would never let me—"

"Leave Astoria to me," Mother says calmly. "I can talk some sense into the girl."

Terrify her more likely. Astoria's always been a bit cowed by Mother—not that I fault her for that. The Black women are all a bit intimidating in their own manner. Or bloody off their nut, in the case of Aunt Bella.

"It's time you went back." Mother hesitates. Her fingers are warm against my wrist. She strokes her thumb in circles across my skin, the way she did to calm me when I was younger. "I always thought your father was wrong to make you come home," she says finally.

It's the only time I've ever heard her disagree with anything my father did. Even during the war she kept her opinions to herself. I'm surprised; I don't pull away.

"Severus was good for you." Her voice is quiet. "Even your father knew that. He just..." She sighs and her fingers slide from my wrist as she settles back into her chair. "I don't think Lucius ever knew what to do with your proclivities," she says after a moment.

"I know." I stand up and walk to the window. It's still misting outside, typical of December in London. A Muggle black cab rolls through the puddles on the street, sending a spray of water over the kerb. I'm comfortable here in this corner of Mayfair. It's familiar. Safe. Mother's right, though. I *was* happy in Paris. It's the only time in my life that I can remember being content, wandering through narrow stone streets and sitting at café tables, sharing a cup of chocolat and a cigarette with him.

With Severus.

Mother turns in her chair, her polished nails blood red against the cream damask upholstery. "As much as I love my grandson, your father was wrong."

A black umbrella bobs past the wrought iron fence outside the window. A gust of wind sends it back; I catch a glimpse of a pale cheek and angular jaw. It reminds me of Severus and my throat tightens. I've told myself for five years that I was right to leave him. That despite everything he'd done for me—with me—my family needed me more. Severus never needed anyone. He'd made that damned clear.

I feel as if the rug's been pulled from beneath me, and then Mother's hands close on my arms. I lean back against her, breathing in the rosewater perfume she favours. "He can't want me there," I say.

"No," Mother admits. Her mouth twists down. "But one can appeal to his reason and his loyalty."

Marvelous. Just what one wishes to hear regarding one's former lover.

"I'm not going," I say tightly and I step away.

"Draco," Mother says, with that tone in her voice that makes it quite clear that she disapproves of my decision.

"Come tell Nini goodbye." I hold a hand out to my son and he blinks at me before he pushes himself to his feet. His trousers are bunched around his hips. I look evenly at my mother. "She has to leave now."

With a sigh Mother scoops Scorpius up and kisses his temple. "Take care of your Papa," she whispers to him. He nods, finger in his mouth, eyes wide. I take him from her. Mother touches my cheek. "Think about going, Draco."

"There's no need." My throat aches. I don't even want to consider it. The last thing I want is Severus's pity.

Mother *hums* at me, but she draws on her gloves. We walk into the foyer and she stops, turning to me. "I'll see you both at Christmas then."

I nod, and Scorpius waves to her, shouting *bye, Nini* as Mother steps into the Floo. He wiggles down once the Floo rattles and Mother disappears—it still frightens him, the noise—and he races back into the sitting room, intent upon revenge on the damned fairies. I follow him slowly.

Mother's mad. I managed to survive the aftereffects of the war, managed to create a satisfactory life and a successful career despite the murmurs of *Death Eater* and *traitor* that I still overhear from time to time when passing through Ministry offices, the furious disdain of former Order members, the wary discomfort people exhibit when forced to work with me as if I might confront them mid-meeting with a *Cruciatius* curse. This can't be worse. Surely.

I'm an idiot.



Two days. That's how long I suffer through the sideways glances and the whispers that follow me through the Ministry corridors. There's been another item in the *Prophet* mentioning Astoria has moved out of our townhouse. My sex life and the dissolution of my marriage seem to be the topics du jour among wizarding society, which only serves to stir up the other rumours, the stories of my family's involvement with His

Lordship—from Grandfather Abraxas to myself—the old, vicious gossip about my parents' marriage, the stupid tales of my schoolboy rivalry with Potter, though now the speculation is that I secretly wanted him to shag me senseless in the Quidditch changing rooms. Please. I don't prefer to bottom, to begin with, and the Prefect's bath would have been far more comfortable.

It's Potter himself who puts me over the edge, stopping me in Shackbolt's outer office to put a hand on my arm and say, with a sympathetic smile that makes me want to hex boils onto his damned face, "They'll move on to the next gossip soon enough, Malfoy."

"Fuck you," I snap, jerking away from his touch. Potter's expression is priceless, all blinking eyes and open mouth. There's a quiet hiss from behind me, one of the assistants, no doubt, and I'm certain that my faux pas to the Chosen One will be spread across the Ministry before lunch, ensuring that I am locked into the state of social pariah for at least the next month or two. The thought enrages me. I'm tired of this. Tired of *them*. I turn, glaring at the faces surrounding me, ones that are watching me openly and ones that duck as I frown at them, hiding behind their pathetic little files and papers as if they weren't just muttering about me.

The words come before I can stop them. "Sod off—every last one of you, you cretinous lumps! You don't know *anything*—any of you—you're nothing but nasty little spiteful fucks—"

A door to my left opens and a calm *my office, Mr Malfoy* stops my tirade. Shackbolt crooks his finger at me, and, cheeks heated, spine stiff, I follow him. The door shuts behind us. Shackbolt raises his eyebrow.

"Would you care to explain why my staff deserved such a berating?" He takes his chair.

I stare down at his desk like a recalcitrant Hogwarts student called before the blasted Headmaster. Shackbolt's blotter is covered with a rainbow stack of goldenrod, pink and blue parchment. A week's worth of *Prophets* are stacked in the top corner. "No," I say after a moment.

Shackbolt just looks at me, his steepled fingers pressed to his mouth. "I see." He sighs and leans forward. "Malfoy, I think you should take a holiday. It's a week before Christmas; in a few days the Ministry will be closed as it is."

"And give them all the satisfaction?" My head snaps up; I meet his gaze. "Unless I've embarrassed the Ministry—"

"Don't be an idiot." Shackbolt slams a palm on his desk. The stack of papers tilts slightly. "I don't give a damn who you take to your bed as long as there's no suspicion of treason, and I rather think that Boot of all people would fall far from that category."

There's nothing more humiliating than having one's employer aware of one's sexual peccadilloes, I must say. I hope Rita Skeeter's fucking cunt shrivels up. Bitch.

Shackbolt sighs. "Go home. Take a holiday. I don't want to see you back until after Boxing Day, do I make myself clear?"

Perfectly. I nod, a curt dip of my head, and stand. "If you'll excuse me?" My hand is on the doorknob when he stops me.

"Draco."

I glance back. Shackbolt rubs his palm across the smooth shine of his bald pate. He looks as uncomfortable as I feel.

"Your position's not in danger," he says. "I want to make that perfectly clear."

My eyebrow arches. "Should I have thought it was?" I say evenly.

He eyes me for a moment. "Get out of my office, Malfoy," he says with the hint of a smile.

I leave before I hex him.



Photo by gilles paveau

ii.

I stand beside César's bizarre black metal *Centaure* in the Carrefour de la Croix Rouge on the edge of Paris's sixth arrondissement, Scorpius's hand tight in mine. Merlin knows my son would be more than happy to throw himself into the mad Muggle traffic zipping past.

Mother had been pleased when I'd Floo'd her, giving in. She'd make the arrangements, she said. I was responsible only for showing up on Severus's doorstep at half-three Thursday afternoon.

It's quarter 'til four.

Five roads meet here at this tiny crossroads in the Saint-Germain-des-Prés quarter—the Rue du Four, the Rue du Cherche-Midi, the Rue du Vieux Colombier, the Rue de Sèvres, and the Rue du Dragon. The latter two had always amused Severus—the absurdity of the juxtaposition had appealed to his dry, pointed sense of humour—and when he noted that it seemed an omen we should purchase the flat on Rue du Dragon near the Carrefour, there'd been no reason for me to argue with him.

The streets have changed little in the past few years. The storefronts are different, I suppose, and traces of snow outline their windows at the moment, but the Société Générale Bank still dominates the corner, Muggles still crowd the kerb, and one of Paris's ubiquitous artists still kneels beneath the centaur, sketching its shadow onto the asphalt.

For no reason but to amuse me, Severus once brought the statue to life early on a Sunday morning as we strolled back home from the boulangerie with our bags of raspberry almond tarts and the chocolate croissants that are Severus's weakness. No one had been about—dawn was the best time to arrive at the baker's,

sleepless and rumped from bed with mouths swollen from kisses, just as they pulled the first loaves from the ovens—and he had allowed the creature to gallop once around the crossroads, its iron hooves clattering against the street and causing lights to go on in a few windows around the plaza. All to see me smile.

The memory tightens my throat. I had come to Paris with Severus a year after the war ended. I would have done anything to escape England, and when Severus was released finally from hospital and informed Mother and Father that he intended to set up brewing on the Continent, I begged them—and him—to let me accompany him as his apprentice.

Severus had been reluctant of course. He valued his privacy and the last thing he wanted was to continue babysitting me, he made damned clear. Father, however, much to his later chagrin, coaxed him into agreeing, certain that time in Paris would cure me of my sullen apathy. Two weeks after my nineteenth birthday I'd Apparated to Paris beside Severus.

We hadn't become lovers immediately. God, no. Severus wasn't the sort to indulge in affairs with sulky teenagers, and while he was never adverse to the joy of being buggered, his preference was for women. Not that I knew that at first. I was an aberration for him, I would discover, one that he did his best to resist.

I can be quite convincing when I wish to be.

Scorpius tugs at my hand, and I look down. He's leaning to one side, one booted foot off the ground, swinging slightly, his mittened fingertips brushing the filthy asphalt.

"Don't," I say, and he straightens. The hood of his pea coat has fallen back, and the wind rumples the curls that peek from beneath his green knit cap.

I take a deep breath, and with a flick of my wand pausing traffic just long enough, I lead him across the intersection towards the Rue du Dragon. The street is narrow and small, stretching from the carrefour to the Boulevard Saint-Germain two blocks north. Shops and cafes line the street level; the buildings stretch up another four storeys, creamy limestone topped with grey zinc roofs. Wrought iron and stone window boxes edge the tall windows. They're bare now, but in warmer months I know they'll be filled with ivy and bougainvillea and geraniums. Muggle music drifts from the Café le Dragon down the street, a steady thrum of drums, guitars, and a cheerful duo half-singing, half-shouting about *le bonhomme derriere*.

Scorpius looks about with wide eyes. He's only been to Wiltshire and London in his few years. Neither is anything like Paris.

Christ, but I've missed it.

The door is hidden between Numbers 32 and 34. Muggles pass it without thought, without noticing the black wood arch and the gilt 32 ½ set into it. A shoe boutique is on one side, a housewares shop on the other. Two doors down is a carved stone sign reading *Victor Hugo habita cette maison en 1821*, which had delighted Severus. When I'd rolled my eyes he'd promptly gone out to the Muggle bookshop down the street and purchased copies of *Les Misérables* and *Notre-Dame de Paris*, tossing them at me on his return with the tart admonition to educate myself and polish my abominable French in the process.

I'd always hated Esméralda—she was too close to the perfection of Lily damned Evans for me. It's terribly difficult to compete with a dead woman, I've found.

"Papa," Scorpius says through the muffler I'd knotted around his neck this morning. His eyebrows draw together, his cheeks pinked with cold, and I pick him up. He pats my cheek with his small hand. The wool mittens are soft against my skin. The cuff of his coat is damp; he has a horrific habit of chewing on it when nervous. He hasn't cared for Astoria's absence. How does one explain to a three-year-old that his mother doesn't live with him any longer?

Warmth rushes over me as I step into the foyer, the familiar comfort of Severus's heating charms. Essy would have arrived earlier, Flooing over with our bags. Severus will be expecting us. We're late, after all, and he despises tardiness. I'm surprised he's not here waiting for us, arms crossed and scowling. I screw up my courage as I close the door.

The small foyer is neat and sparse, the black and white diamond tiled floor spotless. The walls are the same soft yellow that I remember. Scorpius stares in awe at the narrow curving staircase with its carved banister.

"Go up?" he asks and I nod.

The worn treads of the stairs creak beneath my feet. Up one flight then across the landing. The first two storeys are owned by Madame Cheval, who was older than God when we first arrived. I wonder if she's still alive, until I hear the yipping yaps of that horrible old Crup she adored. The damned thing was spoiled, fed on bits of raw liver and boiled chicken, and meaner, as Severus frequently pointed out, than the Dark Lord himself.

"Puppy!" Scorpius shouts in delight, which only urges the sodding creature into throwing himself at the door, rattling it as he scratches urgently at the wood, his frenetic yips growing louder and more frenzied. I'm half afraid he'll have a heart attack.

The door flies open and the Crup—a tiny mop of greying fur with demonically blazing eyes—dashes out only to be caught mid-air by an *Arrêté*. It struggles for a moment, still yelping, then hangs limply, with a baleful glare my way.

A small woman peers around the doorjamb, her silver hair curled perfectly, her face a crumple of tissue-paper wrinkles. Her blue eyes widen at the sight of me. She snaps her fingers, my name finally coming to her. "Monsieur Malfoy, oui?"

For a witch so old, she's a memory like a steel trap. "Madame Cheval." I tilt my head to her. Scorpius leans forward, trying to reach the still-dangling Crup; I pull him back up. "Stop."

Her gaze drifts to Scorpius. "Ton enfant?"

"Oui." I pull a handkerchief from my coat pocket and wipe Scorpius's runny nose. He twists away with a sharp *no*, batting at my hands and smearing snot across my wrist. I sigh. Toddlers can be revolting creatures at times.

Madame Cheval beams at Scorpius. "Un petit garçon si jolie." She narrows her eyes at me, then jerks her chin up. "You left him." It's perfectly clear to whom she's referring.

Christ. I don't want to have this conversation, and it's none of her damned business anyway. "Pardonne-moi." I edge towards the stairs.

Her mouth presses together, disappearing in the mass of wrinkles. She wraps her arms around the Crup, the charm releasing. The wretched beast bares its teeth at me and growls.

"Puppy, Papa," Scorpius says again, a gleam in his eye that I don't particularly care for. I am *not* purchasing a Crup for my son. Absolutely not. I loathe the creatures.

My foot's on the first step when Madame Cheval stops me.

"Now he scowls."

I look back at her. She scratches the Crup's ear; it curls against her chest, content. I don't have the heart to tell her Severus has always scowled. Or that he bloody well deserves to be miserable.

"You left," she says again, her English lilting. "And he scowls." She touches her finger to the side of her nose knowingly. "Réfléchissez-y."

The door closes on her.

"Nosy old bat," I mutter and I start up the last flight of steps.

Our flat—Severus's flat, I correct myself—occupies the top two storeys of the building. The hallway is narrow and dark, lit only by a flickering sconce next to the door and a small circular window, leaded and grimy. I knock once on the heavy walnut door, shifting Scorpius to my other hip. He's getting heavier, a fact which makes me curiously sad. As much as my son drives me mad at this age, I dislike the thought of him growing up. It won't be long before he'll have no need of me. I hate that.

Another knock, and the door swings open. Essy stands there, her eyes wide and ears trembling. I feel a twinge of pity for the elf. Severus has most likely terrified her. "Master Draco, sir," she whispers, looking nervously over her shoulder. "You is here."

My mouth tightens. "What did he say to you?"

Essy shakes her head wildly. "Essy is a bad elf. Bad—"

I catch her head before she slams it into the side of the door. "Professor Snape is not your Master, Essy."

She blinks up at me, twisting her long fingers in her tea towel. "But he is being master here—"

"You answer only to me," I say firmly, stepping into the foyer and closing the door behind me. I'll be damned if Severus is going to torment my elf. Scorpius pushes two fingers into his mouth and watches me, uncertain. Essy's self-punishments have always unsettled him.

Essy nods. "I is taking Master Scorpius?"

"Not yet." I walk into the sitting room and my breath catches. The room's barely changed since the last time I Floo'd out of the hearth. Two overstuffed armchairs and a long, wide sofa frame the fireplace. A gilt-edged mirror hangs over the mantel, reaching nearly to the moulding that rims the ceiling. Winter twilight filters through the French doors that lead onto a small balcony. We'd breakfast out there, looking out over the back garden. If you tilt your head a certain way, leaning out over the balcony to your left, you might catch a glimpse of the Eiffel Tower. Perhaps.

The cream and beige carpet is in need of a good beating, but I know it's a Savonnerie. I discovered it in an old Muggle shop in La Marais one rainy Saturday afternoon. Severus had rolled his eyes when I'd insisted on purchasing it, and the shopowner had insisted we'd not be able to carry it out. Severus had Obliviated him after I miniaturised the rug and tucked it into my pocket. I'd been terrified I might have ruined the pile when I'd re-enlarged it.

"Draco."

My heart stops. His voice is the same. Rougher than my school days, thanks to that damned snake and too many cigarettes, but still deep and resonant. I close my eyes for a moment and I'm fourteen again, standing in his classroom desperate for him to notice me.

"Papa," Scorpius whispers, and I open my eyes again. My son looks back over my shoulder. "Papa."

I turn.

Severus is...Severus. His hair is longer than it was when I left, with touches of grey at the temple, and he now sports spectacles, small oval lenses that perch uncertainly on the prominent arch of his nose. But the white shirt with sleeves rolled up to his elbows is one I bought for him, I'm certain, his black wool trousers are pristine as always, and his fingers are nicotine-stained from the Gauloises he chain-smokes while working.

A streak of ink is smeared across his cheek. He's been writing, and most likely without thought brushed a lock of hair back with the hand holding the quill. He always lost himself in his papers, ones that he'd published in journals on the Continent, in the Americas, in Australia. Never in Britain though. Severus had sworn after the war he would never step foot in his country of birth again. That he would never give anything back to the fools who had rejected him after all he'd done for them.

It's a bitterness I've understood all too well at times lately.

"The elf has put your valises in the downstairs guest room," Severus says. He doesn't quite look at me. Instead he watches Scorpius, his dark eyes fixed on my son. "He resembles you."

Scorpius buries his face in my neck, suddenly shy. Severus looks away.

"Yes," I say, at a loss. What does one say to one's former lover, after all? "I appreciate—"

Severus holds up his hand, stopping me. His fingers are ink-stained. He stares at the floor. "This is a courtesy for Narcissa's sake and for a few days only. Nothing more."

I nod. Of course. My throat tightens. A *miaow* catches my attention. A grey-and-white cat peers around the corner, larger and heavier than the kitten I remember.

"Dukas," I say in surprise and Scorpius lifts his head, watching the cat with interest.

Dukas twines through Severus's legs, his tail lashing as he eyes me. "Did you think I would toss him in the street?" Severus asks stiffly.

The thought hadn't crossed my mind. I'd left too quickly. "No," I say. For some damned reason the cat throws me more than anything. I'd found him abandoned in the alley behind our building, barely old enough to open his eyes. Though Severus had named him, Dukas had been my cat; Severus had disliked him, or had purported to, until I'd caught him in the kitchen late one night feeding the cat scraps of salmon he'd had the fishmonger set aside for him.

Taking Dukas with me hadn't been a possibility. I'd left everything behind that might have reminded me of Severus. I'd had to.

"How is the apothecary?" I ask. It's the only thing I can think to say, as ridiculous as it sounds.

"Adequate." Severus picks up the cat. Dukas stretches over his shoulder. I can hear his purr across the room. "Élise-Marie manages it well enough while I research."

"I see." A flare of jealousy twists through me. Élise-Marie had been the shopclerk when I was here and had made it quite obvious in a manner that had irritated me excessively that she found Severus attractive. Severus had always been a fool for red hair and a charming smile.

I don't bother wondering if he's slept with her again. The studious way he avoids my gaze makes it clear he has, and I tense. He knows bloody well how I felt about that little slut. How I feel. Christ, it's as if it were yesterday that he'd admitted fucking her—there's still a dent in the plaster wall behind him from where I'd thrown a silver candlestick at his head. We'd been fighting—so much of that last year we spent in screaming arguments—and he'd stayed at the apothecary in an attempt to avoid me. He hadn't come home, not until nearly dawn, and when he had, I could smell her on him still. I glance over at the sideboard. The candlestick sits on one end where it always has, its mate next to it, two half-melted candles in them. I feel strangely nauseous. He's probably brought her here. Fucked her on our couch—

"I've a paper to finish." Severus's voice jerks me back. He shifts from one foot to the other; Dukas's tail lashes across his chest. "I would appreciate not being disturbed by you or your..." He hesitates for a moment, and his mouth twists to one side in distaste. "...child."

"Certainly." I keep my voice even and polite. His attitude towards Scorpius annoys me, but this is his house, I remind myself, no longer mine, and he's every right to make that request. I'm all too damned aware of the awkwardness of our situation, and I'd rather not spend the next few days with him hovering either. This was a horrible idea. "I'll keep Scorpius quiet."

Severus nods and turns. He stops in the doorway, looking back. "Your elf may do as she wishes in the kitchen. I usually only prepare soup and bread for dinner."

"Thank you," I say, and then he's gone, and Dukas with him. Fucking bastard.

Scorpius puts his hand on my cheek, turning my face towards him. His brow is furrowed. "Papa, Mummy here?" he asks.

"No." I rub his back. I can feel the sharp juts of his shoulder blades beneath my palm. "No, Mummy's not here."

My son's face falls. His bottom lip trembles. "Want Mummy," he whispers and he slumps against my shoulder, his tears soaking into my robe.

"I know," I whisper into his hair, letting him cry. Severus be damned.

It's going to be a difficult Christmas.



Photo by CharlesFred

iii.

I barely see Severus the next few days. It's as if Scorpius and I've rented a flat of our own, though I can hear the floorboards above us creak as he moves about his workroom. Our only encounters have come at mealtimes, when Severus shuffles downstairs, eyes shadowed from too little sleep, hands streaked with ink or potions ingredients. He nods politely enough, saying nothing about the mess Scorpius makes at the kitchen table, though his mouth tightens. Severus has never been overly fond of small children.

My son watches him with wide eyes, sucking on his spoon. He's not certain what to make of Severus, I can tell, but he's not yet decided whether or not to dislike him. I understand the feeling.

Dukas, however, has taken to wandering the rooms downstairs, whether out of curiosity or because Severus has once again evicted him from his workroom I do not know. Scorpius has made friends with him, much to my surprise, and while the cat still eyes me warily, refusing to forgive me for the betrayal of my leaving, he submits with a loud purr to Scorpius carrying him through the flat, cocked over my son's arms at an angle that cannot in any fashion be comfortable for either of them given that the damned cat is nearly as big as Scorpius.

I take Scorpius out each day, wandering the streets of Paris for a few hours in an effort to distract him from his constant questions about Astoria's absence. Scorpius thinks it's quite great fun to help me pick presents for Mother, and when he is distracted by the plethora of toys spread across the shelves of Au Nain Bleu, I'm able to buy a set of marionettes and a glossy red and black sailboat with a crisp white canvas sail to put beneath the tree for him. Sometime before Christmas morning, I'll charm the puppets to dance and sing on command. Scorpius will be thrilled.

Tucked away in the stacks of a rare book shop on the fringes of the wizarding quarter—only accessible through a hidden doorway behind a cafe on Rue Mouffetard—I find a gift for Severus. I hesitate before purchasing it. I'm not certain what the etiquette is for buying Christmas gifts for one's ex-lover, but I suppose if nothing else, I could pass it off as a thank you for his hospitality (which frankly is a damned laughable concept when it comes to Severus who I'm quite aware has many virtues but *that* is not one he'd care to claim). It takes me only a moment's internal struggle before I hand the book to the shopclerk.

"You have interest in the Muggles?" he says, eyebrow raised

I shrug. This is a mad idea, I know. "Wrap it, please," I say and he nods.

Scorpius takes great delight in the enormous white Ferris wheel at Place Concorde that gives us a view of the Champs Elysees, demanding on each outing to make our way there, and I spend one enjoyable afternoon bringing to life the mannequins in the window arrangements of the shops that line the rue de Faubourg Saint Honore, much to the consternation of the passing Muggles and the giggles of my son. We make a habit of stopping for small cups of chocolat at Le Café de Flore, served by a smiling, pink-cheeked girl who teases Scorpius and smiles at me appreciatively, an open invitation in her eyes that for the briefest of moments I madly consider accepting, Muggle or not, girl or not. I'm surprisingly lonely.

After one of our forays we return with a tree and garlands and boxes from the wizarding quarter filled with sleepy fairies and glass globes charmed to hold snowy scenes. By the time Severus comes down for his soup at half-seven, the flat is filled with twinkling fairy light and the scent of evergreen boughs. He stops in the doorway of the sitting room, scowling at me.

"What the hell have you done?"

I finish hanging a stocking over the mantel before I turn. Scorpius lies curled on the sofa, Dukas stretched next to him. He rubs at his eyes and coughs. Too long out in the cold, I think, with a twinge of guilt.

"Tomorrow's Christmas Eve, Severus." A flick of my wand and the boxes stack themselves. "It should look like it."

Severus's mouth thins. "I don't care for Christmas."

"You once did." I send the boxes flying towards the understairs cupboard. They barely miss Severus.

"Only because you insisted that I should or you would make my life miserable for a damned month."

I snort. "Should I point out *you* dragged me to church every Christmas Eve?" It's an underhanded jab and I know it. Severus was raised Lancashire Catholic at the insistence of his father's mother, the only one of his Muggle relations he gave a damn for. He'd attended every Christmas Eve service with his adored Nan until she died just after his birthday during his fifth year. I wonder how many other people know that about him. It's a strange thought.

The muscle in his jaw twitches. "Take it down."

I ignore him and straighten a fir bough.

Scorpius coughs again, and he squints, shading his eyes. "Papa," he says pitifully. I pick him up, and he

lays his head on my shoulder. He's warm, slightly, a sure sign he's coming down with a cold. I rub at the nape of his neck, tracing small circles on his soft skin.

"This is my flat," Severus begins, and I cut him off.

"And this is my son." I splay my fingers across Scorpius's back. "The tree isn't to annoy you, Severus. It's for *him*. It's bad enough I can't explain to him where his mother is right now. I'm not ruining his Christmas because you've some bloody stick up your arse about me leaving you, as if you even *wanted* me to stay. You're the one that took that little bitch to our bed, after all." My mouth tightens; anger surges through me. I can't stop myself. "How many times has she been there since? Does she mind you calling her Lily?"

Severus steps back as if I've slapped him. We're silent a moment, staring bitterly at each other the way only old lovers can, before Severus says tightly, "Fuck you," and turns on his heel. Dukas follows him, tail bushy. I can hear him stomp up the steps, then the slam of his workroom door.

I have the distinct urge to slam my fist into something. I'll never be anything but a shadow of Lily fucking Evans to him. Irrationally, I blame this on Potter. "Fucking arse." I'm not sure which of them I'm referring to.

"Puckingarse," Scorpius mumbles into my jumper. He rubs at his eyes.

I sigh, tamping down my irritation. "Don't say that." Three years in and I've still not got the hang of fatherhood. "Let's give you a bath, shall we?"

Scorpius shakes his head weakly. "No bath."

It'll be a battle, as it always is. There've been more nights than not that I've resorted to a good Scourgify, much to Essy's horror. She's insisted that she be allowed to bathe Master Scorpius, but I won't let her. I was raised by elves and spent my life doing whatever was necessary just to catch my father's attention. I've no intention of my son going through the same.

The fairies go dark as I start down the hall, Scorpius kicking his feet limply at my hip, mumbling *no, no, no*.

His listlessness worries me, and my anger fades. Sod Élise-Marie and Lily Evans. My son is more important.



I'm not certain what wakes me.

I lie still for a moment, staring up at the ceiling. Shadows stretch unevenly across the white moulding; a faint light filters through the sheer curtains at the windows. I can hear the music from the bar down the block.

And then Scorpius draws a ragged breath next to me and I'm sitting up, reaching for him. He's hot—too hot—and when I roll him over, his face is pink and his hair is wet with sweat.

"Shit." I'm already stripping his clothes off and throwing them onto the floor. "Essy!" My shout doesn't wake him. Fear twists through me. This isn't like Scorpius. "Essy!"

The elf pops into the bedroom sleepily. "Essy is—"

"Go get Professor Snape," I snap at her. "*Now.*"

With a crack, she's gone, and I jerk Scorpius's socks off his feet. His skin is hot and flushed. I shouldn't have taken him out. I shouldn't have. It was too cold today; he'd been tired and listless at breakfast. I should have known—

The door slams open and Severus is there, still in his clothes. He hasn't yet been to sleep, I suspect. His glasses are slightly askew. "What's wrong with him?" he asks, but he's already taking Scorpius from me. He smells of cloves and cigarettes and strong tea.

"He's too hot." I stand up, entirely unconcerned that I'm wearing nothing but pyjama bottoms. "I thought it was just a cold—"

Severus taps his wand against Scorpius's forehead. "Just over forty degrees." He swears under his breath.

"What?" I stare at him. That's too high, I'm sure. My stomach twists. I can't do this. Astoria was the one who took care of Scorpius when he was ill. She knew what to do. I've no damned idea.

Severus doesn't wait for me; he starts down the hall, Scorpius draped in his arms. I follow him upstairs, into his workroom.

He's been living in here for quite a while. A bed is set in one corner, next to the window, and books are stacked five deep around it. Shelves filled with phials of ingredients take up two walls; his enormous worktable is covered with papers and bubbling cauldrons.

It reeks of boiled fish.

"Hold him," Severus says, shoving my son at me. I take him, feeling helpless, and Scorpius whimpers softly. He still hasn't opened his eyes.

"What's wrong with him?" I grip my son tighter. "Should we take him to hospital?"

"Don't be ridiculous." Severus is digging through a wooden box filled with phials. He pulls one out. "Sit him up."

I set Scorpius on the edge of the table, holding him up with one hand and the side of my body. His head lolls against my chest, curls falling into his face. Severus puts the phial to Scorpius's mouth, deftly tipping my son's head back so that the potion slides down his throat.

Scorpius coughs and turns into me. A bit of potion dribbles down his chin. Severus catches it with a fingertip and forces it back into Scorpius's mouth. "Make him swallow."

I press my fingertips into Scorpius's jaw, tilting it back. He swallows by reflex, screwing his face up. His eyelids flutter.

"What is that?" I ask, looking down at the empty phial.

Severus rolls his eyes. "Not poison if that's what you're inferring."

"I wasn't," I snap. I've no interest in his games at the moment. Scorpius lists against me. His skin burns against mine.

A long look and then Severus says, more gently, "It will help to reduce his fever." He puts the box of phials back on the shelf. "Essy!"

Essy is there immediately, bobbing her head, her eyebrows drawn together in worry. "Yes, Master Professor Snape?"

"A bowl of warm water, a flannel and a towel," Severus barks at her, and she hurries off. He glances at me. "You'll sponge him off to help bring his temperature down."

I nod and Severus turns back to his phials, studying them pensively. Essy's back with the bowl, which Severus takes from her, and she helps me spread the towel across Severus's bed. I lay Scorpius on it. He makes a soft noise and curls up on himself. Essy strokes his arm with her long fingers, whispering in his ear. It soothes him.

Severus tosses a handful of herbs into the water and brings it to me. I can smell lavender and rosemary. "Slowly," he says, "and if he begins shivering tell me."

Essy steps back as I dip the flannel in the warm water. She's uncertain, I can tell, and she curls her fingers into fists to keep from grabbing the cloth from my hands. I squeeze the excess water out before I drag the cloth across Scorpius's back. I move in careful, gentle strokes. "This isn't a cold."

"Obviously not." Severus sets out a phial. "He'll be fine," he says, catching my panicked look. "I've potions. The only concern is bringing his fever down to a reasonable level. Has he sicked up?"

"No."

Severus reaches for another phial and nods towards the bowl of water. "Keep sponging him."

I can feel the heat radiating off Scorpius. It nearly dries out the flannel. I wet it again.

For over an hour I bathe my son, Essy hovering anxiously. Severus gives Scorpius the two potions a half-hour apart, making certain he swallows both. Neither of us speak. I can't bear to see Scorpius like this. He barely moves, barely opens his eyes. I sit on the edge of the mattress; I've moved him to my lap. I'm hardly aware of Severus. All my attention is focused on my son. I rock him gently, singing his favourite lullabies to him the way Astoria always has when he's been ill, only I'm far more off-key. I wish she were here. She'd be better at this. She always was.

My pyjama bottoms are wet. I'm shivering. Severus drapes a blanket over my shoulders, and I only nod my thanks, well into the third round of *Lavender Blue*. If I can't have my wife at the moment, I'm glad he's with me. Despite everything that's happened between us, I trust him. I always will.

He doesn't leave. Instead he sends Essy off to the kitchen to make a pot of tea and sits with me quietly, a book in hand. He doesn't speak, doesn't take my attention from my son. I'm grateful.

When the fever breaks, I notice it first in the even breaths Scorpius takes, in the relaxing of his body against mine. Slowly his skin cools, enough that he doesn't feel like a furnace against my chest.

"Severus," I say, and he squats next to us. His fingers brush Scorpius's curls out of his eyes. Severus nods, giving me a faint smile. I catch his wrist. "Thank you."

He freezes, staring at me, and neither of us breathes. For one gloriously mad moment I think he's about to lean in and kiss me and *Christ*, how I want that. The realisation stuns me. Instead he pulls away and stands, tugging his dressing gown tighter around his chest.

"Sleep," he says roughly, and his hand presses against my shoulder for just a moment, pushing me back against his bed. "The both of you need it."

I don't argue, choosing to curl around Scorpius, my back to Severus. He settles the blanket around us. The bed smells like him, musky and musty with the faintest hint of the olive soap he favours. I close my eyes and take a deep breath.

He moves behind me. I can hear the clink of glass phials, the sweep of his sleeve across the wood table-top. It's oddly comforting.

I've missed this. Missed him.

I fall asleep, my son pressed against me.



Scorpius is snoring softly in that little-boy way of his when I wake. His forehead is still warm to the touch, and his cheeks are flushed, but he's nowhere near as hot as he was last night, and I desperately need to piss. I slide out of bed. He rolls into the centre of the mattress, pulling the coverlet with him.

I hide a smile.

The bath is down the hall. It's early still, judging from the greyness of the light that filters through the one window. I don't bother with a Lumos. I know the way.

I piss, then wash my hands, splash water on my face. I look in the mirror above the sink. I look like shit. Pale. Tired. Dark circles ring my eyes and my stubble has gone past the slightest possibility of being considered attractive, moving dangerously into the territory of scraggly beard. I've lost nearly half a stone in the past week. No wonder Severus is uncomfortable around me. Death looks better than I do.

With a frown at my reflection, I reach for the straight razor I know Severus keeps in the cabinet. A quick shave and shower leaves me feeling human again as I close the bathroom door behind me. A few steps down the hall and I notice the bedroom door is ajar. I pause in the doorway, hesitant. Severus is curled on the bed—our old bed—sleeping. He hasn't bothered sliding beneath the coverlet; his feet are bare, his knees curled up to his chest. He hasn't taken off his glasses. I can't stop myself from walking into the room, barely breathing lest I wake him.

The rug is soft against my toes. Severus shifts, and I stop, my heart pounding. There's dust on the dresser and on the edges of the wardrobe and the room smells musty, as if it's been shut off for some time. He doesn't live in this room, I realise, and the certainty of that nearly knocks me off my feet. I catch the bedpost.

He looks exhausted and worn; the years have been hard on him. I watch him sleep, watch the steady rise and fall of his shoulder. I can see the ridge of his spine beneath the stretched cotton of his white dress shirt, and I have the unsettling urge to place my hand on his back and feel the heat of his skin.

I'm still in love him.

The admission feels strange. Terrifying even. I've spent the past five years angry with him and with myself, desperate to believe that when I walked away from him, I left all these feelings behind.

Stupid of me.

I turn and flee, not bothering to close the door behind me. I don't stop until I'm back in the workroom, lying next to Scorpius. I can't think. I won't think. Thinking is a horrible idea. Shouldn't be done.

With a groan I roll over, pressing my face into the pillow. I can smell Severus and it makes me hard, which is utterly inappropriate when in bed with one's spawn. Scorpius stretches and mumbles in his sleep. I'm a wretched father. My son's ill, and I'm lying here remembering what it was like to curl up beside Severus, to touch him, to kiss him, to fuck—Christ. There's a special place in hell reserved for me.

It takes forever to fall back asleep.



Scorpius is gone when I wake up. I stretch. Essy must have him. There are clothes at the foot of the bed for me, and I dress slowly, savouring the familiarity of being surrounded by Severus's work.

I tuck my shirt into my trousers and button them, then slip my belt through the loops. Chopped hellebore and a bottle of newts' eyes are on one corner of the worktable next to a simmering cauldron. Steam curls towards the ceiling, disappearing into a Ventilation Charm. The eyes follow me as I edge around the table, trailing my fingertips over the wood. One of Severus's scales—the smaller one that I've always liked—toddles up, bumping against my hand. I rub it gently and it squeaks in delight, recognizing my touch.

The door creaks open and Dukas peers around the corner. He eyes me for a moment, then slips into the workroom, slowly heading towards me. I squat and hold out my hand. He hesitates, sniffs my palm, then miaows before deigning to allow me to pick him up. He's heavier than I remember, but he curls against me the way he used to, his whiskers trembling.

My throat tightens.

I shouldn't have left, I think. I'd been angry with Severus still, two months after it'd happened, and Father had insisted that I'd do my Malfoy duty, by Circe. I'd just not cared to argue with him, to tell him to sod off. I was hurt and bitter, and Severus had never said he loved me, not once. When I'd asked him if he did, he'd looked away. He couldn't love anyone, he said, and I knew he was right. No one would ever be equal to a dead woman, I'd realised that night. Severus could never let her go. Would never let her go. All I'd wanted to do was run.

I had.

My fingers smooth over Dukas's fur, pulling his ears back the way he likes. A soft purr rumbles through him that I can feel against my chest.

"Not angry with me any longer, are you?" I murmur. Dukas butts his head against my jaw; his tail lashes lightly. I'm fairly certain I'm forgiven. For now at least.

I head downstairs, studiously avoiding Severus's bedroom. It wouldn't have mattered, I realise as I step off the stairs. I can hear the steady cadence of Severus's voice in the sitting room.

He's in one of the armchairs, legs stretched out, feet propped upon a poufed ottoman, glasses slid down to the tip of his nose as he reads aloud the letters to the editor of the *International Journal of Rehabilitative Potionbrewing*. This does not surprise me that much; Severus has always considered it great amusement to mock his colleagues' research. What draws me up short is the sight of my son curled next to him sleepily, head against Severus's chest and thumb gripped firmly between his teeth. Astoria would be horrified. She's spent the past six months weaning him off thumb-sucking.

Dukas leaps down from my shoulder with a thump and a thud, shaking himself as he ambles to the tree. He sniffs at a bough, his whiskers trembling, then hisses as a fairy bops him in the nose.

Scorpius giggles; Severus breaks off mid-sentence and glares down at him. "Your attention, Mr Malfoy," he says and Scorpius reaches up and pats Severus's cheek with a wet hand.

I'm astounded when Severus doesn't protest, but rather snorts and turns the page in his journal. "Wretch," he mutters balefully.

"Is everything all right?" I ask, stepping into the room. It's the first they realize I'm there. Severus flushes and pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

"You shaved." He looks distinctly uncomfortable, much the way he did the first time I caught him wanking. I nearly laugh and almost expect him to throw Scorpius towards me. He doesn't.

"Yes." I can feel my cheeks warm.

Scorpius tries to stand up. "Papa!" He wobbles and Severus pulls him back down into his lap with a scowl.

"Sit, you horrible beast," he snaps. For a moment Scorpius looks as if he's about to protest but at a glare from Severus, he closes his mouth, his bottom lip protruding in a manner that I recognise all too well. Severus looks up at me. "It seemed beneficial to allow you to rest."

I lean against the sofa, utterly bemused. "Thank you." My son has given up struggling with Severus and instead is sprawled sulkily across his lap, much to Severus's quite evident discomfort. Scorpius's hair is mussed and his socked foot dangles over the arm of the chair, pyjamas sliding up one leg. He's gone back to chewing on his thumb. "Stop," I say to him, reaching over and pulling his hand down.

Scorpius smacks my fingers. "No, Papa," he says, obviously out of sorts. His thumb returns to his mouth.

"Children." Severus rolls his eyes and sits Scorpius up. My son looks daggers at him; Severus merely glowers back in a manner that would have sent Gryffindors fleeing. My son is most definitely *not* a Gryffindor. He purses his mouth. Severus's eyebrows draw together darkly.

Much to my surprise, given my experience with my son, in a rare flash of wisdom (or perhaps merely self-preservation) Scorpius gives up first, choosing instead to turn his attention to his socks. He tugs at the toe of one in what he thinks is a discreet manner; it slides down his ankle, exposing several inches of pale skin. Severus swats his hands away, which earns him another sullen scowl worthy of Severus himself in high dudgeon. I bite back a snort; I've never noticed how very alike the two of them are.

"He seems to be feeling better," I say.

"No fever, although he does appear to be producing copious amounts of nasal mucous." Severus wrinkles his nose in distaste. I sympathise. More than once I've ended up with toddler snot smeared across my sleeve. "Your mother Floo'd. She'll be arriving this evening."

"For what?" I'm surprised and somewhat annoyed. I don't particularly *want* Mother here.

Severus looks tired and drawn. He sets the *Journal* aside and rubs at his eyes. "It's Christmas Eve, or have you forgotten?"

"No." I've never lost track of Christmas. I enjoy presents too much. "I just assumed Mother would prefer to stay in Wiltshire as usual this year."

"I daresay she'd like to spend tomorrow with her son and grandchild, whether or not that desire is a ridiculous imposition upon me." Severus sounds resigned. We're silent for a moment. I pick up Scorpius; relief crosses Severus's face. A sock drifts to the floor.

I feel guilty. I hate that. "I could meet her at a hotel," I say finally. I don't particularly want to. I'd rather stay here for Christmas. Scorpius curls against me, warm and heavy, most likely spreading his plague. I'll need a dose of Pepperup to ward it off.

"Don't be an idiot." Severus doesn't look at me. "Ginevra Weasley's in St Mungo's," he says. He reaches for the *Journal*. "According to your mother, evidently the font of all useless knowledge, she was admitted this morning."

Of course. I curl my lip. "How very Potter. I do hope Ginny can hold the brat in until tomorrow. Barnabas Cuffe would piss his pants for that sort of Christmas miracle given the *Prophet's* circulation numbers."

Severus snorts in amusement; the smile he turns on me for a fraction of a second is wide and warm. I've missed that. *Merlin*. I want to slide into his lap, to turn his face towards me, and kiss that mouth....

He looks away, and his cheeks are flushed. He opens the *Journal*. "Sit," he says roughly. "You can keep me company until I leave for service."

"You're going then?" I take the chair across from him. Scorpius drapes himself over my lap, his thumb in between his teeth. I don't bother scolding him this time.

Severus nods. "Nan" is all he says. It's all he needs to.

I settle back into the chair. "Essy!" The elf pops into the sitting room, wiping her hands on her tea towel. "Two glasses and a bottle of the Chateau Lavabre for Professor Snape and myself."

"Drinking my wine now, are we?" Severus asks, peering at me over the rims of his glasses. He turns a page.

"It's Christmas." I smile at him. "Read the letters to the editor to me."

The fire pops and crackles. Severus's voice washes over me, velvet quiet, as I sip my wine, my son curled against my side.

I feel like I've come home.



When Mother arrives, I'm standing in the kitchen in front of the cooker, tea in hand, waiting for the kettle to whistle.

Severus just left for church; Scorpius is asleep on the sofa. Mother's heels click against the tiled floor. She wraps her arms around me and kisses my cheek.

"Hello, darling."

The kettle begins to tremble, then it bursts into a full rendition of *J'ai Du Bon Tabac*, steam bursting from its spout. Severus always did have a strange sense of humour. "Mother." I pull the kettle from the burner and pour it into a teacup. "Tea?"

"Please." She purses her mouth. "The elf should be doing this."

"I'd rather make my own." I measure the loose leaves into a strainer and drop it into the cup before I reach for another from the cabinet. "Severus says Potter's brat's about to be born?"

"Has been." Mother sits at the kitchen table. She looks strangely out of place. I don't think I've ever seen her in a kitchen before. She unwinds her scarf and unbuttons her coat. "A girl, from what I understand."

I shake my head and join her, tea in hand. I set her cup in front of her. "Did you bribe the Healers?" At her sideways look, I raise an eyebrow. "Mother."

"Information is power," Mother says primly. She takes a sip of tea. "Barnabas says she'll be heavily featured in the *Prophet* for the next week or so. I've encouraged him to send a photographer to hospital to capture some, shall we say, *candid* shots."

For a moment, I feel sorry for Potter. It passes. "You're incorrigible, you know."

Mother shrugs and sets her teacup down. "I'm practical."

"How much did you pay Cuffe?"

"Enough that I doubt you'll need to concern yourself with *Prophet* coverage of your personal intimacies again." Mother cuts off my protest. "It's only money, Draco."

I sigh. I know she's right. It's one of the few remaining benefits of being a Malfoy these days. "Thank you."

She nods and lifts her teacup to her mouth. "Astoria's asked about you."

"Is she still angry?" I run my thumb over the edge of my saucer.

"No." Mother looks at me over the rim of her cup before she lowers it. "Merely worried when I told her where you'd taken Scorpius."

I take a sip of tea. It's bittersweet. "Severus is surprisingly kind to him."

"That wasn't her worry." Mother rests her chin in her hand, watching me. "Or mine."

With a sigh I stare into my teacup, watching the milky swirls. "Why did you send me here?"

Mother doesn't answer at first. "I should think it would be obvious."

"Severus." I say his name dully, a curious ache twisting through me. I'm not sure what to do or what to feel. It'll be better when I leave, I'm certain. I'll be less confused.

I'm very good at lying to myself.

Mother looks up at me then, and her eyes are bright and angry. "You were happy with him, Draco. I know you were. I argued with your father for half a year not to do what he did. It was the worst thing for you—"

"Severus cheated on me." It still hurts to say it, after all these years. "That's why I agreed to get married." I sigh. "Mostly."

The silence stretches between us. I've shocked her. Nothing shocks Mother.

"I didn't know." Her voice is quiet. Subdued. I'd never told her. Never told anyone, save for Astoria. I hadn't wanted the pity.

"It's a long, dull story," I say. I run my hand through my hair, pushing it back off my forehead. "It happened; he told me; I used the first excuse I had to walk away."

Mother doesn't say anything for a moment, then she touches my arm. "I thought about leaving your father once." She stares off into the distance.

I'm not surprised by this. Father had been discreet with his affairs, but even as a boy I wasn't stupid. Perhaps that's why I'd been so angry with Severus. I'd seen what Father had done to Mother, and I hated it.

My hypocrisy as of late is not lost on me.

"Why didn't you?" I ask.

Mother shrugs one shoulder. "For all his faults and as much as I disagreed with him at times, I loved Lucius, probably far too much for my own good." She smiles faintly. "Bella always told me I was a complete fool. Perhaps she was right."

I twist my teacup on the saucer. "I think," I begin, and then I break off, frowning into my tea. Mother just watches me, and I take a deep breath. "I think I'm still in love with him." I don't look up at her. "I don't particularly like that."

"Anyone who enjoys being in love is an idiot," Mother says calmly. "Love is mad and certain to lead to utter heartbreak."

"Is this meant to be encouraging?" I lean back in my chair, stretching my legs out. I'm tired. Confused.

Mother just smiles.



Photo by gilles paveau

iv.

I wait on the steps of Saint-Germain-des-Prés. It's cold, despite the warming charm I've cast, and I shove my hands in my coat pockets. The book I purchased for Severus is tucked deep within one; I brush my gloved fingertips against it and the wrapping crinkles. The sky is black, and a few bright stars shine through the orange-gold glow of Parisian lights.

The bells begin to peal above me; the doors are thrown open, and Muggles spill from out of the church, laughing and wishing one another a joyeux Noël.

I almost miss him in the rush. "Severus," I call out, pushing past the Muggles, and he turns, brow furrowed until he sees me. His face softens.

"What are you doing here?" He tenses. "Scorpius—"

"Is with Mother." I smile up at him. "Do you mind terribly if I sleep on the sofa tonight? I think she's probably taken my son and a bottle of wine to bed by now."

Severus walks down the steps. I follow. "I suppose if you must." He turns right on the Boulevard Saint Germain, back towards the flat, and I catch his arm. He stops, eyebrow raised.

"I thought..." I hesitate, suddenly ridiculously nervous. "Perhaps we could walk? The Seine's not far..." I trail off. I can see my breath in the darkness.

He just looks at me for a long moment, his face unreadable, and my heart thuds dully against my chest. He'll say no, I know he will. He'd be mad not to.

"All right," Severus says, and I stare at him like a bloody fool.

"All right," I repeat. The Quai Malaquais along the Seine is only a few blocks up Rue Bonaparte, just past L'Ecole Nationale des Beaux Arts.

We're silent at first, walking together, and I'm certain this is one of the worst decisions I've made. I should know better than to listen to Mother. She's nearly as mad as Father had been, although I will admit her schemes generally have nothing to do with self-aggrandising overlords off their bloody nut, which is a relief.

"It's cold," I say after a while, and Severus gives me a sideways glance. "What?"

He snorts. "Weather. You've nothing to speak to me about other than the weather."

I can feel my face heat up. "You're not speaking of anything at all."

"No." He pulls a pack of Gauloises from his pocket and lights one with the tip of his wand. Acrid smoke drifts from the orange-red cigarette tip. I've forgotten how awful they smell, and how much they remind me of Severus. He offers me one; I shake my head.

Severus inhales, then blows a stream of grey smoke towards me. "What do you want to talk about?"

Annoyance bubbles up in me. "Oh, I don't know. Perhaps the fact that we once spent two years fucking might be a start."

"Perhaps." Severus sighs. He looks at me. "You left."

I wrap my arms around myself. The cold stings my cheeks. "You fucked someone else."

He doesn't say anything, merely takes another drag off his cigarette. His glasses have slid to the end of his nose. "Yes," he says finally.

"Why?" I ask quietly. It's the one thing I'd never wanted to know before. "Were you that unhappy?"

We've reached the quai. The Seine laps at the stones; we turn towards Pont du Carroussel. Hardly anyone's walking along the river. It's too late and too cold. Severus drops his cigarette onto the cobblestones, grinding it with his heel. "I wasn't unhappy," he says.

It's not an answer. I just look at him.

He stops, staring out across the Seine to the Right Bank. He shoves his hands in his pockets. "You disconcert me," he says after a moment, his voice low. "If it had just been sex..." He trails off.

"It wasn't?"

Severus eyes me. "You're an idiot."

I'm not sure what to make of that, but I think I like it. "What was it then?"

A Muggle boy whizzes by, bent over the handlebars of a bicycle. He doesn't notice us. Severus sits on a bench, his elbows on his knees. "I don't know." The wind ruffles his hair. I can see a streak of grey. "You have a rather disturbing way of worming beneath my skin."

I sit next to him. It's quiet here; in the distance I can hear the horns of Muggle cars. "Severus," I begin, but I stop when he looks at me. His eyes are dark behind his glasses.

"You shouldn't have left."

The riverwater splashes against the quai. "I was so angry at you," I murmur. I don't look at him. I can't. Instead, I rub my thumb across the back of my glove. "Was it because she looked like Potter's mother?"

Severus doesn't answer. He pulls out another cigarette and lights it, then stares out over the Seine. Smoke curls from the end of the cigarette, disappearing into the dark sky. "Somewhat. Not entirely."

I pull one foot onto the bench, wrapping my arms around my leg. I feel so damned young and so damned old at the same time. "Living up to her memory is impossible." My mouth twists to one side, bitterness washing over me. "You've made her into this...this...*goddess*—" I break off. I *loathe* this. "I hate you sometimes."

"I know." Severus rolls the cigarette between his fingers. Ash scatters off the end, twisting in the wind. I press my forehead to my knee. "I made a mistake," he says after a moment.

The wool of my trousers is rough against my skin. I sigh, and my breath's warm and damp. "I left because I knew I couldn't ever be Lily Evans," I say into my knee. I lift my head; he's looking at me. "I don't want to be."

"I never asked that of you." His mouth is a tight line. The wind whips his hair into his face; he brushes it back, annoyed.

I shrug. "Not in so many words."

We fall silent. Severus takes another drag off his cigarette. He blows the smoke into the wind. I put my foot down, lean forward, my hands clasped between my knees.

"Have you slept with Élise-Marie since?" I ask, not looking at him. I drag the toe of my boot across the cobblestones. I can't stand the sound of her name.

"Once," he admits slowly. "A few weeks after you left." My stomach twists. He sighs and drops the cigarette to the ground between us. It's only half-burned. He catches my chin, turns my face towards him. "I was angry too."

I can't breathe. I'm not sure I want to, but then Severus drops his hand, pulls away. He wraps his arms around himself, shoulders hunched. "We should go back to the flat. Your mother will worry."

She won't. She's the one who sent me out here on this fool's errand after all. *Talk to him, Draco*, she'd said. *If I know the both of you, you've done nothing but scream at each other over this, which, frankly, doesn't do the slightest bit of good.*

The wind picks up again. It's growing colder. "How did we get here?" I ask, voice low. The ends of my hair catch on the corner of my mouth. I brush them away. "We were happy for a while."

"We were." Severus tilts his head back. The light from the streetlamp above us casts long shadows across his face. He runs a hand through his hair. "We argued a great deal." He snorts. "You always were a self-centred little brat."

"And you were a cantankerous old bastard." I glare at him sideways, and he laughs.

"I still am." His smile fades. "Perhaps I expected too much from you. You were barely more than a boy."

I know he's right. It still stings. "I'm not a boy, Severus. Not any longer."

He brushes a wisp of hair from my face. His gloves are soft against my skin. "No. I suppose you're not."

We stare at each other, and I'm almost certain he's going to lean in, that his mouth will press against mine, that I want—

Church bells ring out midnight, echoing across the quiet streets. We jerk back, the moment broken. Severus's cheeks are flushed, whether from the cold or embarrassment, I'm not certain. To cover my confusion, I reach into my pocket and pull out his present. The bow's crushed now. I hand it to him. "Happy Christmas."

Severus just looks at me before he takes it. "I didn't..." He trails off, holding the gift in his hand.

"Oh, just open it." For the first time in my life I don't give a damn about getting a present in return. I want to go back to the flat and curl up on the sofa beneath a blanket. This conversation has exhausted me.

He unwraps it in that Severus way of his, neatly and precisely, folding the paper back. He stares down at the book. Imprinted on the cover in fading gilt letters is *Les Misérables*. It's a French edition, first printing.

"You were always Jean Valjean to me," I say softly, my eyes fixed on his face.

Severus turns the book in his hands. "And you're Marius?"

"Perhaps without Cosette." I smile faintly. I stand. "It's late. We should go."

He stands, catches my hand. "Draco." His voice is thick and raw. "I..." And then he pulls me to him, his other hand cupping my face, the book pressed to my cheek. "Draco," he says again, his eyes dark.

When he kisses me, I grab him, my hands tight on his arms. His mouth is soft and warm, and he tastes of cigarettes.

I never want this to stop.

His glasses scrape my skin; his mouth opens to mine, our tongues pressing together. He moves his hands. The book presses into my back now, and his other fingers twist in my hair, pulling my head back so that he can slide his mouth across my jaw.

I want him. I turn my head, catch his lips with mine again. I love kissing Severus; I've always loved it. My toes curl in my boots, and I press against him, not bothering to hide the fact that he's making me hard.

"Fuck," he says into my mouth. His hand is on my hip, then my arse, pulling me closer, rocking his thigh against my prick. I pull my mouth away, taking a ragged, gasping breath.

"Home" is all I can get out before he's kissing me again, desperately, eagerly. I wrap my arms around his neck, bite his bottom lip. He groans.

We Apparate.



The flat is quiet, the lights dim.

Severus kisses me the entire way up the stairs, pausing to press me against the wall, his hands pushing my coat open. He pulls his gloves off, drops them on the step.

"Severus," I say breathlessly, but he cuts me off with another kiss, harder this time, his tongue sliding against mine. I tangle my fingers in his hair. We stumble and end up sprawled across the top steps, but it doesn't stop him from working his fingers through the gaps between my shirt buttons.

His touch sends shivers through me. It's been too long, and I want him—Christ, how I want him. I drag my mouth down his jaw, my gloved hands pulling at his coat, his shirt.

My fingers brush the twist of scar tissue across his neck. I pull back and tug my gloves off with my teeth before tossing them aside. I want to feel his skin. The scar is raised and pink; it shines in the faint light. I stroke it gently. Severus looks down at me, his glasses askew, one knee on the step below me, the other between my thighs. I can feel his prick hard against my leg.

He might have died that night. Only forethought and potions taken in advance of his encounter with that damned snake had kept him alive. Well. That and Potter for once having the presence of mind to send someone after him. He'd barely been breathing when they'd found him, but it'd been enough.

Nearly a year he'd spent in St Mungo's recuperating, and even then there were whispers that he'd be tried for war crimes. They've never forgiven him Dumbledore's murder.

I trace the outline of the scar. "I've missed you," I whisper, and then I press my lips to his neck. I can feel him tremble above me.

He kisses me again. I love the way he tastes, bitter and sour and sweet all at once. My cock aches, and I twist beneath him. The steps bite into my shoulders and hips. I don't care at the moment. I just want to get closer to him.

I groan softly when his hand slides down. He cups my cock through my trousers, squeezing. It feels incredible. No one's ever touched me the way Severus has. And then my trousers are open and he slides down, his eyes on my face. His mouth closes around the head of my prick and I gasp, grabbing at his hair. My fingers twist through the lank locks, tight and tense. I want to push up; I want to fuck his throat.

Instead I tug him up. His mouth pulls away with a slick pop. "Mother," I manage to get out, and he blinks slowly before he realises what I mean.

He stands, his unbuttoned coat twisting to one side. His trousers are tented, and—Mother be damned—before I can stop myself, I push him against the banister and jerk them open.

"Draco," he says roughly, and I know how mad this is but I want to taste him, for Christ's sake and I don't fucking *care*. He grabs the banister, leaning backwards as I suck him, my tongue curling beneath his foreskin, pushing it back, lapping lightly at the head. I grab his hip with one hand; the other I use to steady myself as I lean to one side, tilting my head to suck his balls.

Salty. Musky. Severus tastes like everything I've remembered about him and it drives me mad. My prick presses against the wool runner on the stairs. It hurts, but I don't mind. The pain feels strangely good.

And then Severus's hand is in my hair and he's pulling me to my feet. He kisses me, and I know he can taste himself on my tongue. He likes that. He's always liked that; he delighted in kissing me after he'd come in my mouth. That thought turns me on more. Severus pulls back, his eyes bright and hot.

"Bedroom," he says breathlessly, and I nod.

Somehow we make our way down the hall and into the bedroom. The only light comes from the window near the bed. Severus kicks the door shut behind us, and he's already got my coat on the floor and my shirt off one arm before I can step back.

He looks at me, breathing hard. His prick bobs from his half-open trousers. I pluck his glasses from his face and set them on the side table next to the bed. I sit on the edge of the mattress; it dips beneath my weight.

"Strip," I say. He doesn't look away. He slides out of his coat; it falls to the floor. His coat follows, and then his shirt. I can't take my eyes off him. His chest is still thin, nearly concave, and faint scars cross his skin. His nipples are hard and brown and it's all I can do not to take them in my mouth and suck.

"Trousers too."

He pushes them down slowly, kicks them off. His pants follow. It's a curious dynamic, our relationship. It always has been. Outside of the bedroom Severus is assertive to the point of overbearing. Here, though...I shiver. Here he cedes control. He prefers to, and it had disconcerted me the first time I'd fucked him. In time, though, I'd grown to understand the relief he felt at having one place, one private, intimate quarter of his life where he could relax his restraint. Where he could be free.

There are moments that I wonder if I hadn't pursued him, if I hadn't made my seduction perfectly clear if I ever would have ended up in bed with him. I don't think I would have.

I stand up and walk towards him. He doesn't move; he just watches me. I run my hand down his chest. He closes his eyes. Severus loves to be touched. No one knows this but me. He'd been touched so seldom in his life after his mother's death. There'd been Lily Evans, of course, to whom he'd lost his virginity, and Mulciber after that, and then a handful of Knockturn whores.

No one's touched him like I have though.

I drag a thumbnail over his nipple. His cock jerks. He's beautiful, I think. I don't care what anyone else thinks. I lean forward and kiss his nipple, licking at it lightly. Severus hisses. He catches my shoulders.

When I pull away, he opens his eyes. He licks his bottom lip. "I—"

"Lube?" I push my trousers off. He stares at my cock, then motions towards the side table. I open the drawer and pull out a phial, raising one eyebrow. "You've been entertaining?"

Severus snorts. "Wanking." He pulls me onto the bed with him. "I'm fairly certain that's been there for a while, though."

I love the way he feels against me. His skin is warm; his long body wraps around me. I slick my fingers with the oil. "No handsome boys sharing your bed?"

He grunts when I stroke my fingertips across his hole. His thighs open wider. "Only a dildo from time to time."

That sends a shudder of want through me. My breath catches. "Oh."

Severus looks pleased at my reaction. "Indeed." He lifts his hips, impatient. "Well?" I press a finger into him. He relaxes into the pillows. "Better."

I do my best not to roll my eyes. He'd always been rather demanding in bed. Instead, I twist my finger slightly, watching his eyes widen as it slips in further.

"Another," he says, with a soft gasp. I slide another finger into him. He's tight, tighter than I remember. My hips jerk slightly. I want to bury my cock inside of him. I fuck him slowly with my fingers, twisting and pressing and watching him arch against my hand. He loves this, loves having fingers inside of him. My hips buck forward again; my cock's damp. It's been too damn long.

I pull my hand away, and he frowns. "I'm not ready—"

"You are." I press the head of my prick against him. He'd let me finger him for hours if he had his druthers, and I damn well know it. "I have to," I say, and the whine in my voice makes me flush. I need to be inside of him. Now.

Severus curls his hand around the back of my neck, pulling me down into a rough kiss. "Fuck me then," he says against my mouth, and I push forward, sliding into him slowly.

Merlin, it's nearly my undoing.

I grasp his hips with one hand, holding myself up with the other. "Severus," I say, and he pushes against me. I groan.

We fuck in quick, rough thrusts, moving against each other. Sex with Severus is not passive. It never has been. He meets each stroke of my hips with his own; our breaths come in ragged gasps, cut short only by eager, anxious kisses.

I love the way he feels against me; I love that he arches against my body; I love that he bites my shoulder, drags his fingernails down my back. I love the press of his prick against my stomach, the way he groans when my fingers curl around it, twist up the shaft, over the slick head. I love the *please* that he whispers into my hair; I love the slide of skin against skin, the slap of my balls against his arse.

I turn my head, trail my mouth along his cheek as I fuck him. His legs are spread wide; he writhes beneath me, pressing up into each thrust. His skin is flushed, damp with sweat. His hair sticks to one cheek. I fist his cock, the slick head slipping through my fingers, and he's close, I can tell by his sharp, short pants.

"Draco," he groans, and he presses his shoulders into the mattress, twists his fingers in the coverlet. He catches his bottom lip between his teeth. One hand slams against the headboard. "Harder."

I raise up, watching as my cock disappears into his arse. My fingers curl tighter around his cock. He twists his hips; his brow furrows.

"God, I love you," I whisper, and the words come out before I can stop them. His eyes widen; he stares at me, and I wish I could take them back, but I can't, I won't—

He bucks up with a cry, and he comes, sticky-hot over my hand. I smear it over the head of his cock, down his shaft, rubbing it into the crisp black curls at the base before he jerks me down to kiss me.

"Fuck me," he grits out, his teeth rough against my lips, and I slam into him, lifting his arse off the bed. He cries out again, pressing down against my thrust, tightening his arse. My eyes nearly roll back into my head. I catch myself, one hand on either side of his shoulders, and I fuck him faster, not caring about anything but the ache building in me.

I come hard, crying out his name, and his hands are on my hips, pulling me against him. He wraps one leg around my arse, holding me still as I jerk against him, eyes wide. I collapse on him, shaking.

Nothing's felt this fucking amazing for years. *Nothing*.

We lie silent for a moment, breathing hard. I can hear the thrum of his heart as it slows, steadies. His hand strokes down my back, then back up, tangling in my hair.

"I think we should do that again," he murmurs finally.

I laugh. "I wouldn't object." I lift my head and smile down at him. "Think you have it in you, old man?"

Severus growls and rolls me over, his hands tight on my wrists. My cock slides out of his arse, slick and warm. "Old?" He slides down me, stopping to lick streaks of his come off my belly. I shiver.

"Aging?"

He smacks my hip, then leans up to kiss me. I slide my arms around his neck, my hands in his hair.

Neither of us mention my faux pas.



Photo by mindtalk

V.

I wake happy. It's Christmas morning and I'm lying in bed with Severus—in *our* bed, my God—and what could be better? I roll over, eager to kiss him, to wish him Happy Christmas, and my throat tightens.

He's not there.

I roll out of bed, pulling on my trousers He's not in the workroom, not in the bath, not in the kitchen.

His coat is gone. There's a note on the hearth.

Mother finds me in the sitting room, still holding it. The room is dark save for the sleepy twinkling of the fairies on the tree and the pale early morning light that filters greyly through the curtains. She takes the note from me and reads it.

"Oh, Draco," she says, and it's the sympathy in her voice that's nearly my undoing.

"I want to go to Wiltshire," I say, throat aching. My voice is strained.

She nods and pulls me closer.

I want to go home.



The Manor isn't as awful as I've found it in the past. Perhaps I've grown up a bit, perhaps it's just the years that have passed.

Scorpius is happy here, with the wide halls that he can run down, and the elves that delight in being terrorised. The Crup I gave him on Boxing Day bounces after him, his forked tail wagging. Scorpius, for some unfathomable reason, has decided to name him Jack. Essy follows behind them both, cloth in hand for whenever the horrid creature pisses on an Aubusson. I don't think she'll ever forgive me. Each time the beast yelps, I'm fairly certain *I'll* never forgive me.

I spend my days in Father's library, talking to his portrait. It's not like having him about; his portrait is a pale ghost of the man he was. But it's something, and I realise I've missed him.

Astoria comes mid-week to pick up Scorpius and take him (and the damned Crup, thank God) to stay with her for a few days. He flies into her arms in delight, kissing her profusely, and she holds him close, whispering in his ear. When she finally looks at me, she touches my arm lightly.

"You look like hell," she says and I shrug. "Was he truly that terrible?"

She's not referring to Scorpius, I know.

I hesitate. "No," I say finally. "Perhaps that's the problem."

She kisses my cheek.

It doesn't make me feel better.



"Bollocks society," Mother says, slicing into her salmon. It's one of the few times I've ever heard her use a vulgarism. It surprises me.

We're at dinner in the Manor's small dining room that could still comfortably seat fifteen. Mother sits across from me. Father's seat at the head of the table is empty as always, and it's far too quiet with Scorpius gone. Less than a day and I'm ready for him to come home.

I set my fork and knife down. "Not that I disagree, but why?"

She dabs at her mouth with a damask napkin and looks at me evenly. "I'm having my New Year's ball. Smaller and more intimate, of course. There's no time for anything grand."

My stomach tightens. "Mother."

"I won't have you hiding out here, licking your wounds," she says firmly. "For them or for Severus, fool that he is. You're a Malfoy, Draco, and we're going to start acting like you are, the both of us. I'm throwing the ball. Let them come and whisper if they must. At least we'll meet them, heads high. It's what your father would have insisted upon."

She's right. I know it. It's the best way to handle the situation. I hesitate.

Mother touches my hand. "Don't let him do this to you," she says softly.

"All right," I say with a sigh.

I absolutely hate the idea.



Small and intimate in Mother's terminology means throwing the Manor open to two hundred of society's elite. Thank God Potter declines, citing a need to stay home with his recuperating wife, though I suspect it has more to do with my telling the tosser to fuck off in public. Mother just sniffs and tosses his note aside. It's another mark in her book against the Chosen One.

They begin arriving at half-eight, filling the ballroom. Mother's had the elves working for the past two days, and the room is draped with evergreen boughs and shimmering fairy lights. The Christmas tree has been moved from the front sitting room into the corner of the ballroom. Snow falls from the ceiling, settling in drifts around the walls, leaving the parquet floor bare.

Mother plays her role as social butterfly to perfection, as much as I know she despises it. She flits from group to group, at times dragging me with her when she deems certain individuals important enough for me to make a proper impression upon them.

The stiffness I'm greeted with at first soon thaws under Mother's gentle pressure. Astoria joins us, and as society sees us together, laughing and smiling, the faint undercurrent of tense curiosity begins to fade. When the conversation turns towards Potter's new daughter, Mother just looks at me pointedly and smiles.

Pansy Parkinson (now Zabini) walks up to me, her hand held out. "Dance with me, Draco?"

I curl my fingers around hers and lead her to the floor. We're silent at first as we waltz. I've never been brilliant at dancing; it always takes me a moment or two to catch the proper rhythm.

"You caused a bit of a stir." Pansy smiles up at me. Her glossy black hair swings back as I turn her. Large diamond drops sparkle at her ears. I haven't seen them before. Zabini must be doing well at Gringotts. Or Pansy caught him fucking his assistant again.

"Yes." I place my hand back on her waist. "Not intentionally."

"I know." She looks at me, her green eyes speculative. "You're sad."

I shrug, and lead her through a throng of waltzing couples which is far more treacherous than one might think. Old Pilliwinkle nearly knocks me over. Pansy catches me before I stumble into her.

She studies me. "Tell me you're not mooning over Boot."

"Don't be ridiculous." I give her a sharp look.

Her brow draws together. "If not him, then who? It's obviously not that wife of yours." Pansy has always disliked Astoria, deeming her not good enough for me. I doubt that any woman would live up to Pansy's expectations. She's always been overprotective of me. It's charming *and* horrifically annoying at times. I glare at her; she rolls her eyes. "Apologies. Good God." She settles her hand on my shoulder. "Then who? I've known you long enough to know when you're moping."

"No one," I say, my throat tightening. He didn't want me. It still hurts. Badly. I step back. "Excuse me, Pansy. I've..." I can't think. "Mother needs me." It's an obvious lie. I don't care.

"Draco," Pansy says, but I turn and flee, leaving her standing, brow furrowed, on the dance floor, couples swirling around her, snow falling lightly on her shoulders.



As midnight nears, I hang back with Astoria, standing next to the enormous fireplace at the opposite end of the room. A string quartet plays next to us. I've bribed them not to attempt any song that includes was-sail in its title.

I sip my wine. Astoria looks lovely tonight. Her hair is twisted up, and a few wisps fall prettily down around her nearly bare shoulders. The cream velvet neckline of her robe is wide and low, showing her tits at their best.

She bumps my arm. "Are you all right?" she murmurs. She tilts her head and smiles at Mockridge from the Goblin Liaison Office as he passes.

"I'm fine." I'm not, and she and I both know it. Her eyes are gentle and soft. I wish that I could love her the way she deserves. I brush a wisp of hair from her face. "Thank you."

She looks sad. "I want to help."

"You can't," I say over the rim of my wineglass.

"I know."

A ripple of whispers catches our attention. I turn.

Severus stands in the doorway, a column of stark black, his eyes searching the room.

The glass of wine falls from my hand, crashing onto the floor. Wine splashes everywhere; shards of glass scatter across the wood. The music stops.

"Draco," Astoria says. I barely hear her. I can't look away from him.

He sees me, and he steps into the ballroom, ignoring the startled looks he receives. He hasn't been in Britain since he left. His opinion on the country is well-known: he made that quite damned certain in a scathing letter to the *Prophet* before we left.

The open-mouthed throng parts before him; he walks directly to me, his eyes fixed on my face. He's drawn his hair back, I think madly. It looks nice.

Severus stops in front of me. "Draco." His voice is quiet, hesitant.

I just look at him.

"Might we talk?" he asks. The entire ballroom is watching us. I rather suspect Mother's plan has now backfired. I don't really give a damn.

I nod slowly, and I hold out my hand. He hesitates for a moment, then takes it. I lead him towards the French doors that open onto the terrace. Whispers follow us; I can see Mother out of the corner of my eye. She's smiling.

The doors close behind us.

It's cold outside and crisp, and the stars shine down on us. There's a multitude here, out in the country away from the lights. I lean against the stone balustrade, looking out over the gardens. The boxwood hedges are dark in the moonlight.

Neither of us say anything until I glance over at him. "You're in England." My breath comes out in pale puffs in the frigid air.

"Obviously." A small smile curves Severus's mouth. He stares out at the curved gravel paths and the swathes of grass, still green thanks to the elves' gardening charms.

The stone coping is cold beneath my hands. "You didn't want me," I say quietly. The words from the note still run through my mind.

Cannot give you what you wish...will never return your feelings...shall remove myself from Paris until you feel comfortable in returning to Britain...

I feel sick. I look down at my hands, gripping the coping tightly. My knuckles are white.

And then Severus's hand covers mine. The touch startles me and I glance up at him. His eyes are dark; his glasses gleam. "I was wrong," he says, and he cups my cheek. "Incredibly, stupidly, ridiculously wrong."

I can't breathe. His thumb strokes tiny circles over my skin. "You were?" I mean it to come out tartly. Instead it's a question.

He nods. Severus never admits he's wrong. *Never.*

"You're a twat." I lean into his touch.

Severus smiles faintly. "I'm quite certain I'll continue to be one."

I don't know what to say. He steps closer to me. I can feel the heat of his body. I close my eyes for a moment, certain I'm mad, certain he'll be gone when I open them again. He's not. "What are you asking of me?" I have to know.

"Paris." Severus rests his forehead against mine. His breath is sour-sweet. I twist my fingers in his robe, without reason terrified he'll Apparate away. "Come to Paris again."

"For how long?" I don't want him to toy with me. I don't think I could bear it.

Severus curls his fingers around the back of my neck, holding me still. "As long as we want?" He sounds nervous.

I'm silent for a moment. I can feel my heart thudding against my chest. "I'm not her," I say finally.

He snorts. "I don't want you to be." His fingers stroke the nape of my neck gently, tangling in my hair. "I came to England for *you*, Draco."

It's as close to a declaration as I'll get. I smile, and I slip my arms around his waist. From inside the ballroom, I hear muted cries of *Happy New Year*. It must be midnight.

I look up at Severus. "Kiss me."

He raises an eyebrow.

"Kiss me," I say again. "And mean it."

He does.

"Bonne Année," I whisper against his mouth.

I'm ready to go home. "