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Death and the Maiden

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Inhaltsangabe

After years of illness, Narcissa encounters death; she reflects on her life, family and marriage.

Vorwort

Inhaltsverzeichnis

1. Untitled

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Death was coming. She could hear his slow, steady steps, could hear the muffled whispers in the room fall silent all of a sudden, as if they, too, were able to feel his eerie presence. This was the end. Years of suffering would finally come to an end. She was so close to what, during these past weeks, she had desired the most, so close to being released at last. Still, she was afraid, more than she'd ever dare to speak out; hadn't death always lingered over her like a silent shadow?

Narcissa would not live to see her eighteenth birthday, the Healers had predicted when she had fallen ill, yet she had proved them all to be wrong. The years had passed, slowly, and slowly she grew older; older and stronger. Her wedding day had been the happiest of her life, a small, private ceremony instead of the large feast they had thrown for her sister when she had gotten married. It was a miracle, people whispered, that she had found someone fool enough to agree to wed a dying woman. But Lucius was no fool; he loved her like she loved him, so why would they care about whispers as long as they were sure to have one another? One day, Narcissa swore to herself, she would give him an heir.

Slowly, she turned her head to her right as she heard a quiet sob, and smiled. They were all with her. Bella was standing at her bedside, once so fierce and now quiet, looking at her with thick locks of her long, black hair hanging into her face; Andy, too, would only sit there, staring straight ahead, desperate to hold back another sob, yet motionless as if she had turned into stone. Even her mother was here, who scarcely left her home since Father had fallen. She had never allowed herself to shed a single tear in the presence of her daughters, yet now they were silently flowing down her face, like a waterfall of pure sorrow.

They were there, crying for her, and she could do nothing. How much Narcissa wanted to comfort them, how much she wanted to enfold them in her arms... How helpless she felt, how guilty. Yet, how blessed she was, to know her family was always by her side, to not to be alone, dying lonely and forgotten. The years would slowly heal the wounds, time would dry the tears, but she knew that they wouldn't forget her. Never.

This was the end. It all had gone so slow, and yet so fast... She should always remember her illness, they had told her, always be prepared for another attack, no matter how many months went by, no matter how well she believed she felt. And the attack had come, had made her entire world fall apart; Narcissa had been bedridden for almost a month now, and time had made her lose any hope for another recovery. Coughs and fevers had weakened her until she was only a shell of her former self, pale and waifish, with deep shadows lingering beneath her eyes. Potions helped her breathe, granted her rest at least in her sleep, while spells would ...

As if she knew what the spells did to her. Hadn't she prayed, night by night, for a death with dignity? The pain in her lungs had been her constant companion for years, yet had grown sheer unspeakable now, paralysing her, driving her close to madness.

If Lucius could see her in her in such a state, if ...

Would he still love her, if he saw her, dying like this?

They were all there. Only her husband was missing. He had gone into war, had been separated from her in a cruel, violent way, and nobody was certain when and if he would return. If only she would be granted the chance to say goodbye! Instead she found herself forced to leave him behind, like he had left her, forever. What would she give to feel his tender skin against hers for one last time, what would she give to kiss him, to look into his big, grey eyes again, to bid him farewell, like he deserved?

Death was coming. She could almost feel his breath against her skin, cold as ice, as she found her entire

body to be trembling.

“Don’t touch me,” she whispered, her voice breaking with fear. “Please... Don’t touch me...”

Narcissa did not have a chance. She knew that her begging would be in vain — of course, she knew — but she was afraid, so afraid... How much she wanted to be released from her torment, yet how much she wanted to live, how much she dreaded his touch! She was so young, still, too young to face death eye to eye, too young to leave this world already. Twenty-three years of age, at the end of her life, while others had only begun. Bella, Andy... Both still had their futures ahead of them, bright futures she would never see. Her own ended at this moment, without the child she had longed for more than anything else.

She had fought almost her entire life, a battle she was always destined to lose. Five years, she had been granted, five beautiful years at Lucius’ side, five years she would never forget. Now, she had no chance but to surrender. It was time.

“Take my hand, Narcissa.” A deep, quiet voice spoke to her, so strange, yet so familiar. She raised only her arm, slowly, until her skin came to touch his. Carefully, almost gently, Lucius pulled her to her feet, folding his arms around her small, tender body to give her hold. It was him, to come for her, his voice to speak to her so softly, his touch to, at a stride, take all her fear away.

Far away, Andromeda’s scream of sorrow resounded in her ears, but Narcissa would not turn around anymore, would not see her mother breaking down in her sister’s arms when she gave in to Death at last.

She was safe now, safe to fall asleep within his hold. She was ready.