

Practice, practice, practice . . . Bella, with apologies to JKR.

The bell of Malfoy Manor rang. It was a discordant, melancholy sound not easily forgotten.

“What could *he* want?” Lucius Malfoy grimaced, reacting to the image of a powerful man in a deep overcoat patiently waiting on the front porch. While not over-tall, the man was not short either. His long, tumbling mane of grey streaked hair fell out from under a wide brimmed hat. The man was pale, with a somewhat grim manner which was not dimmed by a long, ragged scar that ran from his right brow, through the corner of his mouth, and thence diagonally across his out-thrust chin.

“He looks as though he rode in on a horse or an aeroplane. Either way it was through the weather,” the elder Malfoy sneered. “These people are so uncivilized!”

“Who, Lucius?” asked Narcissa, looking up from tutoring their son Draco.

The young man, surprised by his father’s tone, looked up as well.

“We have a Muggle at the door,” Lucius announced with contempt.

“A Muggle!” Draco exclaimed, getting up and going to the mirror. “How dare a Muggle set foot on our grounds!”

Narcissa joined them, and though anxious at first, as soon as she recognized the figure her features relaxed, and even lost their late melancholy. The youngest of the remaining Black sisters shared their prejudice against non-magical people, but her elegant features bore no hint of contempt, not for *this* Muggle. With a firm voice, she corrected both her son and her husband. “That man is not *a* Muggle; he is *the* Muggle.”

“The Muggle?” Draco replied, his tone changing because of his mother’s rebuke. “What does that mean?”

Narcissa sighed, “He is Achilles Sharpe. He is an Incantamus; he is immune to magic.”

“And thus, the most dangerous Muggle in the world,” Lucius muttered. “He was there during the Battle of Hogwarts. He killed Rudolphus LeStrange—not that it was any great loss.” Lucius sighed, but the shuddering of his breath betrayed his anxiety. He added in an almost inaudible whisper, “Achilles always said he’d kill Rudolphus one day. Strangled him with such earnest he broke LeStrange’s neck.”

“What can he want with us?” Draco exclaimed, now nervous. Their lives had been shaken to the very core during the Second Wizarding War. All of Voldemort’s followers that survived faced repercussions—all of them, including the Malfoys. However, since they had deserted Voldemort during the Battle of Hogwarts, they got special dispensation. They weren’t in Azkaban, but they weren’t free either.

Sharpe had intervened. He carried some small amount of influence on the Ministry of Magic—he worked with them often—and he'd spoken up for the Malfoys. So, the Ministry left them alone—so far. It was a stroke of unexpected fortune that was precarious at best, and they all knew it.

The bell rang again.

“Lucius don't keep him waiting. Invite him in please,” Narcissa said firmly. “Draco and I will be down in a moment.”

Malfoy pursed his thin lips, muttering something about the indecency of not having servants, and left.

Narcissa turned to Draco and took a deep breath, smiling slightly. “Don't worry Draco, he's not here to persecute us. We are perfectly safe with him.”

“I'm not afraid of any Muggle, mother,” Draco insisted.

Her eyes flashed, “You should be very afraid of this one, Draco! Even the Dark Lord was, but well, that was the past. Things are different. Suffice to say that Achilleus has a connection to our family that makes us untouchable.”

“Untouchable—how?”

“He was in love with my sister,” Narcissa told Draco.

“Andromeda?” he said incredulously.

“No, Draco,” Narcissa sighed sadly. “Bellatrix.”

“Bellatrix, how? She hated Muggles; I can't believe she wouldn't have tried to kill him!”

“Oh, she did,” Narcissa smiled. “But then, well, she fell in love with him.”

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The door to Malfoy Manor opened, revealing Lucius Malfoy in his usual elegant black attire. The elder Malfoy's features were improved from his haggard appearance of a few years past. Free of Voldemort's vicious contempt and the threat of Azkaban prison, Lucius recovered somewhat. However, his overt arrogance was gone; obliterated by the misfortunes of the war.

“Hello Lucius, it's good to see you again,” Achilleus Sharpe said, a shallow smile accompanying his outstretched hand, Muggle fashion, as a greeting.

Lucius took the hand, apparently not daring to rebuff the greeting, nor relay wanting to. The Ministry of Magic held Sharpe in some esteem, as did Lucius. Sharpe protected his family, an important consideration when their position could change at any time. “Achilleus, it's been some time. What brings you here—what is the Muggle expression—business or pleasure?”

“I was ordered to come here,” Achilleus replied.

Malfoy's expression stiffened. "Ordered? By whom?"

Achilleus laughed and shook his head, "Don't worry Lucius, The Ministry didn't send me; nor did the Vatican. A higher power governs my presence, although I must admit I always enjoy my time with you and Narcissa."

"As do I," Lucius smiled just completely falsely. Remembering his duties and the lies that they required, he announced, "I would be honored if you would enter my house."

"Thank you," Achilleus nodded and stalked in. Lucius closed the great doors behind them.

Narcissa and Draco came down the stairs. The lady of the house held out her hand to Achilleus, and her smile was genuine. "Achilleus! How nice to see you!"

Achilleus took her hand and bowed quite correctly, then straightened. With an equally genuine smile, though heavy with gravity, he said, "It is always a pleasure to bask in your elegance and see the shadow of my beautiful Bella!" Taking the measure of Draco, he offered his hand. "I don't need to be told who you are; you have the steadfast, noble bearing of your father. You must be Draco."

Draco was taken aback, and could only say, "Yes." Still, he took the proffered hand.

"To what do we owe the pleasure of your company, Achilleus?" Narcissa asked, motioning the Muggle into the great hall. With a wave of her wand a crackling fire sprang into the huge fireplace. There was only a slight tremor of anxiety in her voice, but Achilleus glanced at her, noting it.

The sense of foreboding in the Malfoy family, whatever Narcissa's confidence in Sharpe's benevolence, was palpable. Lucius only made matters worse by telling her, "Mr. Sharpe was ordered here, but by whom, he has not yet revealed."

Narcissa looked at Achilleus with that question in mind. Lucius was troubled. Draco was obviously anxious.

"Who indeed?" Achilleus said mysteriously, and then stopped as if waiting. "Who could order me about on Earth or in Heaven?"

"Why me, who else?" laughed a familiar strident voice.

The Malfoys looked in amazement to see the transparent, ghostly, and dangerously beautiful form of Bellatrix burst from Achilleus. "Cissy!" she cried, embracing her sister.

"Bella!" the sister exclaimed, hugging Bellatrix. In surprise, she found Bella almost solid. "Oh Bella, it's so good to see you, but you'll expend all your energy in a hug! You know you can't coalesce for long. Pray stay sister."

"Oh, don't worry about it, Cissy; I get all the energy I need from my Achilleus! After all, it's him I'm haunting!" She laughed that half mad, half vicious laugh, but then she wafted over

and kissed him on the cheek. “Turnabout is fair play, ain’t it luv? After all, you haunted me in life; it’s only fair that I haunt you in death!”

“As long as you haunt me Bella, I consider myself blessed!”

“You see why I can’t give him up, Cissy?” Bella said seriously. She glanced at Lucius and Draco. “You two could learn something of chivalry from Achilles.”

Narcissa intervened, taking Bella’s wispy arm. “Come sister, let’s have some tea like we used to. There’s so much to catch up with!”

The two witches went, arm-in-arm toward the sunroom: one floating and one skipping almost like a girl.

That left Achilles with Lucius and Draco.

“Extraordinary,” Lucius remarked under his breath. He glanced at Achilles, almost with a sense of pity. “You’re haunted by Bellatrix. I can’t say I would wish that on anyone—even a Muggle.”

“This does put a damper on any attempt at romancing a living woman,” Achilles admitted. “Not to say that I could find another woman who could take her place.”

“You’re somewhat mad, aren’t you?” Draco blurted.

Lucius put his hand on Draco’s chest, a flash of fear lighting his eyes, “Now Draco, that’s rude! Do not insult our guest!”

Achilles smiled grimly. “Don’t worry, Lucius, I don’t take offense. I, more than anyone, know the perils of loving Bellatrix Black!”

“LeStrange, you mean,” Draco corrected.

Lucius physically pulled his son away from Achilles.

“No, Bellatrix *Black*,” Achilles Sharpe said firmly. “I killed Rudy—her arranged husband—and I quite enjoyed it.”

“You strangled him, broke his neck,” Draco repeated what he’d been told to gauge the Muggles reaction.

Achilles paused until Draco was uncomfortable, though whether by curiosity or horror even the young Malfoy couldn’t say.

“Almost got his eyes to pop right out before his neck snapped like a twig. Disappointing that!” Achilles shrugged. “Not much to it. You wizards depend on magic not muscles. A child could’ve done it.”

“You brag about it?”

“Bragging about ridding the world of malicious scum like Rudolph the Red-nosed Wizard—yes, gladly. He was a disgrace to the Wizarding World. He had neither character, courage, nor even conviction. He would have sold you and your family out for nothing, if I let him live.”

Draco looked to his father, who nodded at the accuracy of the statement.

Sharpe stalked to the fireplace, standing there, soaking up the heat. “One can even find a certain elan in a dark wizard like Grindelwald, or courage in one like Riddle. Not with Rudy, however, and the way he treated your aunt Bellatrix sealed his fate in my mind.”

“So, you hunted him down,” Draco insisted.

“No, I don’t hunt wizards. I actually like and respect wizards and witches.”

“Then why did you murder him?” Draco demanded, much to his father’s discomfort.

“Not murder, revenge for his behavior towards Bella,” Achilleus smiled thinly, and unpleasantly. “He was a malicious husband.”

“So, you punish wizards when they step out of line?” Draco insisted, determined to hate the man.

Lucius snapped at his son, “That’s enough Draco! The encounter was at Hogwarts, during the war, do you understand? Do not badger Mr. Sharpe.”

Draco didn’t back down. “What is his purpose here? It’s not Bellatrix, that can’t be it. Don’t you see father, he’s a spy for the Ministry. He’s trying to get enough information to hang us!”

Achilleus laughed, shaking his head. “No Draco, I’m not here to spy on you—what’s the point? I’ve spent a considerable amount of capital with the Ministry protecting your family.”

“You’re lying! You work for the Ministry. What other reason could account for you being here?”

“No son, he’s not here to spy on us!” Lucius broke in. He took his son by the shoulders, and said, “He’s right. Mr. Sharpe has protected our family. He has interceded with the Ministry; he doesn’t work for them.”

Draco was not convinced, “So, what is it you do?”

Lucius sighed, “Draco, put away the prejudice I taught you. Mr. Sharpe is no ordinary Muggle. He’s a Vampire Venatorum.”

“A Vampire Hunter? A Muggle?” Draco exclaimed.

“Draco!” Lucius warned.

“I suppose your Incantamus abilities make you invulnerable against them too?” the young man sneered.

Lucius cringed.

Achilleus sighed and paused. “No, actually, very few vampires can do magic, nor do they need to. They have their own powers, and I’m just as susceptible to them as you would be.”

Draco suppressed a shudder. “Then why would you do it?”

“Because it needs to be done,” Achilleus shrugged. “Many if not most vampires lose their Humanity when blinded by the need to feed. It’s a fever that eradicates all distinction, much like the fever that takes a Werewolf.”

“So, you eradicate them.”

“If they are a problem—yes.”

Lucius moved Draco toward the study, adding, “Depredations of Vampires are something that both Magics and—Mu—Non-Magics share. That was how I met Mr. Sharpe!” He motioned to Sharpe, “Shall we continue this discussion in the comfort of my library? Come, Achilleus, I dare say the sisters will be visiting for a time. We might as well be comfortable, and I think we both need a drink!”

The library was a long, dark high beamed chamber lined with dark old bookcases and paintings. However, the chairs were inviting, deep, enveloping leather. Lucius conjured a fire and went to the bar.

“Wine or Brandy Achilleus?”

“I love this study of yours Lucius, really, what a perfect space,” Achilleus remarked as he took an old bottle from the pocket of his overcoat. “Actually, I brought this for you. I’ve been saving it.”

Malfoy took the bottle and read the label. “Mont St. Michelle 1776? How exceedingly rare,” he said with surprise. He looked up at Achilleus in wonderment. “I can’t understand why you would part with this, but it is gracious of you.”

“I procured it from the abbey, where they had a problem with a turned priest—the abbot, in fact—there are another ten bottles in the car. Sorry, but I had a bottle on my own, to verify the quality. Sometimes the reputation is not equal to the reality. In this case it is.”

“That is a princely gift,” Lucius admitted, uncorking the bottle, and pouring out three glasses.

“Take it as a token of my esteem,” Achilleus said, taking the proffered glass.

Lucius, unable to interpret the vampire hunter’s true meaning, handed a glass to his son. “Here Draco, you might as well learn the art of wine with the best. Anyone who has lived through these times deserves it!”

“Hear, hear!” Achilleus agreed.

Draco took the glass and sipped at the wine. His expression was inexplicable, but his eyes still held Achilleus with suspicion.

Lucius glanced at his son. “Well, Draco?”

“I don’t understand this,” he said sharply.

“Don’t understand—what?”

“Why this Muggle is here; why we are entertaining him as if he’s a family friend,” the young man said with irritation.

“Draco!”

“I’m tired of games father, don’t you understand?” the young man exclaimed. “I know *he’s* gone, and we don’t have to fear retribution from *him*, but what about the Ministry? The Muggles? Is he here to take us to Azkaban, or to trap us?”

“Now Draco,” Lucius urged with a fatherly, almost soothing manner.

Draco interrupted. “No! Don’t you understand? Every minute of every day we wait. Any minute the Aurors could come knocking at the door. When? When is it going to happen?”

Lucius tried to comfort his son, but it was Achilleus who answered Draco. He stood abruptly up from his leather wingback chair, a slick, elegant black with the Malfoy crest emblazoned in red. “You’re astute to wonder about that very question Draco,” he said gravely, walking to the fireplace.

Both Draco and Lucius looked after him. The man leaned against the mantle with one hand, the other cradling his wine. After a long gulp, he looked at the father and son, but his eyes stared straight through Draco, flickering redly with the fire.

“From your vantage point Draco, you see things very clearly,” Achilleus stated. “You are to be commended for seeing through the fog of the past few years and coming to a completely logical conclusion. However, you do not know everything that draws me here. That’s not surprising. You’ve been kept ignorant, and rightfully so.”

“What do you mean?”

“There is a history between me and the Malfoy family that you know nothing about. It was purposefully kept from you,” the man said seriously.

“Kept from me—why?” Draco turned to his father.

Lucius searched for the words, but Achilleus interjected, “Voldemort, of course!”

Draco and Lucius froze at the sound of the name, as even after two years it caused a wave of fear to sweep through the room. The elder Malfoy whispered harshly, “Achilleus! Do not mention that name! Do not draw him here!”

Indeed, a cold rush of air swept through the room, but it didn't faze Achilles. With a furiously twisted countenance, he cursed, "Away foul spirit! You don't dare show your presence around me!"

The room grew still.

Achilleus sighed and turned to the Malfoys. Lucius sighed. Draco stood in amazement. "The simple truth is, Draco, your father was protecting you, protecting your family. You see, many years earlier I met your father on one of my hunts. I was searching out the Vampire Lord Maclaren. Your father became a part of the adventure."

"He saved my life Draco," Lucius broke in. "As you must know from your studies at Hogwarts that Vampires are as deadly to wizard kind as to non-magic people. I was taken," he shuddered. Recovering his composure, Lucius finished, "I was taken by Lord Maclaren."

"The potency of powerful wizards is especially sought after by Vampires, Draco," Achilleus Sharpe informed the young man. "The details of the adventure are unimportant. Suffice it to say that I, with your father's help, was able to dispatch Maclaren and his harem."

Lucius looked sharply at Achilleus, and seemed about to say something, but a hard look from the man stopped him. Sharpe shrugged. "That is the beginning of our connections Draco. Do not underestimate the bonds of shared peril—such as your protection of Harry Potter in this very house, and his rescue of you in the Room of Requirement." He sighed and moved over to the small table where the wine resided.

Lucius snatched the bottle and refilled all their glasses. "Mr. Sharpe shares rather too much of the glory. If he hadn't intervened with Lord Maclaren," he shuddered.

Draco looked at Sharpe with wonder, "So you aren't immune to a Vampire's powers the same as you are magic?"

"For the most part," Achilleus corrected him. "I am as vulnerable to their lust and powers as the meanest Muggle."

"Then how?"

Achilleus put his hand on his breast, and said simply, "Faith!"

Draco still looked mystified, "Why didn't you ever tell me of this?"

Lucius shook his head, "Obviously, if the Dark Lord knew of our connections, especially Achilleus' connection with Bellatrix."

"Did someone call my name?" the ghost of Bellatrix exclaimed. She flew through the paneling, quite transparent, hardly to be seen.

Achilleus grimaced, "Ah Bella, my dear, you've overdone it have you?"

Bellatrix floated up to Sharpe with a pouty face, telling him, "I was just so excited to see Cissy, you see, that maybe I animated a bit too much."

Narcissa opened the door to the study in a normal manner, apologizing for the intrusion. “I knew Bella must be looking for Achilles. She just started to fade, and our time was so short.”

“Not to worry Narcissa, I shall happily restore Bella to you,” Achilles smiled. “Now come to me my dear!”

“Oh Achilles!” Bellatrix exclaimed. She flew to his embrace and kissed him. The kiss lingered, and Bellatrix took on a more and more vibrant form. Finally, with a smile she pulled away. “That’s enough for you love, you’ll have to wait for more later—when we’re alone that is!”

“Bella!” Narcissa exclaimed.

Bellatrix simply laughed, only now it was a laugh not laced with madness, but joy; still, there was not a small bit of impish delight in it. “Later love,” she waved at Achilles.

The Venatorum bowed theatrically. “I am your slave.”

“Of course, you are!” Bellatrix giggled. “Now come Cissy, we’ve still got so much to talk about!”

The girls left.

Achilles went to his chair and slumped into it. “My word, that witch does drain me at times!”

“So, it is true. I understand why you kept this all secret now,” Draco said.

“Yes, the Dark Lord knew that Bellatrix was compromised by the Venatorum, but had he known the depths of Bellatrix’s and our Venatorum’s affection, he would have found it to be an unforgivable affront,” Lucius added. “He would have—”

“Killed us all,” Draco finished.

“Not an understanding sort, Mr. Riddle,” Achilles muttered, gulping down his wine. “I should have finished him when I had the chance!”

“Why didn’t you?” Draco said.

“Your father knows about that as well, the Prophecy!” Sharpe informed the younger Malfoy. “Even the Vatican will not interfere with prophecies. The Prophetics are guided by higher powers, and sometimes lower powers, very low powers. I was forbidden to interfere until the Prophecy was satisfied one way or another.”

The vampire hunter drifted off to sleep in the chair.

Lucius and Draco looked at him.

The elder Malfoy whispered to his son, “You see now why we have him in our house son? He is your aunt’s chosen one—funny how things work out, isn’t it—she’s even more unyielding as a ghost! Yet the madness and cruelty are strangely tempered.”

“Mother seems quite pleased with the arrangement,” Draco admitted, finally sipping at the wine. His finely arched brows rose in surprise, and he took another, deeper draught.

“Careful son, savor it,” Lucius smiled. Nevertheless, he topped off the young man’s glass. Sighing heavily, the elder Malfoy shrugged. “You know how your mother loves her sister. I cannot bar her from this house, nor can I bar him from my company, Muggle, or no.”

“But father,” Draco questioned.

Lucius was firm. “Achilleus kept the family’s secret. Moreover, in the last two years he has hunted down those who survived the Hogwarts debacle, those who might have done this family great harm during my—parole.”

“Rudolphus Le Strange,” Draco nodded.

“Amongst others. Yet Rudolphus had a special place in Achilleus’ vengeance. Achilleus always needled him. Oh, how Rudolphus hated him!” Lucius laughed and laid a hand on his son’s shoulder. Downing the rest of his wine. “Because of your aunt’s infatuation with the most prominent Muggle in our world, we are safe now. That alone is a debt I can never repay.”

“But Bellatrix?” Draco lowered his voice. “She hates Muggles! How can—how—I was there, remember? I never recognized any hint of here desires. Indeed, I never saw Achilleus Sharpe.”

“The two answers are intertwined, Draco,” Lucius said. “The Dark Lord made demands on the Black Family as he did ours. However, his interest in the Black sisters, including your mother, were—well, let’s just save that story for another day. Suffice it to say, Achilleus Sharpe faced Hellish perils for Bellatrix, and through her, our family. She was decidedly grateful, Bellatrix, that is. The Dark Lord was less than pleased, but your aunt and my friend here bore the brunt of his setback.”

“And, what happened.”

“In the end, your mother was free, your aunt was mad, and in order to save what little sanity Bellatrix retained, Mr. Sharpe exiled himself until the Battle of Hogwarts.”

“All because of love between a Vampire Hunter and a Dark Witch!”

“When you can explain love between—people—you let me know Draco.”

“What?” Achilleus started awake. Consciously or unconsciously, he’d obviously been listening. “Love? Well, there’s no telling you know, Draco. It’s not something a man can control—Muggle or Wizard. Why my brother fell in love with a Vampire Queen! Touchy subject amongst the family I’ll tell you! Family gatherings are, well, interesting.”

“When did it happen?” Draco said, to which his father cradled his temple in his hands.

“What?”

“When did Bellatrix fall in love with you?”

Achilleus laughed at the elder Malfoy's discomfiture, telling Draco, "Your father was there. When do you think it happened, Lucius, was it before or after she stabbed me?"

"After, definitely," replied Lucius, pouring himself and his guest more wine. "I was always of the opinion that precipitated everything."

"Rudy started it," Sharpe sighed. He looked at Draco, and explained, "I was in the Defense Against the Dark Arts class. Dumbledore was teaching it during Professor—what was his name?"

"Finnegan," Lucius answered. "Ridiculous man! I didn't learn a thing from him. Dumbledore was at least—talented—I learned more from him in those three weeks than all my years at Hogwarts." The wizard paced, as if giving Dumbledore a complement was physically painful. "Yes, you were an extension of Dumbledore's strange sense of humor," Lucius offered, settling into his chair. "He was making two points, good ones I must admit. First, Muggles are not to be taken for granted. Second, he was demonstrating the power of an Incantamus—a person immune to magic. Most took it in stride, but Rudolphus became incensed when nothing he tried on Achilleus worked. He even tried to use the killing curse, if I remember correctly."

"He did," Sharpe assented. "That's when I took it personally."

"Then what happened?" Draco said breathlessly.

"Finally, in pure rage, Rudolphus attacked Mr. Sharpe physically. It was a poor choice."

"What did you do," Draco asked?

"I?" Achilleus laughed. A moment later he turned serious. "Understand Draco that Muggles are not simply trained in physical combat, everything we do is powered by our bodies, not by magic. Rudy's attack was ridiculous, insulting even. So, it was a simple matter of grappling him and throwing him."

"Halfway across the room!" Lucius laughed. "I'd like my "Expelleramus" attacks to have the same thump! Anyway, Rudolphus was never all that bright. He leapt up to try it again. That was an even worse choice."

"And you," Draco said.

"I broke his arm; his casting arm, of course," Achilleus shrugged. "As he lay writhing on the floor in pain, I took his wand and broke it."

"You broke his wand?"

"And stabbed the shards up Rudolphus' backside," Lucius noted with obvious amusement. "He didn't walk the same for weeks! I quite approved. I never liked—Rudy. It was done with great panache, I must say."

"Thank you," Achilleus raised his glass.

They clinked.

The wine was obviously taking effect.

“But Bellatrix?”

“Oh yes, then she attacked me. I grappled her as well, but unlike Rudy, Bella was—and is—very nice to hold. I didn’t mind grappling her, even if she was trying to stab me like a maniacal wildcat.”

“Then Dumbledore stopped it?”

“No!” both Lucius and Achilles said together.

Draco stood mystified.

“I took the knife from her, but I didn’t let her go. Miss Black protested with some energy.”

“With great energy!” Lucius added.

“So, I held her very tightly.”

“And she demanded you let her go, multiple times. Bellatrix got shriller each time she repeated her demands. It was rather unpleasant on the ears,” Lucius sighed. “In fact, some at Hogwarts started calling her Banshee Bella!”

“That didn’t last,” Achilles chuckled.

“No, Madame Pomphrey was rather busy,” Lucius nodded.

“So, what happened?” Draco insisted.

Lucius raised a brow and looked at Achilles. “Well, nothing would shut her up until you said *it*. Of course, that quite disarmed her.”

“It did, much to my great fortune,” Achilles smiled.

“What did you say?” Draco asked, mystified.

Achilles smiled, but before he could say anything the specter of Bellatrix flew through the wall and landed on his lap, her ghostly pale arms wrapped around his neck.

“You’re telling the story, aren’t you? I could feel it from the other room. Have I stabbed you yet?”

“I thought you said you disarmed her,” Draco exclaimed.

Narcissa entered the room, giggling.

“I did disarm her, but Bella is good, very good. She got me a bit, right here,” Achilles replied, placing a hand on his kidney. “Madame Pomphrey couldn’t help.”

“You’re an Incantamus, it doesn’t always work out,” Bella sighed. Then she giggled. “Have you told him what you said next?”

“I was getting to that,” Achilleus admitted.

“I’ll tell it,” Bella laughed. She looked at Draco, and explained, “I went at him like a Banshee—don’t say it!—but he just took my knife away. There he was, holding me with one brawny arm, and he calmly threw the knife—whack!—right into the head of the snake on the Slytherin House coat of arms. An impressive toss for a Muggle, right across the room!”

“Thank you,” Achilleus smiled.

Draco laughed, “So that’s why the snake looks like he had his head lopped off. I always wondered at that, but never had the nerve to ask McGonagall about it.”

“Yes, well there I was, Bellatrix Black, held fast by a Muggle! Imagine it! I was insane. And then he looks at me as I’m screaming for him to let me go. In a calm voice he says simply, ‘I’ll let you go, under one condition.’ So, I ask, what’s the condition? What do you think he says to me?”

Draco looked surprised, but said, “You asked her to kiss you, didn’t you?”

They all looked at Draco.

“You are correct Draco,” Achilleus admitted. “I was so smitten by her beauty and spirit, and those deep dark eyes, what else would I ask for?”

“And all of a sudden all my anger, prejudice, and hatred evaporated,” Bellatrix sighed. “He put a spell on me, he did. Almost before I knew it, I kissed him.”

Narcissa, sighed, “It was so romantic, I forgot Achilleus was a Muggle!”

“So, there it is Draco, that’s how we fell in love,” Bellatrix sighed. Turning conspiratorial, she added, “Of course, we had to keep that all hush, hush.”

“Midnight rendezvous,” Achilleus smiled.

“Skinny dippy in the lake,” Bellatrix added.

“Alright, I get the idea,” Draco interjected. “I’m not old enough for this!” He turned to leave.

“I think we’ve scarred him for life,” Bellatrix said flatly.

“One moment Draco,” Achilleus called after him. The young man stopped and looked back.

“I have something for you,” the vampire hunter said. He stood up and Bella just sort of swirled around him, clinging to him, looking over his shoulder.

“What do you have for Draco,” she asked with glee.

Achilleus smiled and took a long narrow bundle out of his coat pocket. Walking up to the younger Malfoy, he held it out. “A gift from Mr. Potter.”

Draco drew back, but finally took the package and unwrapped it. “My wand!”

“Yes, Mr. Potter heard that you were going to take your final OWLS. He thought you should have *your* wand for them, and he wishes you the best of luck.”

“Did he?” Draco said, surprised.

“Potter also asked me to tell you, that if you ever want to apply for the Aurors, he would be happy to get you an interview.”

“Me?”

“He did respect you as an adversary,” Achilleus added.

“Thank you, but I think I’d rather hunt Vampires,” Draco replied.

“That can be arranged,” Achilleus smiled. “I do work with a number of witches and wizards, depending on the situation. I’ve never had an apprentice, not one that survived at least, but I think you’re outstanding material Draco!”

“Thank you, Achilleus but no!” Narcissa insisted, sliding in, and moving Draco away from the man. “Now back to your studies Draco!” They left the room.

Bella wrapped her ghostly self around Achilleus, yawning. “Oh, poor Draco, too many choices. You know, this has quite taken the wind out of me. I think I need a nap, luv.”

Achilleus sighed, “Of course, dear Bella, up we go!” He lifted, if that’s the word, Bella’s ethereal form into his arms, and bid Lucius adieu. “No need to show me, I know where Bella’s room is. I’ll see you this evening Lucius!”

Malfoy merely nodded and watched him go, muttering to himself. “Bellatrix is as much an imposition in death as she was in life, but in a wholly different manner!” He took a sip of his wine then glanced around as if to ensure he was alone. He sighed. “And as for my Muggle friend, well,” he hesitated, swirling the wine around in his glass. “I can’t say why, but I would assuredly be disappointed if he decided to banish himself from my company.”

CHAPTER 2

Achilleus Sharpe didn't exactly feel the prodding on his shoulder. Rather, it was a soft, cold sensation. Having felt that sort of thing before, he acted appropriately. Opening his eyes and turning his head, Achilleus Sharpe gazed into the beautiful, ethereal eyes of Bellatrix.

"What is it love, can't sleep?"

"I was thinking," she sighed. "It's not always easy to keep your train of thought as a ghost, and that's a bother, but," she screwed her face up, hesitating.

"But?" Achilleus asked.

"I was thinking of that boy."

"Which one?"

"Longbottom," she admitted.

"Oh," Achilleus replied. "Singular lad, gifted in herbology."

"I, well, I had a hand—more than a hand—in driving his parents insane."

"My dear," sighed Achilleus, "You've been driving me insane since they day I met you, or don't you remember?"

"Now, don't get me off the subject!" Bella snapped. "You know how I can't concentrate as a ghost!" She closed her eyes and screwed up her face. Her ethereal eyes sprang open, "There, satisfied? Now I've gone and lost it."

"You're feeling guilty over Neville Longbottom's parents—the cruciatus curse, wasn't it?"

"Yes!" she exclaimed happily, and then sank into gloom. "It makes me sad."

Achilleus sighed, "Well, Bella, with what little knowledge I have there's not much to be done now is there? The most brilliant minds of the wizarding world haven't been able to do anything other than make candy wrappers a form of communication. It's tragic I know, but it's reality. That's where both of them are, Neville's parents, and that's where they'll stay. There's nothing you can do about it; you're a ghost luv, not a doctor."

"Exactly," Bella replied. "I'm a ghost."

"What are you saying?"

She pouted. "Something, or someone is trying to tell me to help them. If I am to keep what I have—which is you—and not descend into darkness there must be atonement. I feel it."

“You sound like the Church. Very well,” Achilles replied in a serious tone, “Since I can’t lose you, and you can’t lose me, we’ll set it right, shall we?”

“Oh Achilles, thank you!”

Bella popped off somewhere, as ghosts do, leaving Sharpe wondering. He did not look forward to the prospect of visiting the Longbottoms. “Hopeless case! It’s only going to reopen old wounds. How the devil did I get myself into this? I fell in love with her the moment I set eyes on her, but when was I caught, irretrievably caught? The lake, of course. There’s something supremely magical about a Moonlit lake!”

He drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER 3

Thirty years in the past, the Vampire Hunter was only twenty-two. Yet six years of training as a Venatorum meant he was quite accustomed to dealing with serious injuries, like knife wounds. There was no need for a Muggle hospital. Sharpe simply applied a local anesthetic, stitched it up, and that was that.

A few nights after the makeshift surgery, Sharpe stole out of the castle and down to the moonlit shoreline of the Black Lake. Achilles walked with some discomfort but not overmuch. He reached a little inlet overhung with trees, fed by a little stream coming down from the Forbidden Forest. There under the silver light of a three-quarter moon Achilles stopped to drink from the clear, cool waters of the lake.

He stooped and lowered his hand to the surface, but a soft splash froze him. Looking up he saw the head of a young woman break the water with a slight little surprised gasp. It was Bellatrix.

“Well, well, this night is truly enchanted!” he smiled.

“Achilleus Sharpe!” Bella exclaimed, unnecessarily covering her nakedness—the water was inky black, impervious to sight.

“Bellatrix Black!” he returned with a slight chuckle. Achilles stood. “I thought you were a beautiful water nymph at first. I’m happy I was wrong.”

“Oh, then I’m not as beautiful as you first thought?” she shot back, her rapier wit covering her surprise.

“You’re far more beautiful in the Moonlight than I could ever imagine,” Achilles assured the scowling Muggle hater. “You’re so much more accessible as a woman than as a nymph!”

“Join me and you’ll see just how accessible I am, Muggle!” she sneered.

“Don’t mind if I do,” Achilles told her, and despite her objections he stripped and entered the water.

Bellatrix turned so as not to see his nakedness. “You are so impertinent! Just like a Muggle!”

“You are so filled with false bravado and anger, just like a witch!” he shot back.

She turned around to see Achilles fully immersed in the lake, and her eyes flashed. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Simply that you ‘Purebloods,’ as you like to call yourselves are so filled with self-importance and superiority that any time a non-magic stands up to you, you’re offended.”

“And why shouldn’t I be?”

“Because people are people, Bella, no matter how small,” Achilles smiled. “That’s a rhyme from a children’s book, but true, nonetheless. Take me for example.”

“Take you where?” she scoffed.

“To the ends of the Earth, if you like,” he smiled.

“I could you know,” Bella replied coolly. With flashing eyes and a wickedly seductive pout, she added, “I could disapparate us both to the Himalayas and leave you stranded on a glacier.”

“Romantic,” Achilles smiled. “Alas, your magic cannot have the slightest effect on me; even Dumbledore’s magic doesn’t affect me.”

“Dumbledore is not as great as you think,” Bella snapped.

“Oh, you think so, do you? I suppose he got lucky when he dueled Grindelwald. Come now Bella, that’s the most famous wizarding duel in your histories! Grindelwald was powerful. The entire department of Aurors couldn’t stand up to Grindelwald; and yet Dumbledore beat him. Say what you want, but even Grindelwald couldn’t harm me with all his powers.”

“Your point?” Bellatrix replied with suppressed anger.

“My point, my dear, beautiful, enchanting Bellatrix,” he smiled and moved closer to her. She stayed quite still. “My point is simply this, I know you, and I know the Black family and their ‘Pureblood’ philosophy. If I thought as your parents do, well then, logic would dictate that I would think myself superior to the lot of you. Your magical powers can’t do anything to me—nothing. So doesn’t that make this Muggle”—he said the label with derision—“doesn’t that make me superior to you?”

“Oh, I think not!” Then she thought about it. “You, superior to me? You don’t look upon me that way, do you?” she asked with less gravity, less anger, but almost with breathless shock. The argument obviously disarmed her emotional belief.

The young man smiled wolfishly, “Of course not! I put you up on a pedestal, my dear; and I must admit, I’d love to see you on that pedestal right now!”

Bellatrix glanced down at her nakedness, obscured though it was, and swam back away from him into deeper water. “You are a horrible, horrible man! Leave me alone!”

Achilleus swam after her in a leisurely manner. “How can I? I may be immune to your magic, but I’m not immune to your enchantments.”

“Of all the cheek!” she said shrilly, “I didn’t enchant you!”

“Oh, but you did,” he assured her.

“I refuse to believe you!”

“I suppose your attentions to me in the classroom were all due to your loyalty to your boyfriend Rudy, the Red-Nosed Wizardling.” Achilleus laughed, but truly he began to feel concern. Bellatrix was not a good swimmer, and she was getting a bit far from shore for his liking.

“His name is Rudolphus LeStrange!” she insisted breathlessly.

That was enough banter, Achilleus decided. “All right, Bella. Now turn around please, you’re getting too far out. I don’t want you to live with a Muggle rescuing you from drowning!”

Bellatrix stopped, and tread water, looking back. Only then did she realize just how far her anger had taken her from shore. She took a deep breath, admitting, “Oh very well, but no more games Achilleus Sharpe!”

She started back, but before Achilleus could answer her, a greenish blue head with long weedy hair popped out of the water between them.

“Hello pretty witch!” the Merman laughed. “You’re a stranger to the deep waters, I could sense your thrashing from across the lake! Come now with me. I’ll teach you to become one with the waters,” he grinned wickedly and added with a laugh, “As my scullery maid and concubine!”

The Merman reached for Bella and grabbed her by her long mane of hair. Bellatrix cursed, her temper coming to her aid, and she withdrew her wand from the same tangle of wild, wet hair.

“Expelleramus!”

Nothing happened.

“Achilleus, you’re too close—my magic!”

Achilleus was already swimming after them with hard, powerful strokes. “Let her go Merman!”

The Merman laughed, “Ha! You can’t contend with me, Mortal! This is my element! Now be a good lad and get you back! Send word to Master Black that I have his wayward daughter as my scullery maid. If he ever wants her to breath air instead of water, he shall make it worth my while!”

He started to drag Bellatrix down, but she fought like a wildcat. It was to no avail, the lithe Merman drew her toward his lips, and said, “With my kiss you shall become a creature of the depths, and my slave!”

Bellatrix had neither the strength nor the magic to stop the kiss, but her struggles delayed the Merman's curse. At the last possible moment, Achilles grabbed a handful of weedy hair and yanked the Merman's head back.

With a snarl the Merman turned to deal with the man, but as he did, the non-magic Mortal muscles propelled Achilles's fist into his face. Once, twice, thrice, Achilles pummeled the Merman senseless. He sank beneath the waters with a bubbling groan, unconscious.

"Achilleus!" Bellatrix gasped breathlessly. Exhausted by the struggle, she too was sinking beneath the waters.

Three strokes and Achilles was there. He slipped a brawny arm around her and rolled her on her back. "Now, now Bella, I've got you. Just relax. Just float upon your back and breathe easy. I've got you."

Swimming smoothly and powerfully with a lifeguard's scissor stroke, Achilles towed Bellatrix back to shore. After a moment she did relax, and her breathing became regular.

"We're almost there, how are you doing Bella?"

"I'm fine now, thanks to you," she said quietly, and to Achilles, perilously acquiescent.

"Do you want me to let you go and swim back yourself?" he asked, not wanting to stop holding her, but at the same time knowing Bellatrix might suddenly return with a vengeance.

"No!" she exclaimed, reaching up and grasping his arm. As he did not loosen his grip, she relaxed, but kept her small hand on his arm. "I would rather, I mean, you may continue to bring me to shore—please."

"As you wish," Achilles said soothingly, quoting his favorite Man-in-Black.

Achilles didn't stop until he got her into the shallows. Then he transferred her into both strong arms and looked down at her, the Moonlight welling up in her eyes, making her pale skin glow. "Are we all right now, Bella?"

"We're all right now," she sighed, and she actually looked up at him. "I'm trying to be angry with you, but I'm not. I'm trying to remind myself that I'm laying naked in a Muggle's arms under the Moonlight, and I should be furious, but I'm not."

"Truly you are very naked, Bella, and very, very beautiful."

"You're naked too, but again, it doesn't seem to bother me." She smiled impishly. "Maybe this is a nightmare, and it will only end when my rescuer kisses me."

Bellatrix reached up and pulled Achilles to her lips. Achilles felt the warmth of her kiss flow through him, but then a harsh laugh interrupted the magic.

"Bravo Bellatrix, but alas your father would be none too happy if he saw you now!"

Both Achilles and Bellatrix started and looked up to the bank. There stood a tall, imposing figure with heavy Neanderthalic features, a long mane of hair, and feral eyes. He clenched and unclenched his powerful hands, the long nails clacking against each other, menacing.

“Greyback!” Bellatrix exclaimed.

Achilleus moved between them, “The Animungus!”

“Werewolf, Human!” Greyback snapped with a deep growl.

“No, you enjoy it too much Greyback—I know you—you never fully return to your Human form, or sanity!” Achilles replied without fear. “Begone, the Moon is not yet full. You don’t have your full strength. Push me, and you’ll never see a full Moon again! Take advantage of my mercy and get you gone!”

“Mercy! I’ll show you none of that,” Greyback said with a laughing snarl. “I’ve a tasking Human: to pay you well for your attentions to Bellatrix.” He glanced at the young woman, licking his sharp canines. “Your father heard of your little kiss and wants me to fix this lad—my way.” Turning back to Achilles, he roared. “He no doubt meant death, but I’ll not let you out of a life of servitude to me. One bite and I’ll add you to my army!”

Greyback leapt from the bank at Achilles. Achilles shoved Bellatrix away. As Greyback fell upon him, the man grasped him by collar and belt, twisting to throw the Werewolf over his shoulder and headfirst into the water. Instantly, Achilles reversed onto the Werewolf’s back, grasping him by the back of the neck and stunning him with a sharp blow to the base of his head.

The growling ceased, as Achilles shoved the matted head beneath the water. Greyback’s struggles resumed, but Achilles held his head under with one hand and lifted the Werewolf’s legs by yanking up on his belt.

“Bella! Get on the shore and get out of here! I’ll handle this dog!”

Bellatrix waded quickly to shore, but stopped, hesitant.

“Go!”

The witch grabbed her clothes and ran like a deer into the woods.

“Now for you!” Achilles growled in his own turn. “You’re strong Greyback, but not nearly as strong as you are under the full Moon. You’re still mostly Human, and you’re no match for me.”

He held Greyback under until the Werewolf stopped struggling. Then he hauled the hoary head out and struck him thrice at the base of the skull. Greyback went limp. Achilles thrust him out into the water, face down, and retreated to the bank.

After a few moments Greyback’s still form shuddered and he regained consciousness, angry for vengeance. The Werewolf whirled, spying Achilles on the bank. Snarling, champing his teeth in rage, Greyback waded violently to shore, “Fool! You can’t drown a Werewolf! You’ve

sealed your fate!” As he neared the man, the Werewolf warned, “Don’t run Human! You can’t escape me!”

“I’m not running Greyback! I’m here, waiting for you!” Achilleus retorted, yanking the belt free of his trousers. Achilleus wrapped the free end around his right hand. With the left-hand the Venatorum plucked the large Silver crest from his coat. It had a six-inch dagger-like pin while the crest itself covered his knuckles. Thus armed, Achilleus faced the Werewolf. Greyback approached the bank and Achilleus began to whirl the belt, the heavy silver buckle sang in the cool air.

“Come on then Fenrir Greyback, come and feel my bite! Go down in history as slain by a naked Mortal! There go your dreams of revenge upon the Wizarding World!”

“One bite is all it will take lad!”

The Werewolf charged out of the water and up the bank, but his progress was slowed by both water and the steepness of the bank. SWISH-THWACK! The Silver buckle smacked into Greyback’s temple, bringing about a yelp of pain, and a curse. Stumbling, the Werewolf ran full into a punch with the Silver crest. That staggered Greyback. He sank to his knees.

Sharpe was on him in an instant, circling behind and wrapping the belt around the Werewolf’s neck. The man kneed the Werewolf in the back, forcing him face down into the turf.

“It burns!” the Werewolf gasped, and indeed the Silver studs on Achilleus’s belt smoked where they touched his hairy flesh.

The point of the pin entered the Werewolf’s ear. “I can pierce your brain or throttle you with silver, which way do you want me to free you?”

“Who are you? Where do you come by such power?”

“I am a Vatican Venatorum! Now do you understand?”

The Werewolf stopped struggling, raising his hands. “My war is not with the Vatican! I had no idea who you were. Cygnus Black didn’t tell me about you, Sharpe!” Greyback wheezed. “What price for my life? Name it!”

Achilleus thought for a moment. “Your tasking from Mr. Black, what was it?”

“To kill you or failing that to scare you off from his daughter—hopefully—infected. He found out what happened at Hogwarts. Black wanted to blot the dishonor from his family.”

“You go back to Black and tell him that it was Bellatrix that revenged herself upon me with her dagger; that I was wounded near to death. You can say that you infected me for good measure if you like. Set his mind at ease Greyback—that is the price of your life. If I hear that Black is not satisfied, then you know I’ll find you!”

“All right, all right, I’ll do it,” Greyback assented.

Achilleus moved away.

Greyback got to his feet, massaging his still smoking neck. “I’ll convince Black. I don’t want you people coming after me. Do I have your word?”

“As God is my witness, you have my word Greyback. But you stay away from Bellatrix, understand! If you violate her, I will find you!”

“Very well,” he answered, and loped off.

The man watched the Werewolf disappear. When the silence returned to the night, he called, “Bella?”

Nothing.

“Well, she’s safe. That’s what matters,” he sighed and began to dress.

“You give up so easily, do you?” Bella said in a haunting, almost seductive manner, coming out of the trees. She wasn’t dressed, but she held her clothes before her.

Achilleus sighed with relief. “Bella! There you are. Are you alright?”

She laughed, dropping her clothes one-by-one as she coquettishly sashayed with increasing nakedness back into the water. When the last of her garments fell to the ground, she tousled her mane of dark hair and batted her eyes. “I am fine. Thanks to you, Achilleus Sharpe—yes. You’ve saved me three times tonight: once from the Merman, twice from drowning, and thrice from the most dangerous of them all, my father.”

“I am pleased to be of service to you, my dear lady,” replied Achilleus, falling back into character and devouring her with his eyes.

“Then why in such a rush to leave when we haven’t finished our swim?” she asked, wading into the water. When he didn’t answer immediately, she raised her arms up to the Moon, displaying her charms and laughing. “You should know that I’ll be very angry with you shortly, I’m tempestuous I am, but until that time I am liable to be seduced by your chivalry.”

“I am completely your slave, Bella,” Achilleus remarked, making his way into the water, completely under her spell.

“Yes, of course you are!” she smiled, licking her lips.

He approached her, reaching around her hips to grasp her firmly, pulling her to him with a little splash of water. “Bella, Bella, you are so enchantingly beautiful.”

“How beautiful love?”

“Perilously beautiful!”

“I like that,” she cackled, wrapping her arms around his neck. As she drew his head down to kiss him, she told the smitten man, “I love attention, and I love to be adored—feared as well, of course—but right now, you have all my attentions and desires sir knight. Now, woo and love me like the beautiful lady you keep telling me I am.”

Achilleus did as he was told.

#

Achilleus had a room beneath the Astronomy Tower. It was nice, considering Hogwarts was old, drafty, and at times creepy. The Vampire Hunter was popular at the school amongst the ghosts, several of whom were particularly pleased that he'd revenged their untimely deaths.

Such that it was that the "Bloody Baron" of Slytherin Hall paid him a visit sometime after midnight. Achilleus awoke to the ethereal tap-tap-tapping of the Baron's sword on his bare chest. He turned to see the transparent form leaning back on a fictitious chair, smiling, and twirling his mustache.

"Good evening, Achilleus! How are you lad, deucedly good to see you again!"

"Baron!" Achilleus yawned. "Nice to see you sir. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Taking his sword and sticking it with a hardly audible thump in the floorboards, the Baron leaned forward, and said discreetly, "Your welfare Achilleus, that to be sure! Mind you, this isn't a social call. No offense!"

"None taken," Achilleus said, getting out of bed and shrugging on a shirt and pants.

The ghost asked, "How well do you know Bellatrix of the ancient and noble family Black?" There was a sharp note to his query.

"Rather too well in some circles, rather not in others; why do you ask?"

"And her father?"

"I know of him, that's all," he answered. "Again, why the curiosity?"

"She is on her way up here at this moment," the Baron said grimly. He wafted up out of the chair and headed for the door. "I'm keenly aware of certain disturbances in the ether. Earlier this evening I caught a certain ethereal chat between young Bella and her father Cygnus. He was rather piqued at you still being alive after your encounter with Fenrir Greyback the other night. I got the impression that he wished you dead."

"What did Greyback say?" Sharpe asked pointedly.

The Baron laughed and shot him a look, "Oh no more than he promised you, but that is exactly what made Cygnus suspicious." He poked his head through the door to the hall, and then back in. "Ah! Our young witch is coming up the stairs even as we speak. She's using a levitation spell so as to be silent as death itself!"

The Baron floated to Achilleus. "Be on your guard my friend. There are only two reasons Bellatrix Black would be so bold, and careful. She is on the hunt. For what, that is your concern, but it is either for her father or herself. Do not discount Cygnus! He has a powerful hold on his family!"

“Thank you for the warning, Baron, I appreciate it,” Achilles said sincerely.

“Think nothing of it my friend,” he smiled. “Good luck!”

The ghost levitated up through the ceiling, leaving Achilles alone. In the darkened bedroom. The only light came from a shaft of silver moonlight slanting through the diamond paned window. It didn’t illuminate much, the interior of the bedroom being all stone and dark paneling, but it was enough for Achilles to grab his whip out of the satchel next to his bed and hang it on his belt.

Thus equipped, Achilles put the pillows and satchel on the bed and covered them with the blanket, making it look as though he was still sound asleep. That done, the man moved swiftly to the door. With a dexterous leap, he climbed the paneling and disappeared into the shadows above.

A moment later, the wood of the door wavered as if suddenly insubstantial. Ghostlike, the beautiful form of Bellatrix Black passed through the timbers, wand in hand. Her dainty feet didn’t touch the floor, though she walked, moving like a phantom. She stopped, just a few feet inside the threshold. She waited, floating, peering through the darkness at the bed. Her head cocked just a bit, and an impish smile spread across her full lips. With a flick of her wand, she turned and ascended.

“Lumos!” she giggled.

The wand illuminated the Venatorum, who clung spider-like, to the moldings over the portal.

“Hello luv!” Bellatrix giggled again. “Got your hands full hanging like a spider on a thread, have you. Kind of at my mercy, you are.” With that, she wrapped her hands around Sharpe’s head and planted a long, luxurious kiss on his surprised mouth.

After releasing him, Achilles dropped dexterously to the floor. He held a hand up to take Bella’s as she wafted down, as if she were stepping down from a carriage. “What gave me away?”

She giggled again and hugged him close, saying, “It’s all your testosterone dancing with my pheromones! They make quite a racket!”

“That makes complete sense,” Achilles admitted.

Bella sauntered through the chamber, “Well, well they do put you up well, don’t they? I’m relegated to a tiny, tiny bed. I, Bellatrix Black of the ancient and noble family of Black—as my father keeps reminding me.”

“Is your father still unhappy?”

“Quite,” Bella told him, falling heavily into one of the two chairs by the fireplace. Blowing a wisp of unruly hair from her brow, she absently started the fireplace burning. “I endured an hour of his lecture. How tedious! Black this, Black that, oh to be rid of being a Black for just a bloody day!”

“I’ve never met him,” Achilles admitted, sitting opposite her. “I’m sorry, I thought I was clear with Fenrir. He was to satisfy your father. Greyback and I need to have a talk.”

“Why? You made a deal with a Werewolf at the expense of your reputation,” Bellatrix said. “Why Achilles?”

“For you,” he said simply.

“That is pathetic, Achilles,” Bellatrix said imperiously. “I refuse to be loved by someone who is pathetic!”

“I’m sorry if I disappoint you, Bella,” Achilles sighed.

“Oh, don’t be boring Achilles, I hate it when you’re boring,” she sighed.

“When I think about it, six years of training at the Vatican does not help make me interesting,” he admitted.

“I didn’t say you weren’t interesting, just that you were being boring,” she retorted.

“Then, back to your father,” Achilles suggested.

“Now you’re giving me a headache!”

“I have just the thing,” Achilles said, standing up and walking behind her chair.

“Just what are you up to, you naughty, naughty boy?”

Sharpe reached down underneath the tumbled mane of dark hair and massaged her neck and shoulders. Shortly thereafter the eldest Black daughter was purring. “Oh Achilles, I am putty in your hands.”

“Now, how can I help you with your father?”

“There’s no way to help, Achilles,” Bella lamented. “I am his eldest child. I have to carry the traditions of the Family Black. I was supposed to be a boy, you know.”

“In that, you failed miserably,” Achilles told her.

“But I can’t fail, that’s the bloody problem.”

“That’s what your father came all the way to Hogwarts to tell you?”

“Not exactly,” she said hesitantly.

“Well?”

“Well, apparently our kiss upset not only Rudolphus but also Father LeStrange as well, and since our match is important to both families, it was a problem. That was bad enough, but then Greyback hinted at our little tryst in the lake.” She glanced up, her large, beautiful eyes looking both disturbed and sad. “You can see how that may cause my father’s heart—what there is left of

it—to skip a beat. He’s already nervous over how my sister Andromeda has refused to show any interest in her cousins.”

“Ah, I see,” Achilles sighed. “You, the eldest, must make a respectable Pureblood match. I am an unwelcome interloper.”

“Don’t joke about it,” Bellatrix snapped. “This is serious! I am the eldest! My family has expectations of me. I have responsibilities. I’ve been taught all of my life that the purity of the family lines was important, and now,” she stopped, and then suddenly sprang up from the chair.

Pointing a threatening finger at Achilles Sharpe, she told to man, “Now you come along with your Muggle ways, catching me at my weakest moments. No more, Achilles Sharpe! No more!”

Bella walked away with her little nose in the air.

“Oh no you don’t,” Achilles snapped. With one single fluid motion he took the whip from his belt and sent it after the tempestuous Black beauty. It curled around her waist and CRACK! Smacked her right on her curvaceous buns. Bellatrix could retreat no further, turning her shocked expression to face Achilles. He simply smiled and slowly pulled at the whip, turning her to face him.

Bella grabbed the whip, wavering between amusement and offense. Her eyes shined in the dim room. She waited breathlessly.

Achilles reeled her in slowly but irresistibly. In short order they faced one another.

“I’m sorry I interfered with your life, Bellatrix Black, but you interfered with mine first.”

“And how did I do that, Achilles Sharpe?”

“By making me fall in love with you that first moment I laid eyes on you.”

“I did no such thing,” she said breathlessly. “Now, you need to let me go.”

“I don’t want you to go,” he told her in a low, loving growl. He pulled her the rest of the way in, wrapping his free arm irresistibly around her waist.

“Of course, you don’t,” she purred, giving in completely.

They kissed.

When they parted lips, she told Achilles, “You really have to show me how to use that.”

“Use what?” he asked, her beauty muddling his thoughts.

“The whip, darling, the whip,” she smiled.

“You’d be so delectably dangerous; I can’t wait to teach you!”

A hard knock on the door interrupted them. A strident voice forced its way through the heavy timbers. “Achilles Sharpe! I know you’re in there. Open! It is Cygnus Black!”

Bella gasped, "My father!" She looked wildly around.

Achilleus took her hand, leading her to the French doors onto the balcony. He opened the door. "Wait out here while I talk to him."

"Leave the doors open so I can listen!" she whispered.

Achilleus nodded, turning back toward the door. He crossed the room, and in the middle of another flurry of knocking, he opened the door. "Mr. Black?"

"You took long enough to open the door, Muggle!" Black snapped, moving past Sharpe and into the chamber.

"Muggle, is it?" he shot back. "I thought better of the manners of the Wizarding World."

"Don't give me that tongue, young man," Black said with furrowed brows. "You compromised my daughter! Now answer my question. What took you so long to reach the door? Are you quite alone? You'd better be!"

"It is the fate of a Venatorum to be alone, sir," Achilleus answered in as calm and reasonable a tone as he could muster. "To be honest, I was already asleep by the fire."

"With a whip? Asleep in a chair?"

"Well, you can't be too careful when there are Werewolves about," Achilleus retorted, not especially liking the man. Then reason calmed him. Achilleus could not help but wonder how he would react if someone was courting his daughter behind his back. In a more communicative tone, he added. "I am awake now. Of what service can I be to you, Mr. Black?"

Black looked him over. "Greyback lied. You're untouched. How is that possible? I heard you're an Incantamus, but that shouldn't stop a Werewolf. That is, unless Greyback lied about the entire event, and you never met!"

"Oh, we met," Achilleus assured the patriarch of the Black family. "He caught me by surprise, encumbered as I was with rescuing your daughter from a Merman and drowning. Charming, energetic girl, your daughter, but not the greatest of swimmers. It's lucky I happened along when I did."

"You just happened along, did you?" Black was angry, and he did not try to hide it. "You were stalking her."

"Actually, I was quite surprised to find her in my spot," Achilleus admitted. "After all, students are not allowed out of the castle at night, and for good reason."

"Enough of this evasion, Muggle," Black demanded. "Where is my daughter?"

"Why one Earth would you think to find her here, with a Muggle? I do not understand you, Mr. Black," Achilleus said politely.

After looking around the room and seeing no sign of his daughter, Cygnus Black turned on Achilles, and repeated his question.

“Why not try the Slytherin dormitory?”

“Damned Muggle!”

Sharpe took a step toward the older man, a threatening, angry expression on his normally impassive face. Black actually took a step back from the younger, larger man, immediately aware he’d crossed a line. Achilles seemed about to say something from the deep well of fury in his breast, but after a moment, remembering he was Bella’s father, he responded with a softer tone than his original expression would warrant.

“Mr. Black, I do not answer to demeaning labels, especially from families I esteem. I have in my short career, done service to the ancient and noble House of Black. Yet you come to my door after midnight knowing I am not ready to receive you. If you have fault with me sir, then say on. I am at your service.”

Sharpe’s polite response disarmed Black. He stood confused, for a moment, and then said, “Well, obviously my daughter is not here.”

“Obviously,” Achilles replied coolly.

“And yet she has been in your presence, you have compromised her—Mu-Mr. Sharpe—yes you have compromised her twice now! It is scandalous!”

“Scandalous?” Sharpe asked.

“Scandalous!” Black insisted. “First, that infamous kiss in Dumbledore’s classroom, and then a midnight swim with Bellatrix in the lake. Don’t deny it! Greyback witnessed the tryst!”

“Greyback, who you sent to kill or infect me,” Achilles noted.

“Werewolves are a professional peril for your vocation, are they not?” Black sneered.

Sharpe laughed grimly, “They are, but you’re a fool if you trust Greyback’s word or his observation.”

“You deny your romantic tryst with my daughter?”

“Romantic!” Achilles laughed again. “I saved your daughter from being taken captive by a Merman of the lake! Without me, you’d be bargaining with a Merman right now, a Merman who would be using your daughter as a scullery maid after he’d deflowered her! Now there’s a scandal for you!”

Black stiffened. “Are you serious?”

“Absolutely,” Sharpe replied. He spread his hands out wide as if to admit his guilt. “I readily admit to my behavior in Professor Dumbledore’s classroom. I understand it warrants your

disapproval, but I steadfastly refuse to apologize for kissing your daughter or for saving her and honor.”

“Indeed!” Black exclaimed.

“Indeed Mr. Black.”

Black turned and paced away and then back to Sharpe. He drew himself up and said sincerely, if with little pleasure, “If true, then I appreciate the rescue of my daughter.”

“If you doubt my account then I demand you confirm it. Certainly, a wizard of your power and prestige should, regardless, demand an apology from the Chief of the Mer-people for the attack on your daughter. He will root out the brigand. That will verify my account.”

“You are quite right, Mr. Sharpe, and for my daughter’s honor and our family name I will do so. I do not doubt your word, Sharpe. In your short career as a Vatican Venatorum your exploits need no false embellishment. You have my apologies; I should not trust Fenrir Greyback’s word so far.”

“Then you are satisfied?”

“As to my daughter’s life and honor, as well as my family’s future fortunes, I am in your debt. However, there is still the matter of kissing my daughter in front of her peers—you—a Muggle!” Again, Sharpe’s expression stopped him. “You must understand how this looks from my,” he hesitated.

“Pureblood point of view,” Sharpe supplied.

“You don’t understand,” Black insisted, shaking his head.

“Oh, but I do,” Achilles insisted, turning, and walking toward a small fireplace with two leather chairs set by it. “Will you sit? Or do you prefer to stand and continue your interrogation of me? Am I so beneath you that you cannot sit and speak with me, man-to-man? I am yet young, but as you admit, I have already done service to your family.”

Black stalked over to one of the chairs, looked at it, and finally sat down stiffly. Half under his breath, he muttered, “Yes, yes you have done service to my family, I can appreciate that. but this passes all bounds of decorum!” He looked back up at Achilles. “The kiss by itself is scandalous enough, but all anyone will hear is that you and Bellatrix met for a midnight tryst at the lake. What has passed between you and my daughter is scandalous! We are a laughingstock of the wizarding world!”

“The Blacks a laughingstock? I think you over-read the event,” Achilles shrugged, sitting down. “Be that as it may, you bear all the responsibility.”

“Me, how so?” Black demanded.

“If your daughter hadn’t been the consummate Black family beauty and enchanted me, I wouldn’t have lost all decorum and kissed her when she attacked me,” Achilles sighed.

“Enchanted you? Impossible! You are an Incantamus, you are immune to magic,” Black protested.

“Not immune to the magic of Bellatrix’s eyes,” Sharpe replied. “Not immune to her spirit, and certainly not immune to her beauty. You have conjured a wondrous daughter, Cygnus Black. Bellatrix Black is enchantment itself!”

Black stood, dumbfounded. “You’re in love with her!”

“Is that any small wonder?”

Black rose, wandering as if in a daze to the open doors, and before Achilles could stop him, out onto the balcony. The elder Black started, turning to his left, staring at something out of Achilles’ view. “What is this?”

Cygnus Black did not look angry, simply amazed. He stared at Achilles. “Explain this!”

Achilles, surprised that Black didn’t erupt in fury, joined him on the balcony—anxiously curious. There he saw the object that confounded Cygnus Black. It was Bellatrix, or rather a facsimile of her seemingly in stone. The life-size and amazingly life-like statue gazed up at the stars, conjuring with her wand.

Achilles sighed and smiled. “Bellatrix has a vicious sense of humor,” he said. Achilles walked up and tenderly stroked her cheek. “She knows I am under her spell, and she sent this to torment me; to ever remind me of what I can never have.”

Cygnus Black actually laid his hand on the young man’s shoulder. It was only for a moment, and then he withdrew it, and said stiffly, “That is so like my Bella. Very well, Achilles Sharpe. I am satisfied. I shall leave you now. Good night!”

“Good night, Mr. Black,” Sharpe said.

The father left.

A moment later, Bellatrix transfigured from a statue back to herself. She threw her arms around Sharpe’s neck. “To think, I owe Professor Dumbledore’s transfiguration class for saving us; and for discovering that you’re truly in love with me!”

“Hard to believe, isn’t it?” He kissed her.

“But now, I must get back, just in case my father summons me from the dormitory,” Bella said. “G’nite luv, and remember, you’re under my enchantment! You’re not allowed to fall in love with anyone else! That’s my curse on you!”

#

The Vatican Venatorum, all twenty-two years of him, walked, coffee in hand, towards Dumbledore’s office. He was to meet with the professor before the Defense Against the Dark Arts class. The door was at the apex of a “T” junction, and the corridors were crowded.

From the stem of the “T,” heading towards Dumbledore’s door came Bellatrix and her sisters Narcissa and Andromeda. Professor McGonagall trailed them, keeping an eye on them. Achilleus slowed, preparing to announce as indifferent a good morning greeting as he could manage with the overt beating of his heart.

Before he could speak, a group of Gryffindor boys came from the other corridor. One, a poodle head blonde boy, stopped and addressed Bellatrix and her sisters. “Well, if it isn’t Banshee Bella and her chicks. How are you, Bella? Kiss any Muggles lately? Maybe you’d like to try a wizard for a change.”

“Well, that would rule you out, wouldn’t it McLagan? From what I hear, you’re still finding first year spells a bit beyond your wit. How much does your daddy pay extra to keep you in school?”

McLagan snarled and started to move towards Bellatrix. She drew her wand.

Achilleus stepped forward, putting himself between the two, and saying, “I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

“Muggle!”

“Muggle?” Achilleus Sharpe was used to those in Hogwarts, Durmstrang, as well as other schools, who did not accept him as a “Muggle” and indeed sought to take him down a notch. So it was with patient, impatience that he simply sipped his coffee.

“Yes Muggle! Who are you to interfere? You’re not even supposed to be here. What is it that you can teach us—nothing! That’s what.”

“Yes, I can well imagine there’s nothing I could possibly teach you, Mr. McLagan,” Sharpe smiled. “I only interfered for your benefit. Ms. Black was about to send you straight to Madame Pomphrey’s. I only hope Mr. Filch can manage to collect all your parts.”

Scattered laughter by most; cackling by Bellatrix.

“Think you’re funny, do you?” the boy said, seemingly surprised that the Muggle wasn’t in awe of him. His fellow classmates egged him on. So, he retorted, “I hear you’re immune to magic! Is that true or just a trick? What are you doing here Muggle?”

“Why don’t you ask Professor McGonagall or Professor Dumbledore? I don’t think they’d waste their time or yours to no purpose. Of course, maybe they overestimate your powers of discernment. What’s the matter, one too many blodgers to the head?”

“What did you say to me, Muggle?” the boy stammered. Bella and her sisters giggled, knowing what was about to happen.

McLagan looked at them and sneered, but that just goaded the elder Black sister.

Bella cackled, “Easy McLagan, you’ll get him mad!”

“You’d know all about that wouldn’t you, Banshee Bella!”

Bella's beautiful face turned instantly into that of Bellatrix.

"What's it like being a Muggle's tart, eh Bellatrix?" he prodded dangerously. His friends stepped away, knowing he'd crossed into perilous territory.

Bella drew her wand, but before she could do anything a powerful hand grabbed McLagan's shoulder and spun him around. With an explosive blow to the chest with his free hand, Sharpe propelled young McLagan into the wall still holding his coffee. "I've had about enough of your cheek, boy. Now why don't you apologize to Miss Black!"

"Apologize?"

Achilleus Sharpe advanced on the taller boy. "Yes, apologize! Is the concept strange to you? Come now, I know Hogwarts Professors have higher standards for their students. What is your problem—boy?"

Irritated, Professor McGonagall appeared just about to issue a rapier retort to stop the situation, when McLagan flew into a tirade.

"You're stupid Muggle—Stupid!" he exclaimed. "I'll teach you to talk back to your superiors!" He drew his wand and shouted, "Expelleramus!"

The spell sped at Achilleus' breast and did—nothing.

Achilleus brushed the breast of his jacket and sipped his coffee.

"Care to try again?"

"Stupify!"

Same result.

"That was just—stupid," Achilleus smiled.

The boy, who was reasonably athletic, and big, rushed him, yelling angrily, "I'll shove my wand down your throat and see how you like being roasted from the inside!"

Achilleus transferred his coffee coolly to the other hand, stepped aside, grabbed the boy's throat, and lifted him from the floor. As the boy's impetus swung him beneath the choke hold, Achilleus slammed him to the floor. The boy's breath exited his lungs in a single GASP!

Before the boy could catch his breath, Achilleus placed his boot on the braggart's chest, holding him down. After taking another leisurely sip of his coffee, none of which spilled in the confrontation, he looked down at the boy with a quizzical expression. "You know, I've had to endure these situations before. I must admit, Slytherin House students are much more of a challenge."

He winked at Bella, who smirked adorably at him.

"You bastard!" the Gryffindor cursed.

“That will be enough Mr. McLagan!” Professor McGonagall snapped.

“But Professor, this Muggle!” he complained.

“Mr. Sharpe acted with much more restraint than I would have, considering your infantile behavior!” she interrupted. “Ten points from Gryffindor, and a month’s detention for you!”

McLagan, shut his mouth.

Bella cackled.

Professor McGonagall sighed and told Achilles, “My apologies Mr. Sharpe. You may release Mr. McLagan to my not so tender mercies. I have no patience with idiots, most especially stupid ones!”

“Professor!” Sharpe assented, giving McGonagall a slight bow as he removed his boot.

McLagan staggered up only to yelp with pain as the Professor snapped her wand like a whip, herding him down the hall.

Achilles simply sipped his coffee, but his eyes were on Bella.

Bellatrix sashayed on her way, but she passed close enough to brush against his arm, covering her sensuous attack with a biting remark. “You’re so boring, Sharpe!”

“Sooo boring!” he drawled, acknowledging her. He turned to watch her leave, only to see Professor Dumbledore at his door, watching them both.

Bellatrix colored, and she hurried past Dumbledore with her sisters.

“Ah, the Black sisters! Good day ladies!” Dumbledore smiled.

“Professor!” they said curtly, scurrying by.

Dumbledore turned his gaze back to Sharpe. “Achilles! A word before class, if I may.”

Achilles nodded, “I am at your service Professor.”

Achilles joined Dumbledore and they entered his office. Once inside, the wizard closed the door.

“I wonder, Achilles, if you have any idea what the subject of my discourse might be. What do you think?”

“I have heard that you will be following Headmaster Dippet as the new Headmaster of Hogwarts,” Achilles answered diplomatically. He liked Dumbledore and thought him the foremost wizard of the day both in power and wisdom. However, there were times when the Vatican thought the wizard less than understanding toward the non-magic population. “I hope you are not about to sever the relationship between the Vatican and Hogwarts. I think it has been very productive, myself.”

“Hardly Achilles,” Dumbledore replied. “Indeed, my curiosity is much more personal than professional. I hope that does not worry you overmuch. I think it would ease both our minds to talk about it over a cup of tea, or coffee, if you are willing.”

“Of course,” Achilles replied, although he was a bit uneasy about what the subject matter might be. Dumbledore was poignantly accurate in his observations. That could mean but one subject for the interrogation. This was not surprising given the circumstances, but Achilles did not welcome it.

As they approached a small table with a tea set on it, a knock at the door sounded. Dumbledore was in the middle of making a motion to ignore it when the door unceremoniously opened. A tall, lithe young man strode in.

“Tom! Tom Riddle! To what do I owe the pleasure?” Dumbledore started, obviously surprised, and by appearances, somewhat piqued at the lack of courtesy.

“Voldemort, Professor,” the man said, not once looking at Achilles. “Lord Voldemort, if you will. I no longer go by my parents’ nomenclature. I’m sure you understand.”

“Lord Voldemort then,” Dumbledore assented, though his manner was grave. Achilles noted with hidden surprise that the powerful wizard was not amused by Riddle’s claim, not in the slightest.

“I saw you enter your office, and desiring to see you, present myself. I am interested in the Defense Against the Dark Arts position, and I wonder if I might have a word with you about it?”

“Certainly,” Dumbledore smiled diplomatically. “However, as you see I have a previous appointment with Mr. Sharpe here.”

“Certainly, the Muggle can wait!” Voldemort said with obvious disdain.

Sharpe’s brows rose, and he sipped his now cooling coffee.

Dumbledore very politely said, “Alas, Mr. Sharpe is a Visiting Professor at Hogwarts, while you are not. Still, after our appointment I’m certain I can find time before my next class.”

“A Muggle teaching at Hogwarts—can this be true?” Voldemort was visibly shocked.

“We often have visiting professors from Hogwarts at the Vatican,” Achilles told Voldemort. “Professor Dumbledore, to our honor among them. They are quite well received, I assure you.”

“Of course, they are,” Voldemort smiled thinly.

“Perhaps one day you can pay us a visit. Lord Voldemort.” Achilles inclined his head but otherwise showed no emotion.

“I shall certainly do so,” he said, turning on his heel with a flourish of his black robes the presumptive Lord Voldemort left down the corridor.

They sat down at the table, but Achilles looked back through the closed door to where Voldemort previously stood. “Be careful with that one, Professor. Tom Riddle’s name has been spoken of in more places than Hogwarts.” He glanced back at Dumbledore. “I say this with all due respect, sir, but there are those in the Vatican who believe he is your equal—and not in a benevolent way—this, despite his age.”

“Then all is in balance, Achilles,” Dumbledore said evenly.

Sharpe nodded, acknowledging the subject to be closed, at least for the moment. “You wished to speak with me? I hope I did not transgress Hogwarts boundaries. If I have it was not my intention. I do admit, however, that Mr. McLagan did trigger my temper. How can I set your mind at ease?”

“Hopefully Mr. McLagan will take the lesson to heart. Yet my curiosity is about something else entirely.” Dumbledore paused. “Is there something about Bellatrix Black that you wish to tell me about, Achilles.”

“Professor Dumbledore, sir, what is it you wish to know,” Achilles sighed, clasping his hands behind his back.

“I had a visit from Cygnus Black last night,” Dumbledore told the man. He collected his tea and motioned for Achilles to put his coffee on the desk. A flick of the wand and it steamed again.

“As did I,” Achilles sighed, sitting down heavily. “Mr. Black was unhappy with my behavior in your classroom the other day. Specifically, my behavior towards Bellatrix.”

The old wizard paused, looking over his glasses, before saying, “Strangely, our conversation was on the exact same subject. He is a powerful, conceited man, the head of an ancient, powerful and conceited family. While you may find your stolen kiss amusing, Cygnus certainly does not. Indeed, I think his most serious concern is that young Bellatrix found the kiss equally amusing.”

“I do apologize if I’ve created a problem, Professor.”

Dumbledore’s eyes narrowed, “Are you in love with Bellatrix, Achilles?”

“Straight to the point,” the Venatorum observed. Steeling his expression, Sharpe replied, “I won’t waste your time, Professor Dumbledore. I can’t say for certain, as it’s only been a few days. If you’re asking my true opinion, then I’m quite afraid that I am.” He went on to describe, modestly, the adventure at the lake that preceded Mr. Black’s visit.

Achilles got up. He spread his arms out, guilty. Picking up his coffee cup, he muttered, “I need some brandy in this!” That said, he took a long, painful gulp. His brows rose in surprise. Looking at Dumbledore, he growled, “Rum? Excellent! Unique flavor.”

“My brother Abeforth’s own recipe. I anticipated your need.”

“Better than I deserve,” Achilles said, then he turned back to the subject. “It was quite unintentional I assure you, but for all that it feels quite real.” He paused, and eventually admitted,

“This complicates things tremendously. Alas, in my profession I try to avoid connections for obvious reasons. Professor, you cannot imagine what it takes to make that admission for a man like me.”

“Having a host of secrets myself, and many more years to accumulate them, I think I can imagine, Achilles. Yes. I too, have been enamored by someone not of a purely *benevolent* nature. Ah, but love can be as strange as it is uncontrollable.”

“What can I say, professor? I respect your position and apologize for adding to your challenges. I completely understand if you want me to terminate my time here and return to the Vatican. Simply say the word and I am gone.”

Dumbledore raised a hand, “Stay dear boy, stay! I mean no such thing! Indeed, quite the opposite.”

Achilles’ eyes narrowed. “I don’t understand.”

Dumbledore sighed. “You know, Achilles, love can be a very unwelcome circumstance, but it is never evil. We will need love, yes, both worlds will need whatever love we can find. You, Achilles, are one of those steadfast persons that help us get through turbulent times; those times are shortly to be upon us.

“Tom Riddle, who now calls himself Lord Voldemort, is a part of those times. The ancient and noble family Black, of whom our beautiful and talented Bellatrix is the eldest scion, will not be left out. Bellatrix is the greatest up-and-coming witch or wizard of this time with the notable exception of Tom Riddle. Alas, her upbringing is tainted with the Black family prejudice against non-magical people and those it deems not of pure blood. It can be a powerful poison for the mind, Achilles, very powerful.”

The young Venatorum nodded. “Go on.”

“You cannot have fallen in love with Bellatrix if there were not sufficient positive charms in her nature—she is not beyond hope, nor are her sisters. If the opportunity to turn Bellatrix from that dark path presented itself, I would encourage it,” Dumbledore told Achilles.

“Her father has a powerful hold on her,” Sharpe said.

“As do you,” the elder man laughed.

“I cannot do this for your purposes, Dumbledore,” Achilles told him.

“You would be unsuccessful if you pursued her for anything other than sincere love. Do not doubt its power.”

“Love is fickle. I might succeed only in driving her into her father’s desires, or to *him*.” The young man’s voice was deep as the grave.

“Him? Rudolphus LeStrange or Lord Voldemort?”

“Rudy is only a vicious underling. Riddle is dangerous,” Achilleus told him. He paced the office. Dumbledore waited patiently. Achilleus glanced back at the old wizard. “You know, there’s a central trait of self-sacrifice required of a Venatorum. I will say this to you. The more I reflect on this, the more I realize how I do truly care for Bellatrix Black. I would save her from a dark path at the expense of my life, or even her love.”

“That truly is love, Achilleus,” Dumbledore sighed. “I know I appear callous, for I look ahead and see a need. But not all of my motivation is military. No, as I too have noticed Bellatrix’s charms beyond her family prejudice. She is a powerful personality, and such people can go from one extreme to the other. On one side she could find happiness in love, and on the other merely satisfaction in power. Having faced the same argument myself, I would wish her happiness.”

“Then we understand one another Professor.” Sharpe said.

“We do, Achilleus,” the wizard smiled.

Sharpe nodded and turned to leave, “I’ll see you in class Professor.”

“One more thing, Mr. Sharpe,” Dumbledore said, and he got up and placed a hand on the young man’s shoulder. “A favor if you will. Now you don’t have to do it—it is a bit dangerous—but seeing as you and Lord Voldemort don’t see eye to eye, I can’t see it would hurt. You have my permission to provoke Tome Riddle. Poke the Bear, Mr. Sharpe.”

“Gladly, professor,” Achilleus smiled, and left the office.

#

Professor Slughorn gathered the class at his lab table as he often did before the brewing period. The few selected senior students who made it to Slughorn’s advanced potions class included Bellatrix.

Even here in potions, not Bellatrix’s favorite class by any stretch of the imagination, the eldest daughter of the Black family was unique. She was not meticulous like Tom Riddle. She was not intuitively talented like her sister Narcissa. No, Bellatrix willed her potions to do exactly what they were supposed to do. Even Slughorn could not always say how.

So it was, that as Dumbledore talked with Sharpe, something that disturbed Bella’s thoughts, the Professor instructed his class on of all things a love potion. He lifted the lid of the cauldron, inviting the class to gather round. “Amortentia is the most powerful and complex love potion possible—though of course it has nothing to do with real love—still obsession is a practical substitute. Now then, a good brew can be identified by the pearlescent sheen and the unique scent, unique to each person, that is.”

“You shouldn’t need it, Bella,” Narcissa, who was so adept she was advanced a year. “You’ve already got that Muggle wrapped around your finger.”

“Oh, shut up Cissy!” Bellatrix retorted.

“Very well, everyone, let’s get to brewing,” Slughorn smiled. “10 points to whomever gets it right and be mindful I know what it should smell like!”

Bellatrix, flustered by her sister, scurried to the lab table. She didn’t escape Slughorn’s gaze though. As head of Slytherin House, he chuckled. “I must say, I should award ten points to Slytherin as a matter of course, as one of the Black sisters is almost assured of getting this brew right—not that they need it of course!”

Narcissa was next to Bella and was already studying the recipe. Bella blew away a wisp of her unruly hair, already irritated. She’d just gotten to the recipe when the opening of the classroom door interrupted the class. All eyes looked up, except Narcissa, who was already intent on her brew. A tall, hooded figure stood there. He cast his hood back to reveal a handsome if unapproachable face. Bella thought him overly dramatic, but then she heard Professor Slughorn’s normally affable voice quiver with nervous energy and announce, “Lord Voldemort!”

“Who?” Bella whispered to Narcissa. “Lord? Who does he think he is?”

“Shhhh, Bella!” Narcissa whispered sharply, suddenly distracted. “Father knows him! I think that’s how father was able to enlist Fenrir Greyback—Lord Voldemort offered the Werewolf’s services.”

“Greyback served him?” Bella was intrigued. “But Greyback hates the wizarding world!”

“He’s powerful, even Slughorn’s scared of him,” Narcissa told her. Then she cautioned her sister. “Get back to your brewing! You heard Slughorn. He expects one of us to win this.”

“Oh, all right,” Bellatrix snapped, not happy with any of the information. She got to work, mumbling, and grumbling.

However, Bellatrix hadn’t completed her first perusal of the brewing instructions when Voldemort appeared at her shoulder.

“Bellatrix Black!”

Bella looked at him in surprise and some amount of shock. She was struck by the reality that this Lord Voldemort would address a student without permission from the potions master. In Slytherin House especially, conventions were followed to the letter. She looked at Slughorn, awaiting the correction of the head of Slytherin House, but none came. Professor Slughorn stood with a vacuous, nervous expression as if he didn’t dare confront this person.

“I am, sir,” she said, falling back on her own reserve of courage and easy offense.

“You’re not brewing this for the infamous Vatican Muggle, I hope?” he sneered.

“Hardly,” she retorted instinctively. “I’m brewing it because Professor Slughorn has assigned it!”

Lord Voldemort took the spell book from her hands, saying, “And yet, if you will notice, the successful brewing of this potion requires the brewer to identify a target individual, otherwise

there is not enough potency in the brew to achieve the required effect—thus, failure! Who then is your target, if not the Muggle?”

“It is certainly not the Muggle!” Bella responded volcanically. Again, the reply was instinctive; she didn’t know why she said it.

“Who then?” Voldemort demanded.

“If I need to target someone, it would be Rudolphus LeStrange,” she replied.

“Yet you do not desire his love or infatuation,” Voldemort said, eyes narrowing.

“You are perceptive, sir,” Bella replied, refusing to be intimidated. “He is my father’s choice for me; therefore, he is the obvious target.”

“Well said, Bellatrix, well said,” Lord Voldemort smiled. “You respect the old ways. I will remember that about you. There will be a time when all the power you wish for will be before you. Be ready when I call.”

“Yes, Milord,” she said automatically, confused, and to her surprise, somewhat awed.

Voldemort left Bellatrix and went to Slughorn. The potion master looked ill at ease.

“Hello Tom, or should I say Lord Voldemort, what brings you to your old classroom?”

“I am here to bend Dumbledore’s ear,” Voldemort said evenly. “I’m seeking the Defense Against the Dark Arts post.”

“Excellent, excellent,” Slughorn said, with forced good humor. “I’m sure you’re up for it, though you might find the students trying at times.” As if on cue, Bellatrix tried to force her potion to behave—not unusual for her, but nearly always disastrous for anyone else—waving her wand and snapping it just so.

Crackle-SNAP-Crackle-POOF!

A cloud of noxious gas emanated from the cauldron. A sour expression clouded Bella’s beautiful face.

“Oh dear, that didn’t work! Bellatrix Black. Supremely talented girl, a bit impatient though. She does like to force things as opposed to letting the ingredients do their job. Strange techniques, though they usually work.”

“She can be worked with, certainly, but it is you, I wanted to see professor,” Voldemort said firmly.

“Certainly, what can I do for you? If you want me to put in a good word for you that can be done.” Slughorn offered his help, but it was apparent he wasn’t enthusiastic about it. Rather, he sounded almost fearful.

Smiling thinly, Voldemort replied, “Actually, I’d rather you didn’t get into details on our discussions. Dumbledore is rather prejudiced on certain subjects that you and I find curious, don’t you know. I don’t want to give him the wrong impression.”

“Very well, if that’s what you wish.”

“It is,” Voldemort said sharply, and he departed Slughorn without another word.

Lord Voldemort passed by Bellatrix on the way out, stopping momentarily at her ruined potion. He glanced at it, and then at her. “A superior idea, but I sense you were not completely focused on your spell. Commitment is essential even in the simplest charms.”

“Yes milord,” she replied.

Voldemort hesitated, as if sensing something in her, or searching for something, and then left.

Narcissa leaned to Bellatrix, and whispered, “What was that all about?”

Bella shook her head, “I don’t know, I don’t know what to think of him.”

Narcissa won the brewing. Bella’s love potion was an inert batch of sludge, and she didn’t care one bit.

#

Bellatrix and Narcissa prepared to part after Slughorn’s class. Narcissa was on to Divining, and Bellatrix to her favorite class, but her least favorite professor: Dumbledore teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts.

“Why do they employ him if he’s no good,” Narcissa asked.

“Oh, it’s not that he isn’t a good professor, none better if I’m honest about it, but he’s so dreadfully diplomatic about it. If it’s gotten to the point where you’re dueling, go on and get it done. Teach them a lesson they won’t ever forget! I like to make them squirm, so they never want to tangle with me again!”

“Oh Bella, you can be almost cruel sometimes,” her sister chided her. “That Hufflepuff girl was in the infirmary for a week, and she is the sweetest thing!”

“Did her a favor, I did, she needs to smarten up. What if she ends up in Knockturn Alley for some reason? You can’t get yourself out of a corner by smiling sweetly.”

“You could, if it were that Vampire Hunter who had you backed in a corner, I’ll warrant!” Narcissa laughed, but before Bella could retort, she saw their sister. “Oh, Bella look! Its Andromeda!”

Bella turned and she too saw their sister. They were about to call when a boy called her first. Andromeda smiled and to their disgust, blushed.

“It’s that Ted Tonks again!” Bella exclaimed.

Narcissa muttered, “I warned her about being seen in the company of a Muggle-born. Father won’t be pleased if he hears about it.”

“No, I should think not!” Bella frowned.

“Oh well, at least she’s not snogging a Muggle like someone we know!” Narcissa teased in a good-natured sisterly way. She skipped out of the way of Bella’s retaliatory slap and disappeared into the crowd of students, giggling.

For an instant Bella’s outthrust bulldog scowl cleared the area around her. No one wanted to be around Bellatrix Black when she was angry. Then she stomped off to class, muttering, “This is too much! Achilles Sharpe, I am done with you!”

#

Dumbledore’s interview with Lord Voldemort, or Tom, as he called him, was in fact interrupted by his class, but Dumbledore invited his former student to the class itself. “You may as well observe how Defense Against the Dark Arts is conducted now, seeing as you’re wanting the position.”

Suspicious, Voldemort nonetheless assented.

When they walked through the door the students were already assembled. The scattered bits of murmuring conversation and laughter ceased when Dumbledore entered the room, though one of the centers of discussion was apparent: Achilles Sharpe was standing next to the professor’s desk.

Dumbledore said passing hellos to notable students, in this case very notable. “Good afternoon LeStrange; Mr. Weasley—how are you? Good afternoon, Bellatrix!” He smiled down at her. She failed to smile back. Reaching the front table, Dumbledore turned around, and affably greeted them, “Good afternoon class!”

“Good afternoon, Professor Dumbledore!”

“Now class, if you remember, and I hope you do, as I will expect two pages of parchment on the latest assignment due tomorrow,” associated groans. “Not to worry, not to worry,” the professor smiled as he reached the front table. He motioned to Achilles, “As it so happens, I have enlisted one of the foremost authorities on our current study—Vampires—with the expressed intention of illuminating you on the subject. Mr. Achilles Sharpe is a Vatican Venatorum; that is, he is a Vampire Hunter. Now the last fifteen minutes of the period will be for questions and answers with Mr. Sharpe. I suggest you ask the questions posed at the end of your reading assignment. That will make the parchment a simple task, so long as you’ve done your reading!”

A hand went up, and Dumbledore called on Rudolphus LeStrange. “Professor, the Muggle is hardly older than we are. How should he know anything about real Vampires? Shouldn’t we rather trust Lord Voldemort, if you’re not willing to tell us of your own experiences?”

There were several assenting comments, especially from Slytherin House.

Voldemort straightened and smiled at the Muggle.

“Mr. LeStrange, I caution you not to use derogatory nomenclature on visiting teachers to our school. Five points from Slytherin house for your lack of etiquette.” Groans from the Slytherin. Bellatrix rolled her eyes and looked bored, apparently determined not to be interested in anything about Achilles Sharpe. “Still, I will address your question. I neglected to introduce Tom Riddle, also known to some of you as Lord Voldemort, but he is here as an observer only. If memory serves, and please correct me if I’m wrong, your experience with Vampires is limited, is it not, Tom?”

“You are quite correct,” Voldemort said arrogantly. “Indeed, once a wizard or witch achieves a certain level of power and proficiency the undead are not a matter of contention.”

“Then obviously there is no need for this class,” Dumbledore said with mock surprise. “Mr. Sharpe, would you care to refute Mr. Riddle and illuminate my class? The stage is yours, sir.”

“Thank you, Professor Dumbledore,” Achilles said, taking off his frock coat and laying it on the table. He walked to the front of the table and then down the center aisle of the class, while Dumbledore took his seat and Voldemort stood in the back corner, scowling, and observing.

Achilleus undid his tie as he walked, heading right for Rudolphus. “Vampire, derived from the Hungarian *vampir*, a blood sucking ghoul, cursed by the Devil.” Achilles wore a white linen shirt which did little to hide the muscular build so rare in mages. Tie removed, he began to unbutton his shirt, much to the amazement of the class.

“The line of Vampires we know today derives from a pact between Vlad Tepes, the Impaler, Voivode of Wallachia, also known as Vlad Dracula, Son of the Dragon. In order to save his country, and thereby all of Europe, from the invasion of Sultan Mehmed II, Vlad made a deal with the Devil and became the first modern Vampire.”

Achilleus stopped in front of LeStrange. “I know some of you from previous classes, don’t I LeStrange? You’re ignorant, Mr. LeStrange.” LeStrange glowered at him. Sharpe chuckled and looked around at the class, “No matter, *almost* all of you are ignorant, but that’s why I’m here and you’re here isn’t it? There’s no shame in that. I, myself was supremely ignorant once, Mr. LeStrange, and I believed much as Mr. Riddle does, that my training, my power—for you see I am an Incantamus, immune to magic—made me the master of any wizard and even the undead. I was wrong.”

Achilleus Sharpe pulled his shirt off his shoulder, and there was a gasp.

Voldemort cursed, “Damn Muggle, they’re animals!”

Bellatrix blushed and looked away.

“Behold the price of arrogance and ignorance, a deadly combination,” Achilles told them, pointing out a ragged scar at his neck, just a few inches from his jugular. “Now, I came away with this little love bite upon entering the lair of Vampire a little over three centuries old—

experienced, for their kind. You may have heard of him—in life and later in undeath, his title was Laird Maclaren.”

“Maclaren!” exclaimed a student. “There was a Laird Maclaren who lived not far from here!”

“Quite correct,” Sharpe nodded. “His castle is actually only a few hours walk from Hogsmeade.” The class, learning that a Vampire lived so close to Hogwarts sat up and paid attention.

“He disappeared when I was young, but there were stories,” the boy said.

“Were there indeed, Mr.?”

“Finnegan, sir; my apologies, Finneas Finnegan. Our land butts up against the Laird’s estate,” he said. “Me Mum would never let us out after sunset, and hung garlic outside our windows, but she never let on why.”

“Yes, Lair Maclaren returned from a trip to the Continent—infected. He was active in the neighborhood for several hundred years.” Sharpe glanced at Voldemort. “Lord Voldemort, did you know him by any chance? Certainly, you must have heard the stories.”

Voldemort glared at him.

“I wonder at that,” Achilleus remarked. “He was active when you attended Hogwarts, and certainly you were powerful enough to deal with him, that is, if your theory is true. Still, it was three years past when Headmaster Dippet asked the Vatican to send a Venatorum to deal with him. Apparently, Laird Maclaren developed a weakness for the young witches of Hogwarts, which is not to be wondered at.” He paused and smiled. The ladies sighed and giggled at the compliment. The boys, who could not compete physically, or with his battle scars groaned.

“Of course, it was not just the witches he sought. If the opportunity presented itself young wizards were fair game. In this particular instance, three of your peers were taken—three. Now think about it. Why was I called here to Hogwarts to take care of Laird Maclaren? Hogwarts has powerful mages like Professor Dumbledore, Professor McGonagall, or even you, Tom Riddle.”

“Lord Voldemort, if you please,” Tom replied coldly.

“Yes,” Sharpe smiled with dripping condescension. Riddle scowled, but the Sharpe turned away from him. The scowl deepened.

“Ladies and gentlemen, a Vampire is faster than you, stronger than you, and has powers of sight, scent, and hearing you cannot match despite your power or proficiency. He or she can make themselves invisible, change into the form of a wolf or bat, and once latched onto your jugular it is too late.” He paused for effect. The class was still, silent.

Sharpe moved to Bellatrix Black’s desk and stood over her. He stared hard into her beautiful eyes, and she dared to stare back. “I have heard of the reputations and seen the proof of powerful wizards and witches right here at Hogwarts—you, among them, Miss Black.”

“Do you care to put that to the test, Professor Sharpe—again?”

He leaned on the desk, not taking his eyes off hers. “Courage and fortitude, you have both those traits Miss Black. You will need them if you are to survive an encounter with a Vampire with your soul intact! For instance, you have terrifyingly bewitching eyes, Miss Black.”

The class chuckled.

“Yet the Vampire’s stare is hypnotic. It grows with the power and age of a Vampire. Chances are that none of you—not a single one of you—would get off a single spell, not unless your will is strong, and your courage does not fail you.”

He stood upright again and stalked through the class until he came back to LeStrange. “Even if you did get a spell off, the Vampire is nearly as resistant to magic as I am.”

“So how do you fight them,” Mr. Finnegan asked.

“We will get to that, Mr. Finnegan,” Sharpe said politely. “First, let me tell you how NOT to fight them! When Hogwarts called, the Vatican sent me. It was my first solo assignment. Now I had hunted before. I’m immune to magic. I am an expert in armed and hand-to-hand combat. I’d been rigorously training since I was twelve. I was brimming with confidence. Yet, because I was arrogant, Laird Maclaren came within a quarter of an inch of killing or worse, claiming me.” Again, he showed them his scars.

Voldemort laughed.

Sharpe turned on him. “That is exactly the attitude that will get you killed, or worse, turned into a Demon of the Devil, himself.”

“That may be a danger for you, Sharpe, but not to me,” Voldemort smiled.

“Very well,” Sharpe, nodded. He walked to the front of the class and then motioned with dramatic flair to Voldemort. “Then pray instruct us all, Lord Voldemort! A Vampire is nearly as immune to magic as I am. Show us, instruct us on what you would do if I were a Vampire, and I came for you!”

Sharpe began to walk toward Voldemort, his step leisurely.

Voldemort withdrew his wand. Twirling it at a display of two crossed swords, he sent them at the Venatorum. Sharpe stepped lithely aside, and they clattered to the floor.

“Vampires are faster than me, Tom! That won’t stop them!”

He closed.

Voldemort conjured a wall of wicked green flame from the stones of the floor.

Bellatrix, and those in the front rows recoiled at the heat, but Sharpe walked right through it.

“Vampires are highly resistant to magic, Tom. Didn’t you pay attention? That won’t work!”

He closed to within two strides.

Furious, Voldemort's eyes glowed red. He could take it no more.

"Bombarda Maximus!" Voldemort cast the offensive spell on Achilles from point-blank-range. The spell caromed off the man and up to the ceiling where it struck the heavy support beams, cracking them. The spell lifted the massive chandelier, smashing the stout timber and iron construction into the rafters. It came apart, and the wreckage hurtled down on the class.

Bellatrix looked up in horror to see it coming down upon her.

Achilles reacted instinctively, leaping across the aisle, and covering Bellatrix with his own body. She clutched hold of him without thinking.

"Reducto!" Dumbledore commanded. The chandelier stopped a few feet above Achilles and Bellatrix. Then, with a wave of his wand he sent it back where it belonged, none the worse for Riddle's attack. With a sharp expression at Voldemort, he said, "Mr. Riddle, I think it best that you wait in my office."

Seething, Voldemort stared at Sharpe. With a snarl, he turned about, and left the classroom.

Sharpe hunched over Bella for an extra instant. "Are you all right, Miss Black?"

She patted his arm, "Yes, I am all right, thank you!"

Sharpe stood, glancing at Professor Dumbledore, he thanked him. Then looking back at Miss Black, he smiled. "I'm afraid I make a droll umbrella, Miss Black."

Bella regained her composure, and aware that the class was staring at them, became overtly regal. "You are dramatic and boring, Mr. Sharpe! Still, I thank you for the chivalrous attention anyway."

Sharpe bowed and retrieved his frock coat, putting it back on. "Thank you, Professor Dumbledore. I may be immune to Mr. Riddle's magic, but I'm no more immune to your chandelier than I am to Miss Black's charm!"

Chuckles, and a sarcastic smirk from Bellatrix.

As he buttoned his shirt, and tied his tie, Sharpe went back to teaching. "Ladies and gentlemen, there is no lack of courage amongst your faculty or even Mr. Riddle. Vampires, however, are not ordinary foes. If you lose to a Vampire you stand to lose not simply your life, but your soul. Their magical resistance calls for great caution; therefore, it was logical that Hogwarts contacted the Vatican. Pacts with the Devil and the resultant evil is our tasking."

"What about Laird Maclaren and the three who were taken?"

"Thank you for getting us back on point, Mr. Finnegan. Now, three of your number," he pointed to all of them, "Three young, vibrant, talented students were taken by Maclaren. All three were accomplished. All three could handle themselves in the Dark Forest, Knockturn Alley, or the inner-city turf of some Muggle gang." They chuckled as he put the accent on a Muggle gang. "Yes, they could hold their own in the real world. Yet their magic was ineffective; and now you know why. Worse though, not one of the three ever got a spell off!"

Silence.

Bellatrix broke the tense atmosphere. “So, all Maclaren had to do was to look at them—just look at them—and they were under his control. Exactly how does that work?”

“An intriguing question, Miss Black. I’ve been subject to the Vampire’s spell several times,” Sharpe told them. “It depends upon the power and experience of the Vampire. It can vary between simple thought suggestions to your own mind actually welcoming the suggestion and wanting desperately to follow it.”

“Excuse me, Professor,” an uncertain voice announced itself. Sharpe looked over the assembled students. A single hand was up. He waited, and then asked mysteriously, “You’re certain you want to address this, Mr. Malfoy?”

“Yes sir, if you please sir,” a tall, young man with ghostly white hair, answered softly. His voice cracked like an uncertain boy of twelve, rather than the supremely confident and accomplished wizard of eighteen.

Bellatrix turned around in her seat, and then looked poignantly at Sharpe. “You know Lucius?”

“Go ahead Mr. Malfoy,” Achilleus told him.

Miss Black glowered at him.

The young man spoke with difficulty, as if exceedingly shy or embarrassed. The rest of the class knew Malfoy as a Pureblood wizard from an old family, someone who flirted with a level of arrogance quite rare at Hogwarts. It was an astonishing change. “Um, Vampires, like Maclaren, have very personalized powers. His suggestion was one of dominance, and it made you feel like you were violating the orders of your father or master. You didn’t want to disappoint him.”

“And the younger more inexperienced Vampires, newly turned girls, for instance,” Sharpe interjected. “What were they like?”

“They chide you, they tease you, demeaning you if you tried to fight them. They made you feel worthless and—inadequate—if you didn’t give in to their desires. You try to fight it, but when their eyes start to sparkle. It feels like you’re drowning. If you’re not prepared, well no matter what your mind is telling you, you lose yourself in them.”

“But there is a way to prepare, isn’t there, Mr. Malfoy?”

“Focus, Fortitude, and Faith, Mr. Sharpe!”

“Excellent Mr. Malfoy!”

Dumbledore announced, “Five points to Slytherin for each of your answers, Mr. Malfoy, and twenty-five points for extraordinary courage!”

The Slytherin students applauded loudly while Gryffindor, Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw were more polite, if confounded. The Slytherin crowd was silenced by Bellatrix, who complained, “Bravo Lucius, bravo, but that wasn’t in the reading! How did you know?” She glared at Achilles, and demanded, “What are you up to Mr. Sharpe, currying favor with Slytherin; you strike me as a do-gooding Gryffindor?”

“Well said Miss Black, you are quite correct. That information was not in your reading,” Achilles smiled. “How then did Mr. Malfoy know that Vampires have very potent powers of hypnotism and how to prepare for it?”

Lucius Malfoy blushed with embarrassment as his peers studied him. Bellatrix gasped, “You don’t mean to say, he was one of the three taken?”

Lucius squirmed in his seat, but then turned his head. He drew down the left side of his high collar and exposed the scars over his jugular. There was an audible gasp in the class.

Achilleus walked over to Mr. Malfoy, and nodded, “He was one of the three, and as you can imagine it took great courage for him to come to this class today. The horror of being attacked by a Vampire can never quite be shaken off.”

There was general applause for Mr. Malfoy, although it somewhat restrained in Bella’s case. Malfoy had long been seeing her dear sister Narcissa, but he’d never shared the story. Their match was an already accepted Pureblood match. However, Narcissa and Malfoy actually liked each other quite a lot; whereas Bella and LeStrange got on well—that was about it.

Mr. Sharpe clapped Lucius on the shoulder, and said approvingly, “Mr. Malfoy was essential to the success of my mission. A stalwart lad who did not flinch from terrible danger!”

Malfoy was embarrassed but appreciated the acclaim. He heaved a great sigh of relief, as if a great weight were lifted from his shoulders. When even Dumbledore applauded, he appeared genuinely pleased.

Sharpe made his way back to the front of the class. Bellatrix, somewhat placated, asked the burning question in everyone’s minds, though in her own venomous way.

“I suppose the other two girls were equally appreciative of your rescue, Mr. Sharpe?”

Achilleus sighed and his face turned grim. “Unfortunately, no, Miss Black. You see, Mr. Malfoy had been infected, but he had not fed on Human blood. When I sent Laird Maclaren to the realms of the Dead, he was freed. However, in the other two cases the young ladies had already fed. All I could do was to dispatch them and leave their souls to the dispensation of the Lord.”

He crossed himself.

Another silence fell upon the class.

“That, my friends, is the damnable part of the business.”

It was Bellatrix who alone—again—had the courage or audacity to ask the next, most damnable, question. “Who? Who did they feed on?”

Achilleus hesitated.

“Me,” Lucius Malfoy admitted. Again, everyone looked at him. “Laird Maclaren didn’t really want me. He didn’t want to feed on me or turn me, he wanted me as food for his, his . . .” he couldn’t continue.

“Food for his wives,” Achilleus said gravely. “Maclaren’s targets were indeed Anastasia Lillywand and Gwendolyn Fenn, I know you’ve already guessed the poor girls’ names. Maclaren weakened Lucius enough so they could feed on him without resistance. Their new powers were granted a harmless victim on which to practice. Understand please, that there was nothing the poor girls could do. They were quite beyond hope at that point.”

“Can you tell us what happened?” Bellatrix said.

“When I found young Lucius, he was greatly weakened, a few more feedings and that would be it.” Achilleus continued. “Fortunately, it was late morning when I entered the lair. My plan was to find Laird Maclaren by noon and dispatch him. At that apex of the Sun the creatures of the Devil are blind and weakened. As the Vampires had not yet sensed my presence, I anticipated no great difficulty. However, when I discovered Mr. Malfoy, my plans had to change. I certainly could not leave him. I had a choice: dispatch him with mercy and continue with my mission or revive him. Obviously, I chose the latter.

“Using a holy elixir, prayer, and some mortal sustenance, Mr. Malfoy revived enough to play a pivotal role in the mission. He was no longer under Laird Maclaren’s control. Being a stout fellow, he joined me in the descent into the catacombs beneath the castle.”

“It wasn’t pivotal, Mr. Sharpe,” Malfoy protested.

“You do not give yourself enough credit, Mr. Malfoy. Suffice it to say, that I wouldn’t have accomplished my mission, without Mr. Malfoy’s help.”

“So, go on!” urged Bellatrix.

“When Mr. Malfoy recovered his strength, it was late afternoon. I had a decision to make: do I take Mr. Malfoy to safety and give away my presence; or do I proceed in the evening and take advantage of the surprise? I chose the latter. It was foolish of me, and it endangered both of us. That’s what being young, inexperienced, and powerful can do. It is a bad combination whether you be a non-magic or a wizard—remember that. The real world does not reward fools!”

“What exactly do you mean, Mr. Sharpe?” Bellatrix said, seemingly uncomfortable with his humble attitude and self-deprecation. The attributes were apparently alien to the ancient and noble family Black.

Sharpe spoke forcefully. Impressing upon them the seriousness of his lesson. “Miss Black, you and Mr. Malfoy have seen the real world. It can be surprisingly brutal and uncaring. The rest of you are familiar with the classroom, where you are overseen by a powerful witch or wizard

that can save you from falling chandeliers, rebounding spells, and the like. Next year, all of you will be out and about in the real world. I do not say fear it, but you should respect it. There are always going to be forces more powerful than you—always!

“Vampires are among those forces. Now I bring you back to our little adventure. You see, hunting a Vampire in his lair during the day is dangerous enough. They can still move about as long as they stay out of direct sunlight, they still have prodigious strength, and their powers are still potent. Handling them at night when they are at their most powerful—and in their lair—that is not for the faint of heart. Yet, as I could not leave Mr. Malfoy behind, he shared in the danger. We entered the lower levels of the castle, into the dark galleries nigh on the crypts. Vampires can see in the dark, but we cannot, therefore we proceeded with lanterns.”

“Wouldn’t that give you away?” Bellatrix interjected.

“At that point Ms. Black there was no hope in stealth,” Achilles told her. He approached her desk and leaned over it, closing his eyes. “A Vampires senses at night are far more acute than ours. For instance, I have to be within arm’s reach to scent the lavender in your perfume or hear the beating of your heart.” He opened his eyes and looked at her. “Laird Maclaren could sense all that from the hallway. More to the point, he could also scent your living blood, and he could hear it coursing through your veins, feel the heat of it. Do you understand?”

“I understand you are a cad and a fool for proceeding into his lair,” she said smartly.

“Exactly correct on both counts!”

“You might as well have shouted ‘Hello, I’m here to get you Laird Maclaren!’”

Sharpe stomped the floor three times with his boot, getting everyone’s attention. “Exactly correct again! Yet note class, one of the primary laws of the real world is this: turn your weakness into advantage!”

“How?” she demanded.

“I could not go thumping around the catacombs without light, so, needing illumination, I simply brought that which was on my terms not theirs. The lanterns I use for the purpose have special wicks that burn with the spectrum of the sun.”

“You blinded them,” Bellatrix nodded. “Clever.”

“Wands out class!” Achilles ordered. Everyone obeyed. “Good, now the spell you need is a variation of your standard ‘Lumos’ spell. It is conjured exactly the same, however, you add the term ‘Solus.’ Now all of you try it, ‘Lumos Solus!’”

“Lumos Solus!”

Everyone’s wands glowed with a small starlike illumination at the tip—all except Bellatrix’s wand.

“Mr. Sharpe, do you mind?”

“My apologies, Miss Black!” he smiled, stepping back three paces.

Bellatrix tried again and got her bright little star.

“Now, back to our adventure. They don’t like lanterns, and they don’t like this spell. Fair warning though, it will fade just like Miss Black’s spell within close proximity to a Vampire. Remember that!” smiled Achilleus.

“Down we went into the catacombs, until we came to a great open vault. Across the chamber on a raised dais was Laird Maclaren’s coffin. Beside it were two brand new coffins. I took out my stakes and advanced. It was foolish. Thankfully, Mr. Malfoy’s timely warning, saved me from a future of preying on Hogwarts beauties.” He paused for the compliment to sink in, and the groans of the boys to fade. “When Laird Maclaren attacked, he had to do so from above, and blind. Still, it was well planned. The Vampire surprised me, grasping my arms with his hands, his nails digging in my flesh, biting swiftly—though thanks to Mr. Malfoy’s warning I flinched enough to make him miss my jugular. Still, he had me firmly in his grasp!”

“How did you escape?”

“He was too fast, too strong for me to stop his attack, so I didn’t,” Achilleus said. To their quizzical expressions, he explained, “I allowed his momentum to carry us both forward. Reaching behind, I grappled his head and beard, throwing him over my shoulder even as he bit down, ruining his attack. He landed on his back, but in an instant, he was up and facing me.” Achilleus re-enacted his defense, holding his left hand out choking the virtual Vampire. “As he whirled and snarled,” Achilleus plucked the dagger out of its sheath with his right hand and swifter than the blink of any eye he plunged it through the top of the virtual skull.

GASP!

Relaxing, Achilleus told them, “This is the very dagger. As you can see, it is no ordinary dagger. It is iron, coated with Silver, with Holy Symbols on the blade and haft. Silver! Remember that!” He stomped his foot again. “Ever since Judas Iscariot took thirty pieces of Silver for the delivery of our Lord, Silver has been the bane of the Devil’s children.”

“So, Vampires can be killed with Silver weapons?” Bella asked.

“No, not so easy,” Achilleus told her, making his way back. “That didn’t kill him, but it did immobilize him,” Achilleus told them. “As long as that blade of Silver was in his brain, he could do nothing.”

“What did you do?”

Sharpe laughed grimly, and replied, “Well, we all know how to destroy a Vampire, right Miss Black?”

“While immobilized, you staked him through the heart, cut off his head, and stuffed the mouth full of garlic,” she answered.

“Five points to Slytherin,” Professor Dumbledore announced.

“Well done Miss Black,” Achilles smiled.

“What else works against Vampires, Mr. Sharpe,” Bellatrix asked him, narrowing her beautiful eyes at him.

Sharpe left the dagger with Bellatrix, stalking to the front of the class. From a long leather scabbard, he pulled a rifle. He held it up and told them, “This is Beowulf.”

“Beowulf was a Werewolf, wasn’t he?” Bella questioned.

“Yes! That name is, of course, from the first Werewolf recorded in literature, but in this case, it is more properly the brand name of the projectile, not the gun,” Achilles told them. He pulled back the bolt and ejected a very large projectile.

“Wicked!”

Holding it aloft, he said, “It is a standard .50 caliber Silver hollow point projectile travelling at roughly four Quidditch pitches per second,” he handed it to Bellatrix, who actually held her hand out to receive it. Achilles let his finger drag momentarily across the palm of her perfect little hand. She trembled at the touch, but a question came from the students which blinded Bella’s reaction to all eyes, except Dumbledore’s.

“Will that kill a Vampire?”

“No!” Achilles said, turning to the student. “Even should I hit a Vampire in bat form, exploding him into vapor, the Vampire’s regenerative powers are such that they would reform and be on their way. However, it will immobilize them long enough for a thorough staking! Therefore, the Beowulf is used against Vampires; but what it is truly designed for is hunting its namesake, the Werewolf. I truly wish I lugged the thing with me the other night when I tangled with Greyback!”

“Greyback!” several students gasped.

“Yes, Fenrir Greyback, you’ve all seen the posters,” Sharpe smiled grimly. “He came looking for me,” the Venatorum said, but then stopped, glancing toward Dumbledore. With a barely to be seen shake of the head, the soon to be Headmaster made it clear that the conspiracy was not to be unmasked in his classroom. “Undoubtedly, it was my own stupidity that attracted him. You see I was swimming in your lovely lake at midnight. It was a most eventful evening. I was enchanted by the rare sight of a splendorous, impossibly beautiful water nymph,” Bellatrix stared at her desk and blushed. “That got me into an argument with a Merman; and then Fenrir Greyback put in his two galleons worth.

“Now, I should say, that I do NOT hunt Werewolves as a rule. Unlike Vampirism, Lycanthropy is a disease that can be controlled. Why there could be Werewolves in this classroom, even as your friends, and you might not know it unless you were unfortunate enough to be with them during a full Moon. While there are no cures, there are treatments, and the threat can be contained. Regardless, the unfortunate souls who suffer from Lycanthropy have no idea what they are doing in Werewolf form, with a few exceptions such as Fenrir Greyback.”

“Why didn’t you catch him?” a student asked.

Achilleus laughed, “I was swimming. I was naked!”

They all laughed.

“Why weren’t you killed or infected?”

“My profession prepares me for all sorts of malevolent creatures,” Achilleus told them. “He came after me. I got the upper hand and drowned him. That did not kill him, of course.”

“Why didn’t he come after you again?”

“Oh, he did, he’s a rascal, that fellow, and he bristled at my rough treatment—literally. By then I was armed.” Achilleus pulled off his brooch and his belt. “Notice the prodigious amounts of Silver on brooch and belt. Everything on my person has a use for my profession.”

“Unless you’re naked,” Bellatrix corrected him.

“Exactly, Miss Black. Therefore, next time I go swimming I’ll keep my belt on!” He put the items on Bellatrix’s desk so she could pass them around.

Chuckles from the class.

“Why Mr. Sharpe, there’s blood on the brooch,” she noted, holding the brooch exactly as Sharpe had. She looked up at him with her big brown eyes and asked cheekily, “Is it yours or Fenrir Greyback’s?”

Dumbledore got up and took the brooch. Holding it up to the light he examined it, “Interesting.” He walked over to his table and put the brooch down. Then, flipping open his pocket watch, Dumbledore touched the brooch with the tip of the wand. Slowly removing the wand caused a faint stream of light to follow the tip. A simple flick of the wand and the light congealed on the face of the watch. After watching it for a moment, Dumbledore turned to the class.

“Now, this is a bit off subject, but interesting nonetheless,” he said. “You see every cell in your body holds memories. Some keep them longer than others. For instance, those in your brain are designed for the purpose and retain the important memories all of your life. However, even a single drop of blood may hold numerous memories especially those charged with a moment of emotion or excitement when the blood departed the host.”

He turned to the Venatorum, and asked, “With your approval, Mr. Sharpe.”

“By all means, professor!”

Taking out his Deluminator, Dumbledore darkened the room. “Behold the confrontation that produced this drop of blood!” He tapped the watch face. In the air above the table the class watched the fight between Achilleus Sharpe and Fenrir Greyback from Greyback’s perspective. They watched the Werewolf’s attack out of the woods; Fenrir’s drowning; and finally, his wounding and strangulation by the Venatorum.

Bellatrix gasped as she saw herself, but to her relief it wasn't her, it was a nymph just as Achilles told the class—Dumbledore. Also, the dialogue between Sharpe and Fenrir was indistinct and hard to follow, masking the conspiracy of her father—again, Dumbledore manipulating the memory.

The rest of the class, awed and entertained by the fight, gave a rousing commentary. However, Rudolphus LeStrange was still not satisfied.

“This is all very impressive about the Werewolf, but what about the Vampire? How do we know he's not still out there?” Rudolphus challenged Achilles. The rest of the class hushed at the accusation. Bellatrix turned and looked at her arranged partner in unpleasant surprise.

“Very well, Mr. LeStrange, I suppose Professor Dumbledore brought me all the way from Rome to fill your heads with Muggle fairy tales,” Achilles growled, turning, and walking back to a large leather bag at the front of the class.

“Class, meet Laird Maclaren!” He withdrew a skull from the bag. It was a human skull with faded red hair still attached to the skull and cheeks. It had a prodigious set of fangs.

There were many expressions of “Wicked! Look at those fangs!” and the like.

Mr. Finnegan laughed, “That's old Laird Maclaren all right! Me Mum and Dad told me all about him. I've seen the portraits!”

The Venatorum walked by Bellatrix and retrieved his dagger. Approaching Rudolphus with the Vampire skull, Sharpe plopped it down on the young man's desk. Like a pencil in a pencil box, he dropped the dagger into a hole in the top of the skull. “There we go, fits like a glove. But that's not proof, is it? This could be any old Vampire—right?”

“Right,” LeStrange answered, knowing he was being set up.

Sharpe backed away. “Now I know you've taken Divination, Mr. LeStrange. Please sir, Divine whose skull this is!”

Rudolphus was not pleased, but he had no choice. He pulled out his wand and cast the Divination spell. The room's lights dimmed, and a cold wind whistled around the stone walls. Then a transparent face formed around the skull. The eyes popped open! They stared right at young LeStrange. The boy shrieked.

Maclaren laughed at the boy, and then turned, hopping around on the desk, shouting disparaging remarks at the class until finally, he faced the Venatorum.

“Achilleus Sharpe you Blackguard!” the head exclaimed.

“Afternoon, Maclaren, how's the afterlife?”

“Better than being a blasted Vampire, I'll say! God save yee for putting me out of me misery in time!”

“I’m happy to have been of service to you, Laird Maclaren,” Achilles smiled. “Now, I shan’t keep you long.”

“Oh right, as if I had anything better to do here, but say on. What can I do for you?”

“I’m giving a lecture on Vampires, and your name popped up.”

“Oh, bloody Hell! I spent my time in Purgatory, and done me penance, I have. Right shame about those poor lasses. I’m eternally grateful you delivered me, but it was a near thing, wasn’t it? If that lad hadn’t yelled a warning, we’d be doing the Devil’s business together. Right nasty thing for you, I imagine.”

“That lad is here today, milord,” Achilles said, retrieving the head. He lifted it and turned it toward Malfoy. “Can you see him, the tall young man in the back.”

Malfoy turned whiter than even his normal pale.

“Bless my tormented soul, you’ve grown into a man—no thanks to me,” the ghost lamented. “You have my apologies, Mr. Malfoy. I did a dreadful thing to you, but I wasn’t meself. Sharpe, I hope you will keep your promise and revenge me on Cardinal Richelieu!”

“We are keeping watch for him, don’t worry, Maclaren. I’ll descend the rascal.”

“I won’t rest until he’s dining with the Devil himself,” the ghost remarked. “Will that be all then? It’s tiring visiting the world of the living, though I say it as I shouldn’t.”

“Very well, Laird Maclaren, I appreciate your patience and your presence,” Achilles told him, cradling the head and taking him back to the front of the class.

“Hold on, Achilles—wait!” cried Maclaren. His ghostly eyes grew wide, centering on one person.

“What?”

“The lovely lass—Bellatrix Black!”

“You know me sir?” she exclaimed with shock.

“I should say so, I was ordered to collect you!”

“By whom?” Bellatrix and Achilles said together.

“Richelieu! Richelieu!” he cried. “But there was someone behind him, Sharpe! Someone far more dangerous. One of the living—Argh!” Suddenly the ghostly image wavered, and Maclaren’s face transfigured to one in pain. The ghost’s face howled and fled.

“Well, well,” Achilles sighed. He looked up to the stunned faces in the class. “My dear witches and wizards, I did not intend this to be anything more than an academic exercise. Yet welcome! Welcome to the world of a Venatorum! And yet, you see here how our worlds overlap. This mystery is as important to the wizarding world as it is to the world outside. Yet so it is in everything. Your world is just as endangered by today’s subject as mine.”

Achilleus leaned over to Bellatrix and whispered in her ear, "We must talk after class!"

"Yes!"

Achilleus put the skull away, and then he looked over the class. "So, are we satisfied, Mr. LeStrange? Any questions on the veracity of my account?"

The boy was silent and sullen.

"Very well, shall we get to your questions?"

Bellatrix coughed, and asked with a heavy voice, "What of Focus, Fortitude, and Faith? That was a question at the end of the reading. It's not in the Magics Handbook, or in the Magical Encyclopedia."

"Very true, Miss Black, that is because the source is simply me," Achilleus told her. "It is my own personal experience turned into a doctrine that might help you deal with these situations. Professor Dumbledore thought it worthwhile to include in the lesson, but I leave it to him to instruct you on the meaning as it applies to the magical world."

"Nonsense, Mr. Sharpe!" he laughed. "You've already taught them a new spell, and quite successfully! Please favor the class with your definition of the phrase. I am sure they can translate it to their own circumstances."

"Very well, Professor Dumbledore," he agreed. "Class, I want you to think specifically of the moment a Vampire tries to hypnotize you, to make you acquiesce to their will.

"Focus. Focus on controlling your mind. The Vampire will use suggestion. You must focus on keeping your thoughts and actions your own. How? My friends, you do it every single day. Literally, you train for this all the time. Every time you cast a spell FOCUS on only that spell. Ignore everything else around you, and everything else that tries to invade your mind. Doing that while spellcasting, you train your mind to ignore the Vampires commands and instead keep control of your will.

"Fortitude. Think of it, class. The Vampire wants to control you so that they can feed on you. That is terrifying! You need to steel yourself for the moment. How? Do you fear flying? Do you fear certain spells? Do them! Get used to facing danger. Train yourself to face your fears!

"Faith." He stopped, lifting a Silver crucifix so the class could see. "Do not underestimate the power of Faith. Even if you do not believe in God, He believes in you! Believe in yourself. Believe in the goodness of your world. For the Vampire is a creature of the Devil. Faith in all that is Holy and Good is your best defense against their powers."

The last fifteen minutes flew by, but they got through all of the questions.

As for Bellatrix, she was satisfied with Sharpe. The class looked on her now not just with fear, justified due to her temper, but with healthy respect. The chiding she took over Sharpe's kiss was now tempered with his opinion of her. Certainly, none of the Hogwarts boys would ever have thought to take a dagger after that Muggle as she did!

At the end of class, when Dumbledore dismissed the students, he called for Bellatrix. She approached his desk. Achilles joined them.

“Yes sir?”

“Miss Black, I know you to be made of stern stuff, but as your teacher, I wanted to make sure you are quite well after the fright of Tom’s bringing down the chandelier,” he told her. “I rather thought you would have stopped it yourself, but Mr. Sharpe interfered with any defensive spell you might have cast. Thus, my interference and inquiry.”

“I am quite well, thank you, though Mr. Sharpe did surprise me,” she replied with false bravado. She glanced over to him, “I’m sure he was being unnecessarily chivalrous. So, while it was tedious of him, I consider the incident over.”

“You have a very stout heart, Miss Black!” Dumbledore said with approval. “However, the assertion of Laird Maclaren must have been a shock to you; it certainly shocked me. What do you think Venatorum?”

“It surprised me as well, and now it concerns me mightily.” Achilles looked to Dumbledore, who nodded. He then asked Bellatrix, “Does your family have any connections with Cardinal Richelieu, in history that is?”

“None that I know of,” Bellatrix told him.

He nodded. “Miss Black, I am not satisfied to leave this alone. I must investigate it. Once a Vampire targets a specific person it becomes a serious matter. They have time, and they are stubbornly patient. I will inform Professor Dumbledore of my progress on this matter, and he can keep you and your family apprised.”

“If you please, Mr. Sharpe, as it is me that is in the spot, so to speak, I don’t want to be the last to know. Whatever you discover, I ask you to tell it to my face.”

“As you wish, Miss Black,” Achilles said with a bow.

“Thank you, Miss Black, you may go,” Dumbledore nodded.

“Yes professor!”

Achilles bowed. “Bellatrix, it was good to see you again.”

“Of course, it was,” she told him with her nose in the air.

“Thank you for not stabbing me this time!” he said.

She turned on her heel, saying, “You’re a bore, Mr. Sharpe!”

“It is my duty to bore you, Miss Black!” he smiled.

She turned just long enough to stick her tongue out at him.

As she joined her classmates, Achilleus, told Dumbledore in hushed tones, “Richelieu has been in hiding since I slew Maclaren! As far as I know there is no connection whatsoever between Richelieu and any wizarding family. However,” he stopped.

“Yes?” Dumbledore urged. “Please speak your mind, Mr. Sharpe.”

“Sir, if Lord Voldemort did indeed supply the services of Fenrir Greyback to Cygnus Black it speaks to his recruiting allies,” he ventured.

“And if Lord Voldemort is recruiting Werewolves, then why not Vampires? Is that your contention?”

“I’m afraid it is, sir,” Achilleus admitted.

“Then we are of the same mind, Achilleus,” Dumbledore admitted. “I expect you’re going to look into this with some urgency?”

“It is now my highest priority—yes.”

“I would consider it a personal favor if you would keep me informed of your progress,” Dumbledore smiled. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I must disappoint Lord Voldemort. Good day Achilleus.”

“Good day professor,”

Dumbledore turned and left, well satisfied.

Rudolphus walked with Bellatrix out the door and into the hall. “What was that about?”

“What do you mean?” she demanded.

He repeated, “He bores you?” sarcastically.

“What do you think?” she exclaimed. “He bores me!”

“He did try to save your life,” Rudolphus reminded her.

“Of course, he did, he’s in love with me, why shouldn’t he save my life?” she replied indignantly, but then she suddenly stopped, turning her burning eyes on young Mr. LeStrange. “I note with some disappointment that you dove under your desk when the chandelier fell. Why didn’t *you* try to save me Rudolphus?”

He tried to stammer a reply, but Bellatrix would have none of it. “If you can’t find the backbone of a Muggle then you are not worthy of escorting a Lady of the ancient and noble family Black! Good day Rudolphus!”

Bella turned to walk the other way, but that put her back in the direction of Dumbledore’s classroom. There was Achilleus, at the door, watching her walk away. She grimaced at him and whirled her wand. BOOM! The door slammed in his face. Happy with herself, Bellatrix Black strode away into the castle. Behind her were various exclamations of “Don’t make her mad!” and “Don’t fall in love with Bellatrix!”

Behind the door, Achilles closed his eyes and smiled. After the door slammed in his face a pair of ethereal lips popped through the beams and planted a luscious kiss on his own. The most amazing thing about the magic was that he felt it just as clearly as if Bella had really kissed him, which of course, she did.

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Dumbledore heard a soft knock at the door. "Come in." The door opened and Professor McGonagall poked her head in.

"Are you busy Albus?"

"Come in, Minerva come in," he said softly. "Tea?"

"Please," she replied, coming in and sitting down. Dumbledore poured the tea, adding two cubes of sugar and cream for McGonagall. When she took the cup, she asked nervously, "How did it go with Mr. Riddle, or should I call him Lord Voldemort?"

"Not well," he sighed, "but as anticipated. With the help of our young Venatorum, he exposed his capricious nature and gave me ample reasons to deny his desire to become the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher."

"Thank the stars!"

"I could not allow him to recruit his army from within Hogwarts. He is doing enough damage as it is outside our school." He looked away and shook his head. "Cygnus Black is firmly in his grasp. Alas, he is gaining many other unsavory allies."

"Cygnus Black! But that means Bellatrix and Narcissa will become his creatures," McGonagall fretted. "Poor Andromeda. Her heart is not in it. I fear for her."

"As do I, but it is Bellatrix that concerns me," the future Headmaster contended. He got up and paced the room.

"She is going to be frightfully powerful Albus," Minerva.

"Yes, frightful and powerful, apt words for her." The wizard paused, gazing off into the distance. Finally, he said, "Yet as so often happens fate never cleaves a straight path."

"Whatever do you mean," she asked. "I would say her path is quite straight. Straight to the dark side!"

"Yes, so I thought when the year began. The Black family has stern requirements for the eldest of Cygnus' children, especially as he has no son. Bellatrix, by tradition must carry that torch, and being a female, she must be twice as fierce as any son."

"She satisfies that admirably," Minerva said emphatically. "Why then would she stray from the family path?"

“There are other powers even more potent than familial responsibility. I mean, Minerva, that the visit of Achilles Sharpe has thrown a new variable into the fate of Bellatrix Black. Of course, it could drive her further towards darkness, and Voldemort, but then again love can defuse the deepest well of fury.”

“Love, whatever do you mean Albus,” McGonagall asked.

“Simply that Achilles Sharpe is in love with Bellatrix, and she is in love with him.”

“The Vampire Hunter? Bellatrix? Are you serious?”

“Quite,” he admitted.

“But I thought that kiss was nothing more Achilles prodding her prejudice.”

“No, I think that might have been his initial intention, but when he stopped her, held her, well Minerva, I think all he saw was her beauty and spirit.”

“It was a salient moment, I grant you, but it was a moment Albus, not an affair!”

“So, it might have stayed, until the other night!” Dumbledore said, glancing at McGonagall. “Yet that night cemented everything. Our young Mr. Sharpe attended Miss Black’s midnight swim, whether by fate or fortune I cannot say. Yet as it happens Achilles saved Bellatrix from the bondage and dishonor of the Mer-people. Then he bested Fenrir Greyback, who Cygnus Black hired to revenge his family for Sharpe’s stolen kiss.”

“Greyback! That vicious monster!”

Dumbledore drew out his pocket watch and handed it to Minerva. She watched the entire enterprise without Dumbledore’s edits. When the scene finished, she stared at Dumbledore in amazement.

The wizard nodded, “Yes Achilles bested him—easily, and in front of Bellatrix. You can see how that affected her. She respects power and strength. She is a Black.”

“Vulnerable after his saving her from dishonor, and then watching her savior defeat the most vicious Werewolf of this age, it’s enough to take a girl’s breath away,” Minerva gasped. “What happened then?”

“A tryst, Minerva,” he sighed. “Today cemented it. Voldemort attacked Sharpe today. Sharpe shrugged it off, but it put Bellatrix in grave danger. Although it was I who stopped the chandelier from falling on her, it was Achilles who covered her with his own body.”

“Albus, he is indeed in love with her, that’s true. But I don’t see that from Bellatrix. I’ve observed them. She can’t stop telling him how boring he is,” Minerva replied, shaking her head.

“Replace “boring” with “loving” and you’ll have solved the riddle.”

Minerva thought hard, but in the end, she nodded, “So there is hope for Bellatrix, after all; but great danger as well.”

“Yes, grave danger. She has to battle her father and Voldemort, but Bellatrix also has to fight her own responsibilities and the expectations of the ancient and noble House of Black. Still, there is hope for her. If I could, I would counsel her not to pursue power for the sake of power. I know well enough the price of that perilous path. The only thing that can do that is love.”

“Then let us hope for love, Albus.”

When Bellatrix Black got to the Slytherin common room after class she naturally rendezvoused with her sisters. Hardly had they begun to go through the events of the day when professor Slughorn’s owl fluttered in through the window and landed on the back of Bella’s chair.

“What on earth can he want?” the elder Black sister said.

The owl dropped a letter in her lap, and he promptly flew off.

Bellatrix picked it up. It was sealed.

“Well open it, Bella!” urged Narcissa.

She did so, reading aloud,

Miss Bellatrix Black. On account of recent events, you are hereby restricted to the Slytherin Common Room, the Great Hall, and your scheduled classes until further notice. You are under no circumstances to wander out of the castle itself. This is by the order of Headmaster Dippet.

H. Slughorn, Head of Slytherin House

P.S. Your cooperation would be GREATLY appreciated!

P.P.S. Absolutely, positively NO trips to the lake! Do NOT go out at night!!!

“They certainly have you figured out!” her sister giggled.

“Oh, shut up Andromeda!” Bellatrix scolded.

“Really Bella, you should take this seriously!” Narcissa countered.

“Truly, this Richelieu is supposed to be one of the oldest and most powerful Vampires in existence! I was reading about him in the library. He could take the form of a fog and enter the castle, even to your bed, none the wiser. Is that what you want?”

“Read it in the library, eh sis, what with that Ted Tonks Mudblood?”

Andromeda shrank from the stare of her older sister, saying in a tiny voice, “It wasn’t anything, he helped me read up about this Richelieu. I was only trying to help.”

Narcissa came to Andromeda's aid. "Now Cissy, she's as worried as I am. Don't get on her about that! Leave it alone, we've got more important things to deal with, like a Vampire who wants to carry you off!"

"All right, all right, I'm sorry Andromeda. Thanks for looking out for me, but really, I can take care of myself. No one better! Mist, bat, or wolf, no creepy French bloodsucker is going to sneak up on me!"

"I certainly hope not!" announced a voice behind the elder Black sister.

Involuntarily, Bellatrix nearly jumped out of her chair. When she landed back on the cushion her little hands gripped the arms so hard, she tore through the Slytherin green leather. There was some scattered laughter in the Slytherin Common Room.

Andromeda stifled a giggle, but Narcissa couldn't help but laugh, "Oh, Bella!"

Bellatrix frowned, eyes closed, until the wave of immediate anger passed. Finally, with a withering glance she looked up to see the dashing Venatorum smiling down upon her.

"Achilleus Sharpe! I might have known!"

"Bellatrix Black!" He took off his hat, and bowed like a medieval musketeer. "At your service!" Putting his hat back on, he began, "I should tell you that Vampires are—"

"Yes, yes, they are stealthier than you are, I know, but I daresay they aren't as sneaky!"

"Why thank you!" Sharpe smiled. He looked upon the gathering of sisters and inclined his head. "The famous Black sisters! I am quite overcome! Having already met your father, I am no longer surprised at his jealously protecting his familial treasure!"

Narcissa and Andromeda blushed at the overt compliment, but Bellatrix merely blew a wayward lock of hair from her forehead. "You are boring me, Sharpe," she said, plainly meaning the word this time. "How is it that you're in the Slytherin Common Room?"

"Headmaster Dippet has given me total access to the castle, so naturally I'm starting here," he answered.

"How did you get through our door?"

"It's magically sealed," he shrugged. "The lock doesn't work on me. Besides, the Bloody Baron is a friend of mine!"

"Of course, he is," Bellatrix sighed.

"Excuse me, Mr. Sharpe," Andromeda said, obviously a little awed by the Venatorum. "What is it you are going to do to protect Bellatrix?"

"First things first, I'm going to have her lead me to her bed!"

There was a mixture of unbridled laughter and gasps amongst the Slytherin's.

“Achilleus Sharpe, I am going to murder you—slowly!” Bellatrix muttered.

“Mr. Sharpe!” Andromeda exclaimed.

“Muggles!” Narcissa snapped.

Sharpe turned about and addressed the Slytherin’s. “That’s enough!”

His strident shout brought the room to silence.

The Venatorum began to walk about the room in a leisurely manner, but his expression left no room for levity. “Have we all had our little laugh at Miss Black’s expense? Quite humorous, isn’t it? A Muggle wanting her to show him where she sleeps at night. Well, let me quote a statistic for you. Nine out of every ten victims of Vampires awaken to find the creature standing over them or already latched on to their jugulars—in their own bed. Over half the victims have other people in the room with them, sometimes in the same bed.”

“So, what are you going to do Mr. Venatorum, sleep in bed with her?” asked a snide voice.

Sharpe turned to find Rudolphus LeStrange standing behind him.

He smiled at the young man, and then his right hand shot out like a snake and clutched the lad’s throat. Sharpe shoved Rudolphus into the wall and then off his feet. “I fail to find any humor in that! Who do you think is going to protect Bellatrix Black—you?”

“Mr. Sharpe, ah there you are!” said Professor Slughorn, entering the common room. “I see you have things well in hand! Sorry I’m late, but I had to brew some potions for our students here, nasty business Vampires. Can’t be too careful.”

“Professor!” LeStrange wheezed.

“LeStrange, still stubbornly ignorant, are we? Take detention for wasting Mr. Sharpe’s time. A month should do.”

“I’m already on detention!” he gasped.

“Well then double detention, that’s something new, isn’t it?” Slughorn said absently. “Report to Hagrid presently, I think his dragon pens need cleaning. Caustic stuff, dragon dung—pip, pip—off with you!”

Sharpe threw LeStrange into a chair, and off the young man stumbled, coughing, and wheezing something about revenge.

Slughorn watched him leave, shaking his head. “Hopeless in the laboratory. A good thing his parents are wealthy and powerful!” Then, addressing the Slytherins, he said emphatically, “Now I want no more of this nonsense. Anyone who doesn’t cooperate with our Venatorum will find themselves joining Mr. LeStrange in scraping dragon dung off of stones with their fingernails. Fair warning, it burns, and the odor won’t dissipate for weeks. Frightfully hard on the appetite and on romance, let me tell you. So, no nonsense. He is the expert, and you will follow his directions. Am I being clear?”

“Yes, professor!”

“Now, Mr. Sharpe will be staying in the lady’s dormitory while this crisis lasts, highly irregular I know, but ladies please pay attention to your decorum. For you gentlemen, I advise you not to give Mr. Sharpe any reason to humiliate or damage you. Last thing. I’ve left draughts for you all on the central study table. Drink them! They will make your blood much less palatable for a Vampire. It’s not foolproof, but every little bit helps. That will be all.”

Turning to Sharpe, Slughorn said, “They’re all yours. Deucedly glad you’re here, Sharpe. Nasty business. Don’t want any part of it myself. Good luck!”

“Thank you, professor,” Sharpe replied, shaking the proffered hand.

After Slughorn left, Sharpe addressed them all. “I hate to belabor the point, but there are certain things to watch for when defending yourself against a Vampire.” He ran through the litany he taught in Dumbledore’s class, and then dismissed them to their activities. The Slytherins broke up into their usual study groups, but there was very little studying done on the whole. When Sharpe rejoined Bellatrix, Lucius Malfoy was standing next to Narcissa.

“Are you ready to leap into the fire again Lucius?”

“How can I help?”

Sharpe retrieved his backpack. He withdrew a smaller satchel from within. “This is for you. It’s got everything you need: crucifix, sparkling dust, Holy Water, oak stakes, you know the drill.”

Lucius took a deep breath. “Where do you want me?”

“You’ll bunk at the entrance to the girl’s dormitory. They’ve already put a cot there for you.” Sharpe said.

Lucius nodded.

“Now let’s see the girl’s dormitory. Ladies, if you please!”

“You’re not really going to, to sleep with us, are you?” Andromeda said.

“Think of it as camping,” Sharpe replied as they climbed the stairs.

“Camping?”

“A Muggle thing,” Bellatrix interjected.

They reached the door. As promised, a cot was waiting for Lucius. “All the comforts of home!”

“Stalwart lad!” Achilles said, clapping him on the shoulder. “You won’t need to be here until Bellatrix and her sisters go into the dormitory. So, you’re off duty for now, but don’t stray too far.”

“I’ll wait for Narcissa out here.”

“Hold on,” Bellatrix said. “Why are you including my sisters? They’re not at risk—are they?”

“I don’t know,” Sharpe admitted. “Richelieu may very well be willing to kidnap either of your sisters if he can’t get to you. If that happened, you would trade yourself for either of them. So, in my mind you’re all at risk.”

“All right let’s get this over with,” Bellatrix sighed. She opened the door and passed through. In her most strident Bellatrix shout, she announced, “Muggle male in the dormitory! Put away your charms, ladies!”

“Oh Bella!” Narcissa scolded.

Andromeda giggled.

Bellatrix led Sharpe to her bed. “Here it is. This is where I sleep—naked.”

Narcissa massaged her temples.

Andromeda giggled some more.

The other Slytherin girls gathered round to watch this extraordinary event.

Sharpe walked about the floor, as Bellatrix pointed out the salient features. “This is the eighth-year floor. Narcissa is upstairs one floor, Andromeda is three floors up.”

“Narcissa and Andromeda will move down here, two of the girls will have to move to their beds. I want all the beds in a circle, keeping the center open. Bella, you, Narcissa, and Andromeda will be together by this window.” He opened the window. There was a small balcony without, high up overlooking the lake. “Perfect.”

Sharpe left the window and collected one of the high back chairs. Picking it up, he took it outside. “This is where I’ll be. With the curtains closed that will give you ladies a modicum of privacy. I won’t see anything you don’t want me to see, but I will hear any and all giggling!”

There was answering giggling from everyone except Bellatrix, She asked, incredulously, “You’re going to sleep outside in a chair?”

“Who said anything about sleep? I’m here to protect you ladies, you especially, Bellatrix,”

The ladies of Slytherin swooned.

“My protector!” Bellatrix didn’t buy any of it.

“Are there any other entrances to the dormitory?”

“Only the loo, and the showers; you are not allowed in the showers, Achilles Sharpe!”

Giggling.

“Muggles don’t shower,” he replied.

Laughter.

“Well, you need to warn us if you’re going to use the loo.”

“Don’t worry, I’m equipped to use the balcony,” he replied.

“Eeeew!”

Bellatrix shook her head, “Achilleus Sharpe, you are—”

“What?”

“You’re a man.”

“Thank you for noticing!”

Bellatrix muttered something to herself with a little mischievous smile.

“What was that?”

She promptly slapped him.

Achilleus Sharpe spent the next few hours making preparations. Night fell. He toured the common room, and then he set Lucius up. “Are you ready?”

“Ready,” he said steadily.

Sharpe dipped his finger in oil. He drew the cross on Lucius’ forehead, “May the blessing of Saint Michael guard you against the creatures of the night!”

“Thank you!”

“Sleep now, you’ll be more attuned to the dangers than if you’re awake. If your dreams are troubled wake yourself up—remember?”

“I remember!”

“Good luck.”

“Achilleus!” Lucius said as he turned.

Sharpe stopped.

“Narcissa, she’s very important to me,” he said in earnest.

“Don’t worry, she’s like my own sister, I won’t let anything happen to her, Lucius!”

“Thanks!”

Sharpe entered the dormitory. He repeated the anointing of oil on every girl in Slytherin House. The girls thanked him, all of them, with a kiss on the cheek.

The Black sisters last. Both Narcissa and Andromeda followed the example of their sorority sisters.

“Thank you for protecting us Mr. Sharpe!” Narcissa whispered. Then she asked, “Will Lucius be okay?”

“Lucius knows what he’s doing, don’t fret!”

“Thank you, Mr. Sharpe, please look after Bella!”

“I will, and you too, don’t worry,” Achilleus told her.

Bellatrix waited her turn.

Sharpe anointed her.

“Are you sure this will help? I’m not, not religious you know.”

“It will help more if you believe, but either way it will help,” he told her.

“I believe in you, Achilleus Sharpe,” she whispered in his ear. “You didn’t save me from Greyback, the Merman and the lake just to have some blood sucking creep make me his wife.”

“No, I didn’t,” he whispered back.

Bellatrix LeStrange kissed him long and hard on the mouth.

The Slytherin girls turned around and gave her some privacy.

Before everyone got into bed, Sharpe asked them to get their wands out. “Now ladies, you will sleep with your wands at ready. If you are awakened and feel threatened, or if you have to get out of bed for any reason, what do we do?”

“Lumos Solus!”

One hundred points of light illuminated the room, “Very good. Now, you will notice, every group of three beds has a circle of Holy Wafers around them. If we are attacked, you will stay within your circles! You all have Silver crucifixes, hold them directly at the Vampire. Now, I am going to say a prayer to Saint Michael, our warrior Archangel. Vampires fear his retribution.”

Sharpe said the prayer.

“Questions? No? Good night and sleep tight!”

Everyone got into bed and the lights went out except for a single candle. Achilleus put it on the nightstand outside Bella’s bed. She opened her curtain to look at it. “What is it?”

“It is a Holy Flame. The wick is made from the hairs of saints. It will tell me if any creature of Hell is near. It is very precious.”

“I don’t know that I’m worth that, Achilleus,” Bella told him.

“Bella, you are worth every holy relic on this earth!”

She poked her little white hand through her curtains.

Sharpe took it and kissed it gently.

Bella withdrew her hand.

Quiet overcame the chamber.

An hour passed. The Moon rose and peeked through the window.

Sharpe watched and listened, but for the most part he reached out with his senses into the night. Evil did not pass without disrupting the quiet of the night. All that could be heard was the wind sighing in the curtains and the soft whispers of breath from the Slytherin girls.

“Are you awake?” Bella whispered.

“Of course,” he said. “Don’t worry Bella. Try and get some sleep.”

“Yes dear!”

Near the middle of the night, Achilleus noted the candle flickering in an unseen wind. A heaviness fell upon his heart. He got up and moved toward the feeling. A burning sensation grew upon his brow. Achilleus stood, looking out into the night beyond the balcony.

A misty, sparkling shape hovered there, almost man-like. Two piercing red sparks appraised him.

“Good evening, Cardinal Richelieu!”

The apparition disappeared.

The night passed.

The next day Achilleus left the girls to their morning routine and awakened Lucius.

The young man awakened at night, troubled, but as he got up to contact Achilleus the feeling passed. Sharpe told him, “Trust your senses. They did not lie to you. Now get about your day. I’ll see you this evening.”

Sharpe met with Dumbledore after breakfast.

“You are welcome to join us at the head table Achilleus,” the Headmaster reminded him.

“No, let their day be as normal as possible,” he advised.

“And the night?”

“Cardinal Richelieu paid us a visit last night,” Sharpe told him, sipping his coffee. “He was surprised to see me. He didn’t stay or make any further move, but I am very concerned that he was able to come directly to Bellatrix Black’s window. If he follows his habits he will try thrice. The next two nights will be dangerous, with the third night being the worst.”

“Why three nights?”

“His actions will be a mockery of the Holy Trinity,” Sharpe explained. “The creatures of Hell cannot create, they can only mock. Everything they do is toward that end. That is why it takes three feedings to turn a victim into a vampire. To feed it takes but once, but the threshold of the undead is very precise.”

“He did not feed this night,” Dumbledore noted.

“No, but once he does, so long as it is short of death, she would be susceptible to his call,” Achilles told the wizard. “The victim has little say in the matter after that.”

“Then by all means we must prevent that. What do you mean to do?”

“It’s Richelieu’s move,” Sharpe replied gravely. “I’ve done what I can; however, with a Vampire this old and powerful the only real defense is confrontation. Richelieu knows what he risks in coming to grips with me. He will test me tonight and assess the situation.”

“The risk goes both ways my young friend,” Dumbledore observed.

“It does indeed,” Sharpe admitted. He rose as if to leave, but Sharpe hesitated.

“What is it, Achilles?”

Sharpe did not answer immediately, and Dumbledore waited patiently. Finally, reluctantly, Sharpe told him, “I have an uncomfortable observation, one I would share with no one else.”

“You’re not disappointed with the support of Hogwarts, I hope?”

“No, not at all. In fact, in similar circumstances that was the greatest detriment to my duties. Here, I can fault neither the support nor the courage and mettle of your students. I am especially impressed with the young ladies of Slytherin House. This is not an easy trial.” He paused again. “Rather, my concern is family oriented. To be specific, the ancient and noble family Black.”

“A very powerful family in the Wizarding World,” cautioned Dumbledore.

“Yes, I am personally familiar with it,” Sharpe replied. “So, a Muggle steals a kiss from the elder daughter of Cygnus Black and he flies here, Werewolves in tow, to answer. Yet when that same daughter is threatened by Cardinal Richelieu, a Vampire so old and accomplished that not a handful of Venatorum would deal with him, he chooses to be—absent. I admit, Professor Dumbledore, that I find myself mystified.”

Dumbledore rose, nodding. “That is not an unjustified question, my young friend. Rather, it is a question that you must delve into.”

“When I confront Richelieu, yes, I see what you mean,” the Venatorum thought aloud. “Vampires are vain and arrogant. They have every right to be. Richelieu’s motives are confounding. Clarifying them might be important.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Dumbledore agreed. “I might suggest one more resource for your preparations. In our library are some tomes that are quite rare, and there is one that comes to mind. That tome deals very specifically with many perilous people, including Cardinal

Richelieu. This book is not found in the Vatican, being magical in nature. I thought you might want to look into it.”

“I appreciate the offer, Professor, but I tend to disenchant things like that.”

“Yes, I’ve arranged some help on that account.”

Prior to starting her advanced transfiguration class, Professor McGonagall walked up to Bellatrix. “Miss Black, your presence is required in the library this period.”

“What? Me? In the library?”

“I know it seems incongruent to your past practices, but yes, you, Miss Black.”

“Am I serving detention?”

“No, but you are serving a very useful purpose considering the circumstances. Report to North Tower please, off you go!”

“But the North Tower is off limits to students. It’s more restricted than the Restricted Section!”

“How perfectly put. Now Miss Black, this concerns your present circumstance. We are doing everything we can to keep you safe, so please for once just do as you’re told!”

“Yes professor, thank you professor,” Bellatrix sighed, gathering her books.

Professor McGonagall looked shocked. Bellatrix had actually *thanked* her.

The realization of her Human reaction dawned on Bellatrix, causing an instant storm to brew her mood. The other students immediately buried their heads in their books as she stomped off. That stern expression followed Bellatrix through the empty castle corridors—everyone else being in class—and presented itself at the entrance to the Hogwarts library.

Ms. Pince was awaiting her with an equally impervious expression of distaste. “Miss Black! How extraordinary to see you at my library! This is a momentous day! Follow me!” Immediately, without waiting for a reply, the Head Librarian turned on her heel and entered the vaults of the Hogwarts library.

Having to quicken her step, as Ms. Pince wanted her to spend as little time in her library as possible, Bellatrix followed. She was not unaware of the astonished glances of the student body studying within. Bellatrix Black in the library?! She scowled at each, sending them back into their books.

“Excuse me, Ms. Pince, but where are you taking me?”

“An obvious question from one who knows little of the interior of Hogwarts vaults of knowledge, but I was instructed to usher you into the North Tower. I have already removed the required volume from the Cursed Vault, but I warn you,” and at this she turned and stopped,

looking severely upon Ms. Black. “Although I realize the depth of danger you and indeed all of our students are within, you would do well, Miss Black, to follow the restrictions of these tomes to the letter! Their worth is more than all the faculty and students of this revered school—with the possible exceptions of Professor Dumbledore and myself.”

She turned on her heel and headed to the tower stair. An enchanted chain hung across the entrance. It immediately reared like a snake; rattling and clinking it barred their way. Ms. Pince snapped her wand, and it moved aside.

“Come!”

She climbed the stairs energetically, and Bellatrix found it difficult to keep up with her. Many, many levels above they came to a small landing. A thick door stood between them. Ms. Pince waited. When Bellatrix touched the landing stone the door transfigured into a wooden face. “Hey there, who goes a calling on Harold Oakendoor?”

“Oakendoor?” Bellatrix chuckled. “Are you serious?”

Ms. Pince gave her a withering look, but it was Harold who corrected her. “Who be you, questioning me? Eh? I was here not just before you were born Missy but in the age before this age, when I was the right Doorward to Alexandrus of Norrland, Greatest Mage of his time, son to the last Incantamus of the world, Tarius Praetorian of Roma!”

Bellatrix was always—always—up to a challenge, it roused her inner spirit. “That must mean the current Incantamus of the age, Achilles Sharpe, has something to do with this, or you wouldn’t have mentioned his predecessor. Am I right?”

Harold seemed taken aback, glancing at Ms. Pince, “Right bright witch. All right then, in you go!”

Harold opened. Ms. Pince passed in, “Thank you Harold!”

“Ms. Pince!”

Bellatrix passed, saying, “I rather like your spirit. Not many people challenge me. You’re really quite the door, aren’t you?”

“Like I said, Brightest witch of the last century!” he winked.

She passed into a small round turret chamber. There were bookcases all around, and a single upholstered chair set before a library table. One large Tome was on the table, illuminated by a chandelier with nine bright lanterns hanging from iron fixtures. Across the way were a pair of French doors open to a balcony.

On the balcony stood a strong figure of a man.

“Achilles Sharpe,” Bellatrix announced. “I might have known.”

Ms. Pince address Bellatrix sternly. "I cannot be more serious about this. Mr. Sharpe cannot, I repeat, CANNOT come within the threshold of the balcony. If he does, this priceless tome will be ruined!"

"Be comforted Ms. Pince, I know their worth," Sharpe said forcefully. "As I was forced to gain this balcony by climbing your tower, I will not waste that effort by destroying your books!" He said this to convey, in no uncertain terms, that he did not enjoy the exercise and he accomplished it only because he understood the gravity of the situation.

"I understand Mr. Sharpe, and I thank you for understanding!" she relented. "I leave you to your task. Call me if you have any questions or desire any other volumes.

Bellatrix was confounded. "What am I here for?"

"Apparently, you are to read what I cannot read for myself," Achilles explained. "Professor Dumbledore told me there is information on Cardinal Richelieu in that tome, but I can't access it without destroying them. You are here to read to me, I suppose. I'm sorry Bella, this is not my doing. I had no idea you would be enlisted into this tedious study."

"Why couldn't Ms. Pince do it?"

"Perhaps she cannot handle allowing a Muggle into her library; you know, we have libraries in the Muggle world too. Some of us can even do more than look at the pictures, a precious few of us can even read!" He said it loud enough so the retreating Ms. Pince could hear. She turned with a withering glance, stuck her nose in the air, and exclaimed, "A Muggle barbarian in my library!"

With a last look at her precious volume, Ms. Pince retreated as if she were leaving her child behind in the care of wolves. The librarian disappeared down the stairs.

"So, I'm supposed to read to you, like a child?" Bellatrix was obviously irritated.

Achilles did not make it any easier, "No, you're supposed to look beautiful doing it." He smiled. "Of course, you have that part covered."

She smirked, "You're such a bore!"

He blew her a kiss, "Only to you, my dear!"

"Impossible man!" she exclaimed, sitting down, and taking out her wand. "Let's get cracking. Sit down and make yourself comfortable. Even with magic, this could take time."

"I'll stand, Ms. Pince couldn't be bothered to furnish me with a stool."

Thunder cracked, and it began to rain.

"Or an umbrella," he lamented. "Oh, how I hate climbing, especially in the rain!"

"This is intolerable!" Bellatrix exclaimed. She whirled her wand over her head, rather violently if one can be honest about it. "Animatus!"

Down in the library one of the upholstered chairs suddenly shook itself free of a student, dumping them unceremoniously on the stone floor. Then, like an extra from Disney's Sorcerer's Apprentice, it marched up the stairs of the North Tower, nearly running over Ms. Pince on her way down.

"That Bellatrix Black!"

Back in the tower, Bellatrix thought, what about the rain? "Ah, just the thing, very in keeping with you, Mr. Sharpe!" Again, she twirled her wand.

First to arrive was the chair. It ceased to be animated on the threshold of the French door. She pushed it, with difficulty, onto the balcony where Achilleus could take it.

"Sitting in the rain is definitely better than standing in the rain," he said with sarcastic appreciation.

"Oh, yee of little faith. Look, there he is!"

Achilleus turned to see a great leather pinioned flying creature, a dinosaur of some form, swoop in and alight on the back of the chair. Bellatrix issued instructions and the creature held its webbed wings over the chair, sheltering it.

It croaked.

Achilleus sat beneath it, admitting that the shelter was effective but the bird, if bird it was, had a very sharp beak sitting right above his head. If it happened to get irritated about being rained on, "Well, I might be the target of his dissatisfaction, don't you know."

"Oh, don't be a baby," Bellatrix scolded him, conjuring a bucket full of fish. "Just keep shoveling the fish his way, and he'll be quite content."

Achilleus tossed up a fish. SNAP! CROAK!

"Yes, you're right about that!"

Bellatrix, shaking her head, addressed the tome. "*Seventeenth Century Sadists*, I'm sure this is chock full of the very best of society!" she muttered, little knowing what path her future led. Tapping the cover with her wand, she said, "Cardinal Richelieu, Vampire!"

The book opened. She paged through the pages, and she emitted an exclamation of surprise. "Why this isn't just a history, it's a living story! The spells used in this tome are extraordinarily powerful. Look here, the book is adding text about our accessing it, at this very moment! It's writing itself. Wait a moment, what is this? How strange!"

"What?"

"The book is telling me that it, the book, is now communing with Cardinal Richelieu—what can that mean?"

A face forced its way out of the pages. It had piercing red eyes, lean with a well-manicured mustache and beard. “Who dares to prod my patience? Who are you?”

“Do not use your name!” Sharpe ordered.

The face of Cardinal Richelieu stared at Bellatrix and then laughed, “Poor fool! How would I not know Bellatrix Black, the most powerful witch in over a century! Welcome, welcome to my life, daughter of Cygnus!”

“Ignore him, Bella, remember what I taught you. This isn’t just a book, that is the Cardinal Richelieu. He will try to entrap you!”

Bellatrix nodded, and instead of answering the face, she ordered, “Revelio! Reveal everything about Richelieu the Vampire!” Passages highlighted themselves in blood, and Bellatrix began reading them. As she did so, the face of Richelieu watched her suspiciously.

“Look into my eyes young witch! Listen to my commands!”

She looked away, “Indeed I will not!”

“Your will is strong, witch.”

“Stronger than you know, Richelieu, but you’ve given yourself away,” Sharpe told him. “You’ll never bring her under your spell. I’ve prepared her for your attacks.”

The head rose above the pages and turned to him. The eyes flared with anger. “Achilleus Sharpe! Don’t think your anti-magic powers will work against me!” the Cardinal said sternly. “They sent you too early. I am not Maclaren. He was but my vassal. You may have given young Bellatrix instruction enough to foil this book but wait until tonight when the Black Sisters face me truly.”

“Sisters? So, you’re after all the Black sisters not just Bellatrix?”

“Indeed!” Richelieu smiled, and his voice dripped with heavy sarcasm. “Their powers will not protect them against me—and you? What of you?” He laughed. “There is naught that you can do against a Vampire as old and as evil as I; face the truth, your task is hopeless. Go! Return to Rome and await another tasking within your talents. Why waste a promising career on unfounded hope? Think on it!”

“Oh, I look forward to tonight, Cardinal! Come then if you dare!”

Richelieu laughed, “So be it. Yet consider this, Venatorum Sharpe, I already own the Black Sisters by contract. They are mine. Much of your hope disappeared when Cygnus Black himself set blood to parchment!”

Sharpe glowered at Richelieu, but Bellatrix was perplexed. “What does he mean Achilleus—what does he mean?”

Achilleus did not answer, and the Cardinal laughed again. “Think on it, Sharpe! It’s over before it’s begun! I shall be back tonight to collect *my* girls!”

The Cardinal's head re-entered the page, and the book closed with a heavy SNAP! It wrenched itself out of Bellatrix's hands and fell onto the table.

"What was that about?" Bellatrix said anxiously, her eyes wide with astonishment.

Instead of answering her, Sharpe called, "Did you see that Dumbledore?"

Harold opened and allowed the future Headmaster of Hogwarts in. "Indeed, I did, Mr. Sharpe!" He stopped, looked back at the door, and said, "Harold, if you don't mind, please see that no one interrupts us. This is strictly secret, do you understand?"

"Absolutely, Professor! My lock is engaged, and my lips are sealed!"

"What's this all about Professor Dumbledore, what's going on?" Bellatrix demanded.

"You have a right to know, Miss Black, but I warn you, the truth is not easy!" the Professor told her.

"Then you'll no doubt enjoy this," she said, slumping in her chair.

"Not at all, Miss Black. I have great respect for your spirit and skill. You are a rare witch, and that is highly commendable. Be that as it may, I did not anticipate this eventuality. Actually, it was Achilles who first suspected something dark and sinister in this plot."

"More dark and sinister than a Vampire wanting me?" she shot back.

"Point taken, Miss Black. It might be easier for Mr. Sharpe to tell you; I know that I do not have your trust," Dumbledore told her.

Bellatrix looked at Sharpe, and with no small amount of exasperation, demanded, "Well?"

Sharpe cut to the chase. "I'm sorry Bella. Your father has made a contract with Cardinal Richelieu. Your father has sold you and your sisters to the Cardinal."

"Sold us, you mean, all of us," she said angrily, becoming more and more animated. "Father sold the three of us, his own daughters, to a Vampire as slaves?"

"As wives," Achilles corrected her.

"Wonderful, just wonderful!" Bellatrix exclaimed, stalking around the table. "What a dear heart! He even sold Cissy? His favorite! Why, Mr. Sharpe, can you tell me why?"

"I think so," he told her, to which she stopped and stared at him. Her expression demanded he continue. "Consider that your father recruited the services of Fenrir Greyback from Tom Riddle, our own self-proclaimed Lord Voldemort. All that, to avenge himself on me. That verifies that Voldemort recruited the Lycans to his cause. I believe he's trying to do the same with the Vampires. However, to do so, he needed to recruit an old and powerful Vampire Lord. Richelieu was the obvious choice. Richelieu's weakness is well known in my profession. As proof of your father's loyalty, I believe Voldemort demanded you and your sisters as payment to Cardinal

Richelieu. The three beautiful sister's Black would fit in with the Cardinal's desire for very powerful wives."

"Why should he want such wives? Obviously, he doesn't know how difficult I can be!"

"Three Vampires adept at the arcane arts would offer Richelieu significant protection against the Venatorum."

"Excepting you, of course," Bellatrix replied with a huff. She once again collapsed in the chair. Finally, she looked up, the fire had gone from her eyes. "My father will make Vampires of us all. Is there anything we can do, or is our fate set?"

"Courage! Unfortunately, the contract makes our position more dangerous," Achilleus sighed. "For instance, a Vampire's powers are curtailed when trespassing. Since the contract addresses exactly that point, Richelieu will have all of his powers available to him. There are many other subtle points, but this changes my plans."

Bellatrix was crushed, guessing what Achilleus meant, but couldn't bring himself to say. "It's all quite hopeless then! You may as well forget about me and go back to Rome!" The stalwart, courageous Bellatrix pouted, and her full, red lower lip quivered.

"Now, now Miss Black, there will be none of that!" Dumbledore interrupted, his expression was fixed and determined. "The faculty will be present and are here to protect you and your sisters. We have many powers, and we will use everything at our disposal against this scourge! Moreover, I can say with perfect confidence that it would be impossible for me to remove Mr. Sharpe from your side! He, as well as the rest of us, will defend your life as if you were our own daughters!"

"Well, that's a sight better than my dad will do," she sighed. "Thank you, Professor, and I mean that."

"I am at your service, Miss Black!"

Bellatrix rose from her chair. "What change of plans Venatorum?"

"It's quite simple, Miss Black," he told her forcefully. "Heretofore, I thought defending you through this cycle would be sufficient. It won't be. I have to destroy Cardinal Richelieu. He is the most powerful Vampire in the world with the exception of Dracula, himself. That being said, this must end with his destruction."

"If he is that powerful, how will you accomplish it?"

Achilleus Sharpe smiled, and said, "With Focus, Fortitude, and Faith, Miss Black!"

"Focus, Fortitude, and Faith," she repeated. Bellatrix joined Achilleus on the windy balcony. "Will you truly stay by my side, Achilleus Sharpe? Will you protect me from the powers of Hell?"

"To the ends of the earth and beyond, Bella!"

Slytherin House dormitory settled in for another tense, frightful night. In keeping with the expected events, the weather turned from fair to stormy. As Sharpe announced, “That is not unexpected, as the most powerful Vampires can affect the weather.”

This did nothing to calm the nerves of the girls, but the arrival of the more powerful teachers did help. “The castle is locked down,” Dumbledore announced. “And rest assured none of us will rest until we are certain you’re safe. So, take shelter in dreams, but keep your wands close! To bed all!”

Praising the girls for their courage the night before, Sharpe urged them to sleep as much as they could. “Tonight, may well be more exciting, but one never knows. Since that is out of our control, we must make the best of it.”

The girls took to their beds.

The last to retire was Bellatrix. She waited for Achilleus to come to her before opening her curtains. “I didn’t say anything in front of the others, but why not go after the Vampire; after all, you went after Maclaren?” she asked.

“A logical question, Miss Black,” he replied formally, as Dumbledore was within earshot. “Unfortunately, I don’t know where Richelieu is. If I did, I would have settled it today. As it is, we must sit and wait.”

“You’re certain he is coming though?”

“We put up a brave front, and he knows my reputation. It is possible he will await another opportunity. That’s what I’m afraid of.”

“Why?”

“Because I control things here, I know the field of battle,” Sharpe said. “He must come to me, but if he is patient, if he waits, our position may well be untenable.”

“What do you mean,” Bella asked. Then she answered her own question, “He can wait as long as he likes. Why attack Hogwarts when all he has to do is wait for the term to finish and take us, all of us from our very home—unprotected. Father has already signed our lives away.”

“Yes, that is my greatest fear,” Achilleus nodded.

“That’s why you goaded him,” Bellatrix realized. “You knew father would never allow you on the estate. Oh, Achilleus!”

Dumbledore stepped up to them. “The evening is gone, night is upon us. To bed Miss Black. Let us hope that nothing stirs but the wind without the walls tonight!”

“Yes, Professor Dumbledore, thank you!” she said with a sigh.

“Don’t worry, Miss Black. Hogwarts has never seen such a witch as you come through its doors. I don’t think it’s your fate to be exiled to a Vampire’s harem. Yet I do wonder that you kept your sisters ignorant of their danger. Are you certain that’s wise?”

“Professor, my sister Andromeda would spend the night in the fetal position, and poor Narcissa could think of nothing but her father’s betrayal. I think, I’m being merciful, maybe for the first time in my life.”

Dumbledore smiled, “You never cease to impress me, Miss Black. Good night then!”

Bella waited until his back was turned, muttering, “I’d rather stand guard over my sisters. How can you expect me to sleep?”

“I not only expect you to sleep dear Bella, I need you to sleep! If Cardinal Richelieu comes tonight, he will call to you, to Andromeda, and to Narcissa. He will try to call you out, away from your protectors. Your sisters will be highly susceptible to his call; they are already contracted to Richelieu. I’m counting on you to fight that call, and thereby warn me.”

“I understand,” she said simply. She held her hand out. Sharpe took it. She seated herself gracefully on the bed, then allowed Sharpe to tuck her in. He kissed her gently on the forehead. As he rose, Bellatrix withdrew her wand and held it over her blanket, ready for use. Her dark eyes shone.

“You are beautifully dangerous! How could any man not fall in love with you?”

“Well said, Mr. Sharpe—goodnight!”

He closed her curtain.

Sharpe retreated softly from the bed and went to the balcony.

Dumbledore joined him. Looking out at the night, he asked, “Do you think he will come tonight?”

“Yes, this change in weather tells me he is angry, and did not expect this resistance. Richelieu will move again tonight. He is preparing to challenge me. I’m hoping that he still thinks he can back me down. It’s a logical plan. I’m still young, normally too young to face someone of his age and power. He knows my reputation, and hopes that should he not back me down, that I will be overconfident.”

“So, the circles of wafers, the crucifixes, the garlic, they won’t affect Richelieu?”

“He will notice them, but they will not stop him,” Sharpe told them. “A silver crucifix wielded by a man of Faith, like me, can harm even a powerful Vampire, but that alone will only cause him to change his mode of attack.”

Dumbledore chuckled softly to himself.

“What is it?”

“You remind me of myself preparing for my old friend Grindelwald! Ah, it was to be the duel of the ages, and it most assuredly was; and yet I was just as focused as you are now,” he leaned over and nodded to Sharpe. “Of course, I was twenty years your senior at this point. However, Grindelwald was equally as powerful to me as Richelieu is to you.”

Sharpe, who had not stopped watching the night pass, said, “The Moon is setting.”

“I will patrol the floor,” Dumbledore nodded.

The Venatorum was so focused on the minutia of the night, he simply nodded. Outside, the Moon was diving for the hills, continuously cloaked and uncloaked by the flying clouds. A howl broke out, and then another. Soon, there was a symphony of howls serenading the falling Moon. When it disappeared, they ceased. The darkness became a palpable thing. Sharpe closed the French doors of Bellatrix’s window and sealed them with a prayer.

Going first to Bellatrix’s bed and then to her sisters, he unfurled a tabard on each with a Silver Cross embroidered on all sides. Walking to the center of the circle of beds, he began to pray. His voice was low, powerful, invoking his Faith for the protection of the girls within the room. “Saint Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle; be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the Devil!”

The candle flickered. Although the winds howled with fury against the windows, no breath of air stirred within the chamber. It was dark within, but even so, a sprinkling of fairy dust—so it seemed—caught some ethereal light and some unseen wind. It flew over Bellatrix’s canopy, probing the top and sides. Being rebuffed it swirled about the room. The Venatorum followed it with his eyes.

“May God rebuke him, we humbly pray: and do thou. O Prince of the heavenly host, by the Power of God, thrust into Hell Satan and all the evil spirits who prowl about the world seeking the ruin of souls!”

The fairy dust congealed before Sharpe. It was no fairy. It was Cardinal Richelieu.

“Amen!”

“Bravo, my young Venatorum,” the Cardinal smiled, revealing his ultra sharp canines. He applauded with calm, steadfast demeanor. “I celebrate that you recited St. Michael’s prayer without even a quiver in your voice, a trembling of the lip. Your heart is stout, but your will, what has reality to say about that?”

“Behold my will, Richelieu!” Sharpe insisted, presenting a large Silver Crucifix.

Richelieu gazed at it unflinchingly, but neither did Sharpe waver. For a long tense, moment they strove, but then it was Richelieu, who looked away. Then he disappeared, seeming to move too fast for the eye to follow. Sharpe turned, stepped aside, and thrust the Crucifix before him, drawing a Silver blade with a heavy Silver pommel in his right hand. Just as he stopped moving, Richelieu materialized in exactly the spot where Sharpe thrust the Crucifix.

The Vampire hissed and disappeared.

Again, the Venatorum moved, this time rolling away, stopping, and then whirling about. Again, the Crucifix met the Vampire's attack.

The Cardinal sneered, "Third time pays for all, Venatorum!" He disappeared.

This time, the attack was apparently not so immediate. Sharpe moved at once to his left, but then, just as he whipped the Crucifix around, he waited. The Venatorum kept moving, albeit slowly, looking about. It was obvious that he didn't know where the Cardinal was.

Bellatrix awakened to the sound of Achilles' prayer. She held her wand aloft, and with her other hand swiftly made sure the Silver Crucifix Sharpe had given her was outside her gown. Then she drew the Silver dagger he'd given her. Swiftly, driven by anger and fear for her sisters, Bellatrix swung out of bed and burst through her curtains.

She gasped, as she saw Richelieu materialize not ten feet from her.

"Cissy! Andromeda! Get up now!" she ordered. The girls did so in a twinkling, not being able to sleep in any manner but frighteningly light. They sprang out of bed, wands out. "Get behind me!" Bella warned, and they did so.

Dumbledore's voice filled the room in a loud whisper, "Up girls! Up for your lives! Wands at the ready, Ladies of Salazar Slytherin! Courage! Make your House proud!"

The ladies rolled out of bed, bleary eyed but ready. They watched as Sharpe met Richelieu's first attack. Then his second. Finally, his third.

Bellatrix watched, wand and dagger ready, protecting her sisters, as Sharpe met the Cardinal's unseen attacks with astonishing prediction. Yet when the third came and Richelieu did not appear, her heart quailed.

"Now Dumbledore!" Sharpe exclaimed.

Dumbledore's thunderous voice roared, "Slytherin House, Lumos Solus!"

Two dozen wands blazed forth with the light of the sun.

Richelieu screamed and suddenly materialized above Sharpe. He fell, but Sharpe rolled aside, casting his Silver knife as he came up on a knee. The dagger plunged into Richelieu's back, and the Cardinal roared in pain and anger.

The Venatorum sprang to take advantage of the strike, pulling a carved stake from his belt. He leapt forth, seeking to drive it into Richelieu's heart from behind. The Vampire whirled, knocking Sharpe sprawling just as the stake closed on his cloaked back.

The Venatorum rolled to his feet in one swift motion, stake in hand.

The Cardinal sneered at him. He glowered, and then in concentration closed his eyes. The dagger slowly eased out of the Vampire's back as the terrified girls watched. Once clear, still

dripping with Richelieu's dark blood, the Vampire Lord, said simply, "Have your dagger back, Venatorum!"

The dagger flew to Sharpe, but he stepped aside and snatched from the air.

Cardinal Richelieu began to pace the circuit of the chamber. Sharpe paced opposite him. "We appear to be at a stalemate."

"For the moment, Cardinal," Sharpe replied. "You know I've restrained myself because of my charges. Be reasonable. Forgo your contract! Leave these ladies alone, let them live their lives naturally, and we need never dance again."

"Is that the price," Richelieu smiled, and stopped. "I think not! You see, I've already won. I call upon the Sisters Black! Upon your Paternal Decree, come to me!"

Almost at once, Andromeda and Narcissa attempted to go to Cardinal Richelieu. Fortunately for them, Bellatrix, the stubborn, strong-willed, recalcitrant scion of the ancient and noble House of Black, thought otherwise.

"Stay back sisters, we're not going to this demon's bed!" she shrieked in the purest fury of a daughter betrayed by a father. She spat at the Cardinal. "You'll have none of us!"

Sharpe used the opportunity to take out his whip. SWISH-CRACK! The Silver tipped thong curled around the Cardinal's neck, drawing blood, as well as a strident curse!

The Venatorum drew himself up the whip, stake in hand to end the night's drama.

Cardinal Richelieu, held by the jagged Silver tines on the whip's last yard, was frozen. He could do but one thing, he dematerialized, and fled the chamber with a screech. The French windows burst, and he was swallowed by the night.

A roar of triumph from the Slytherin girls filled the chamber.

Sharpe went straight to Bellatrix, but all three girls hugged him close. He allowed it for a moment, but then, out of necessity, extricated himself. Yet with a smile, he appraised them. "There you are, my doughty, daughters Black! I am well rewarded with your courage! Nowhere are there three such sisters!"

"Is the night truly over?" Andromeda said, pleading that it should be so.

"Tonight, is over, Andromeda—tonight! But we are that much closer to being done with this terrible ordeal!"

To that, Dumbledore added, "Well done Slytherin House, well done Slytherin! Gather round ladies, and you too, Mr. Malfoy, who has steadfastly protected you against the terrors of the night! Now come round! I celebrate your courage, this night. You will all receive accommodations for service to Hogwarts, the mark of which I have never seen! Now, I believe a draught of Professor McGonagle's own family wine is in order to sooth the nerves and bring on a restful slumber through the rest of the night!"

The girls gathered, but Sharpe told the Black sisters, “No, I’ve got something special for you!” He took out a flask, Silver of course, and handed it to Bella. “This is wine from the very stock of the grapes that graced our Lord’s Last Supper. There is no more precious elixir on this world. You have all earned it.”

All three drank the wine, and then Achilles tucked them in with soft words.

Andromeda was the most anxious. “You think he’ll come back again, tonight?”

“No! Tonight, the ordeal is over, Andromeda.”

“How can you be so calm; my heart is racing!”

“Listen to the wine. Now sleep Andromeda. I’m watching over you.”

“You won’t nod off, will you?”

“Not for a single moment!”

She closed her eyes and Sharpe closed her curtains.

Narcissa was more concerned over Lucius than herself. “Will he be all right?”

“He will come straight to me if he senses anything else tonight. Yet I’m certain the night shall pass without adventure. Don’t worry, Lucius will not tackle anything on his own.”

“He put himself in deadly danger!” she objected.

“Yes, but he insisted,” Sharpe told her. “He wants to protect you. That is a very courageous thing of him, and very selfless. I cannot stop an act of love, Narcissa.”

“Yes, yes, that’s what it is, thank you,” Narcissa said. She closed her eyes with a smile.

Sharpe moved to Bellatrix. “How are you holding up, my Queen?”

“You going to kiss me good night?” she said, surprising him. She puckered up.

Sharpe obliged, letting it linger.

Bella pulled away, “Why Mr. Sharpe, I do think you copped a feel! How unprofessional of you!”

Scattered giggling.

“To bed girls!” he told them. Turning back to Bellatrix, he shook his head and sighed. “Such unrelenting courage! You truly are a marvel, Miss Black!”

She motioned him closer. When he leaned over her, she whispered, “It’s all a front. I’m deathly afraid, still, but that just makes me angry and a bit forward.”

“I’m here. I’m not going anywhere,” he assured her.

“I know, but this isn’t Laird Maclaren. Richelieu is different, isn’t he?”

“Yes, but that is for tomorrow. Between the two of us, we confounded his plans—tonight,” he told her. Then he gently put her back on her pillows. Brushing away the unruly hair from her smooth brow, he kissed her again. “Sleep now, my beautiful, brave Bella.”

Sharpe closed her curtains and again paced the room. When he got to the dormitory door, he opened it and stuck his head out. “How are you doing Lucius?”

“Holding up,” he said. “You’re certain he’s done tonight?”

“Yes,” he replied gravely. “Tomorrow is another night. Sleep. If something happens, listen to your dreams.”

Lucius nodded and got into his cot, wand out.

Closing the door, Sharpe took his place in the chair on the balcony. He’d just settled in, when a whisper came from Bella’s bed.

“I can’t sleep!”

“You must try Bella,” he told her.

“I can’t, I tell you. Move your chair over here so I can talk to you without waking everyone up!”

Sharpe did so, setting the chair right next to the curtain behind the head of the bed. “I’m here Bella. How can I ease your mind?”

“Just talk to me,” she said. “When did you start on this career?”

“I’d finished grammar school in the States, our 6th grade, that’s when our Parish priest asked to see me. He told me that the Vatican had some interest in me. I was surprised. What could they possibly want with me?”

“What did they want with you?”

“Apparently several of the parishioners were Magics—I didn’t know anything about that—and they had certain items disenchanting. Eventually they traced it to me. The Ministry sent a few Aurors out to test me, again without my knowledge. The Ministry then informed the Vatican, which I learned was the standard way they dealt with special Muggle cases. The Vatican then interviewed me.”

“But why a Venatorum? You said there’s very little advantage being an Incantamus,” Bellatrix noted, yawning.

“True,” he agreed. “Initially, I was put through their general training program. Part of that program was to funnel me into a specialty. By the time I was sixteen I was already trending into exorcism, vampirism and anthromorphics—Werewolves and such. That’s when a case came up concerning a rare magic using Vampire. It was my first hunt. That’s how it all began.”

Bella answered with a soft, sensuous snore.

Achilleus Sharpe sighed, turning his mind back to the whisperings of the night.

Dumbledore met with Sharpe again that morning. The professor looked no worse for wear after the night, but he noted that Sharpe could use a legitimately strong cup of coffee. The Venatorum smiled, replying, "It's not the lack of sleep but the racing mind that leads to weariness. Tonight, will be the most dangerous time of this endeavor. I cannot be satisfied with driving Cardinal Richelieu off; he must be destroyed."

The wizard sipped his tea, also troubled. "From what you said earlier, should he fail tonight, then he will wait until the Black sisters return to their father's estate and his claim will be all but settled."

"If I fail to destroy him tonight, then this changes to a hunt. That will be much more difficult. However, he will try again tonight. He must. The Cardinal's standing in the hierarchy of the Vampire aristocracy will be considerably lessened if he is driven off by a lone Venatorum, no matter how much Hogwarts has done to aid in the defense."

"Is this aristocracy so important to their world?" Dumbledore said, frowning.

"It is everything," Sharpe nodded. "The modern scourge of Vampirism owes its lineage to one man: Vlad Tepes Dracula, Voivode of Wallachia. He was a Prince, a member of a royal family, a warrior and an aristocrat who put great weight on his actions and lineage. Those qualities did not die when he left behind the land of the living. In fact, Dracula purged those "mongrel" Vampires still in existence, taking great care, with who was chosen to be turned and added to his ranks."

Sharpe opened up a book, showing the lineage of modern Vampires. "You'll note two things in this family tree of Vampires. First, there are a few thousand Vampires, not tens of thousands or more. Dracula never wanted Vampires to become a scourge on Humanity, but rather, he wanted to cultivate a force of Vampires beneath him in order to succeed where he, as a lone Prince against the might of the Muhammadan Invaders failed. True, he stopped the invasions, but he could not destroy the threat. That is his motivation."

"Interesting," Dumbledore mused. "I have some experience with the powerful players, including to some small extent myself, trying to change the world. Is this your interpretation or the Vatican's of Dracula's motivation?"

"Actually, it is his," Sharpe replied. "I've spoken with him. Indeed, I've spoken with Prince Dracula about Cardinal Richelieu."

"You astonish me!" the wizard exclaimed.

"Imagine my astonishment when Dracula actually sought me out," Sharpe nodded.

"That must have been a terrifying moment," Dumbledore said, brows arched in surprise.

"No, quite the contrary," the Venatorum replied. "You are familiar with Paris?"

"Many times," Dumbledore smiled. "There is a quiet café in St. Michaels Square—"

“Where you can watch the world go by from the sidewalk on the Seine—”

“Under the spreading bows of an old oak tree, with Notre Dame as the backdrop!” They both laughed quietly. “The family that owns that café also have a vineyard in Burgundy. They have a delightful red wine. Ah, it has been many years since I travelled there for a glass.”

“This last spring, I was enjoying a glass of that very wine, watching the people, when a singular figure approached my table and asked to join me. He was tall, wearing a long coat and gloves despite the heat of the summer day. A wide brimmed hat shaded his face, and dark blue glasses his eyes. Yet the pale skin, the long mustache and perfectly trimmed beard, yes, I recognized the Prince immediately. It was Dracula himself.”

“I stood, greeting him with as much composure as I could muster. He smiled, tapping his Gold shod iron cane on the pavers, and much to my continued surprise, he held out a hand. ‘Mr. Sharpe, I have heard much about you. So much, I should say, that I have left Transylvania for the sole purpose of seeking you out. Please, please, do not let me interrupt your drink. Rather, may I join you?’ So, he joined me for an entire bottle of that red wine. I’m still quite curious about the encounter.”

“I imagine so,” Dumbledore agreed. “What may I ask was his purpose in seeking you out?”

“He addressed that at some length,” Sharpe admitted. “The entirety of the interview included many things, but his purpose concerned our adventure here. It was Dracula himself who warned me of Cardinal Richelieu’s interest in recruiting Magics into his ranks, and in fact, into his family. The Prince was troubled by the possibilities of Magic-Vampires. In his words, ‘The combination is too powerful. It threatens the very order of my children. Should it spread, the repercussions will not only threaten my world, but the world of Magics, and of course Humanity as a whole. That cannot be allowed.’ So, it was Dracula who sent me after Cardinal Richelieu.”

“I’m assuming you reported the encounter to the Vatican, and they in turn sent you here,” Dumbledore asked?

“Yes, and none too soon,” Sharpe answered. “When I cleaned out Maclaren’s castle, I knew he was part of Richelieu’s family,” he pointed to the Richelieu branch of the Vampire tree. “I didn’t yet see the overall danger. However, after my meeting with the Prince, the connection to Hogwarts became clear.”

“That brings to mind Lord Voldemort’s sudden interest in the Defense Against the Dark Arts post,” the wizard mused. “All the threads are now being shown to be part of one large, intricate fabric.”

“If I may bring you back to the Hierarchy of Dracula’s children,” Sharpe said, pointing out, “Richelieu’s branch is the largest and most powerful. The two other branches together are larger; however, Contessa Vianney and Rothschild are rivals in the New World. Neither has the inclination to revisit the struggles of the Old World. They see politics on the Continent as just that, and not worth their time.”

“Meanwhile, the Cardinal wants to supplant Prince Dracula and begin a new scourge of Vampirism. If he is sent packing by you, a young Venatorum, no one will follow him. Therefore, tonight Richelieu will rally his forces—here.”

“Exactly,” Sharpe said.

“How many?”

“Dozens, at least,” Sharpe admitted. “It’s a tall order.”

“Indeed,” Dumbledore said soberly.

“The one advantage we have is this: if I succeed in destroying Cardinal Richelieu, I also destroy his children. They are freed, and subject to death. Not all choose it, of course, but history tells us that when offered the path to the light, the majority will take it.”

“Then we know what we must do, tonight!” Dumbledore said gravely.

It was late evening and the girls of Slytherin House were in their dormitory. All other students would spend the night in the great hall, but it was Sharpe’s contention that space was too large for an effective defense. Most of the professor’s joined the students in the hall, but Dumbledore and a few selected professors stayed with the Slytherin girls, among them the Keeper of Grounds and Keys, the half giant Hagrid.

“What is it you want me to do, Mr. Sharpe,” the giant asked.

Sharpe smiled, and told him, “You’re the only one here as strong as the Vampires. All I want you to do is keep your eyes open. If you see someone in trouble you handle it.”

“Any particular way?”

Sharpe shrugged, “A Vampire has prodigious powers of self-healing, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t hurt when you slam them into things, especially stone.”

“That means walls, floors and such,” Hagrid nodded, satisfied. “Right lot of stone in a castle!”

“Use it well!” Sharpe nodded as the girls from Slytherin came in from the restroom.

Bellatrix made a bee-line to Sharpe. Her sisters followed her, so she leaned in and whispered to him, “You’re going to protect us—all of us—aren’t you Achilles?” The use of his first name, and the expressive nature of her big, brown eyes was more than enticing. She was afraid, extraordinary for her, and she was also afraid for her sisters.

Sharpe smiled grimly, opening his coat. On his belt were half a dozen hardwood stakes. He withdrew two of them, handing them to Bellatrix. “Hold these, will You?”

Andromeda and Narcissa crowded in behind Bellatrix, watching.

Sharpe pulled up the sleeves of his coat. Beneath were iron fittings, one for each forearm. They couldn't tell what they did. They were steel springs, rings, rails—it was a Muggle contraption—it left them confounded. Sharpe pulling on a latch, forcing it back until it snapped with a CLACK! That was one arm. He did the same with the other. Then he held out his hand for the stakes.

Bellatrix handed him one.

Sharpe slid it into the rail and snapped a holding ring on it—SNAP!

She handed him the other. Slide—SNAP!

“Notice the runes and talismans carved on the stake. I'm quite certain you're familiar with them.”

The girls craned to look, and exclaimed, “Ooh yes! Oh, I like that one!”

“Yes, they work for Muggles too!” he told them. Then Achilles approached each of them, starting with Narcissa, then Andromeda, and finally Bellatrix. To each, he said a prayer.

“St. Michael protect Narcissa, and if I may trade my life for hers, I am here resolved!”

He handed Narcissa a Silver dagger with a crucifix on the handle and kissed her on the forehead after anointing her with oil.

“St. Michael protect Andromeda, and if I may trade my life for hers, I am here resolved!”

He handed Andromeda a Silver dagger with a crucifix on the handle and kissed her on the forehead after anointing her with oil.

“St. Michael protect Bellatrix, and if I may trade my life for hers, I am here resolved!”

He handed Bellatrix a Silver dagger with a crucifix on the handle, and then unhitched his whip. Handing her the coiled whip, he told her, “I think you're better with this than I. You are an amazing student, and an incredible woman—Bella, my beautiful, intoxicating Bella!”

“Don't get intoxicated before the night is on, now,” she smiled, taking the whip. Yet when he anointed her with oil and stooped to kiss her forehead, Bellatrix clutched his jaws and pulled him to her lips. “This night, you are my hero, even if you are a Muggle!”

Sharpe said sternly, “I bask in your glow my magical lady!”

He closed the curtain and made his rounds.

Outside the entrance to the dormitory tower, Sharpe checked on Lucius. The young man stood with one of the professors, and he nodded at the cot. “I'll get no sleep tonight.”

Nodding, Sharpe reminded him, “Your Lumos spell and the crucifix will be your greatest weapons. Be vigilant!”

Returning to the tower dormitory, he met Dumbledore. “We are as prepared as we could be outside of Holy Ground. Still, we want to lure him in. I can’t stand watch over Bellatrix and her sisters the rest of their lives.”

“You could, of course,” the elder wizard reminded the man. “That is, unless your orders forbid marriage.”

“They do not. As the Templars before us, the Venatorum are considered warrior priests. That requires a less stringent application of canon law,” Sharpe replied. Then he shook his head. “However, for something of that sort I would require her father’s consent, and that I will never have!”

“One never knows,” the wizard shrugged.

“Cygnus Black is willing to sell his daughters to a Vampire as a token of his service to Voldemort. I’d say we know right well enough, Professor!”

“It is a confounding application of parental love, I must admit.”

“There will be no dialogue tonight. He will send his minions in first, hoping to panic or at least distract us. When chaos is supreme, he will come himself to steal them away or at least infect them to his call. At the first sign of their presence all must be roused.”

“We are all ready!”

Sharp continued his pacing around, and around the girls. He never lost sight of the candle flame by Bellatrix’s bed. On occasion it would flicker. He would stop and it would regain its steady flame. On he paced.

The night wore on.

The Moon set.

A sudden chill silence took the air.

Sharpe stopped, staring at the candle.

It went out.

“Arise! Everybody up!” Sharpe exclaimed.

“Lumos Solus!” Dumbledore ordered. A chorus of girl’s voices joined him. “Lumos Solus!”

The chamber became bright as day, just in time for a dozen dark shapes to coalesce into human and wolf form. Immediately, the Vampires fell upon the girls and teachers, but their attacks were at once foiled, at least for the moment. The girls took refuge within circles of Holy Wafers, three to each circle, standing back-to-back-to-back-to-back, Crucifixes held forth, shining with painful Silver brightness.

The Vampires couldn't pass the Holy Circles. Still, they roared, champed their fangs, and harangued the girls, trying to get them to panic, to flee blindly out of the circles. The professors darted to and from, their more powerful spells, worrying the Vampires.

Bellatrix and her sisters were in their circle, but Bellatrix could not take a passive stance. A Vampiress terrified a circle of her classmates, and they looked about to panic. She uncoiled the whip—CRACK! SWISH-CRACK! Bellatrix snapped the Silver armored thong on the Vampire's back, slicing through the raiment, and drawing dark, heavy blood.

The Vampire reeled, but then whirled on Bellatrix in fury. "You little she-witch! I'll have you for that!"

Bellatrix snapped the whip at her face, but the Vampire moved aside with a swiftness the eye could barely follow. Before Bellatrix could recover her stroke the Vampiress was before her. The long-nailed claws grappled the whip, and laughing, she pulled Bellatrix out of the protective circle.

Cursing, Bellatrix jammed the Crucifix into the Vampires laughing face. The Silver sizzled, turning the Vampire's laughs into howls! Furious, the Vampiress reached for the witch, but as her claws closed around her arm her smoking head was yanked backwards. A silver blade came from behind, slashing through throat and bone. The head gruesomely parted from the neck, and the body collapsed. The head dripped foul smelling blood, swinging in Achilles Sharp's hand. Swinging it about, he tossed it out of the window, and out of the castle.

The head screamed as it plummeted into the night.

Taking out a stake from his belt, Sharpe said, "Finish it! Stake her and release her!"

He tossed the stake, and Bellatrix seized it with both hands. With all her might, the eldest Black daughter stabbed it into the heart. The body stiffened, and from outside a horrible scream split the night. Bellatrix leaned over the stake, shoving it home until the stout beams of the floor stopped the wicked point.

The scream faded, but strangely, the terrible cry ended in a joyous note of eternal relief.

"Well done, Bellatrix Black! You've released her, now back to your circle. We're not through this yet!"

"No, we are not, Achilles Sharpe!" said an evil voice. So calculated was Richelieu's attack, that he was already alongside and behind Sharpe when he coalesced. He grappled Sharpe by the neck with one hand and the arm with the other, pinioning him. In a moment, the Cardinal would break the Venatorum's neck. Yet Sharpe, caught as he was reacted instinctively. The Vampire locked his knife hand, but Sharpe flicked the blade up in the air and snatched it with his free left hand. Rocking back his left elbow, he struck Richelieu across the face. The force of the blow was negligible. The Vampire didn't enjoy it, but it wasn't the strength the affected him, it was the Silver. The Silver armor at the elbow raked across the Cardinal's eye, blinding him momentarily. The Silver edged blade followed, cutting across the neck, jaw, and across the Cardinal's face.

It just missed the jugular.

The Cardinal cursed, but he maintained his hold on Sharpe with deathly strength.

“Now, we end this!” the Vampire exclaimed, his face inches from Sharpe’s.

Swish-CRACK! Bellatrix’s whip curled around their legs. The distraction caused both combatants to look down at the whip and then at the sisters. The Cardinal appeared about to laugh, when Bellatrix ordered her sisters, “Pull!”

The three girls hauled on the whip handle, pulling the legs out from under Sharpe and the Cardinal. They fell to the ground, with Richelieu on top of Sharpe.

“Well now, that didn’t work out, did it?” Richelieu smiled, and he bared his fangs.

“It worked out just fine!” Sharpe replied, coldly. SNAP-CLACK-CHUNK!

Richelieu’s red eyes went suddenly wide with surprise. In a sudden panic, he disengaged from Sharpe’s grasp, kicking free of the thong of the whip, and staggered to his feet. “What have you done?” he gasped, and blood gushed from his lips. The Vampire looked down to see Sharpe’s stake protruding from his chest. Terror took Richelieu. “No! No! I cannot, I will not return for judgement!” he wheezed, grasping in vain at the protruding end of the stake. He no longer had the strength to withdraw it, and indeed, the Holy Runes written about it burned his hands.

“Sharpe! You don’t know what you have done! You,” his voice was swallowed in a gush of bilious blood as he fell to his knees. Finally, the piercing eyes grew vacuous, and Cardinal Richelieu collapsed to the floor. Sharpe was on him immediately. With one vicious chop, the Venatorum severed the head. The corpse shriveled and shrank to that of a withered old man with a stake through his skeletal chest. The scream that escaped the cracked, dry lips was lonely and hollow.

Standing, Sharpe said, “I was afraid of that!” Then he looked around. The rest of the Vampires, all children of Richelieu, fell—dead in truth. Each chose the freedom of the grave, all but one.

One stood glowering at him.

Sharpe approached the Vampire, telling him, “You need not live out this horror that was forced upon you! Repent and find peace!”

“Forced? I embrace it!” the demon replied, coldly. “I will begin my own realm with your blood!” He rushed Sharpe. There was an answering gasp from the onlookers, so swift was the Vampire’s attack. The Venatorum appeared to do nothing.

Bellatrix exclaimed, “Achilleus!”

Sharpe swiftly stepped aside at the last moment, raising his knife as he did so. The bitter edge cut a crimson swath across the pallid, polluted flesh of the neck. The Vampire stopped, staggered, lifting his hands to staunch the flow of blood. The Venatorum pulled out his Silver hammer. Braining the maimed Vampire brought it down, stunning it. With brutal efficiency,

Sharpe rolled the creature onto its back and staked it. A moment later the head was off—it was over.

Sharpe stood and Bellatrix rushed into his arms. She hugged him. “Richelieu is dead now—right?” The Beautiful Black sister looked up at him with her huge brown eyes. “It’s over?”

“It is,” Achilleus assured her. “We’ll make certain Richelieu can’t come back.”

The Slytherin girls gathered round, and Bellatrix drew away from him, embarrassed. “Thank you, Mr. Sharpe! We certainly appreciate your efforts!”

The girls giggled at her false coldness. They all asked the same question Bella did, was it over? Truly?”

“It’s over, your courage has won you freedom! Well done, Girls of Slytherin!”

There was general joyous approval, and Professor Dumbledore praised them. “Yes, your outstanding courage will be forever remembered in Hogwarts history! There will be time for celebration, but for the remainder of the night you will join your classmates in the great hall and rest without fear!”

The girls were quite ready and followed the professors to the great hall. The last to leave were the Black Sisters, Andromeda and Narcissa thanked Achilleus with kisses on the cheek. Bellatrix held out Sharpe’s whip. “I’m supposing you want this back?”

The Venatorum resisted. “No, you’ve earned it Bellatrix Black! You keep it.”

She smiled, but then said, “Professor, is it really necessary to quit our dormitory and sleep on the floor in the great hall? Mr. Sharpe has gotten rid of the Vampires. Can we not sleep in our own beds?”

“Miss Black, would you really get any sleep here, with a dozen dead Vampires around you? It’s a bit macabre, don’t you think?”

“You do have a point there,” she admitted.

Dumbledore smiled, but it was not a condescending smile. There was obvious respect in his delivery. “I applaud your courage, Miss Black. Yet, Mr. Sharpe has more work to do, as does our staff so that on the morrow your sanctuary is just that—your sanctuary.”

Obediently, the girls followed their classmates. Bella stole one last look at Achilleus, and said, “You’re still boring, Mr. Sharpe!”

“I fear, I will always be boring, Miss Black!”

After the girls left, Dumbledore looked after Bellatrix, and said, “She is really an extraordinary young woman. Courage combined with skill driven by a powerful will, well that is a power to be reckoned with.”

“Yes,” Achilleus agreed. “We dodged a bullet tonight.”

“One bullet,” Dumbledore sighed. He looked down at Richelieu. “He can come back, can he not?”

“There is a way, but it’s not easy,” he admitted. “Richelieu did not repent, but he’s not even a ghost right now. He’s a spirit that cannot animate himself or give word to thought. However, if the garlic is removed from his mouth, his head mated with his body, and then the stake removed then he would reanimate—if he’s strong enough.”

“How do we prevent that?”

“The best way is to separate his head from his body,” Sharpe replied. “I will take the body back to Notre Dame. It is not simply consecrated ground; it is the heart of France. As he lays there Richelieu will hear the eternal call to repentance. Eventually, he will listen.”

“And the head?”

“Your Defense Against the Dark Arts vault?” Sharpe shrugged. “I can’t think of a more secure place. Whomsoever wants to reanimate Richelieu has to then defeat extraordinarily potent magical defenses and Holy defenses.”

Dumbledore smiled. “We will honor him there!”

Sharpe’s “victory” celebration was hardly that. It involved the systematic staking, beheading and the “Consecration of Garlic” of the former vampires. Then, he laid the bodies in a neat row and performed the Last Rites for each of them. Finally, when that was done, he carried the bodies—one-by-one—down the tower stairs to a trailer attached to his vehicle.

After that, he had to perform an exorcism ceremony upon the Slytherin dormitory.

It was a long, tedious night.

The next morning, Sharpe prepared to leave. When he paid his respects to Dumbledore, the professor implored him to stay an extra day. “That was a sore trial for many of us, but most especially for you, Achilleus. Can you not stay a day and take your rest? The Black Lake is delightful at this time of year, especially around Midnight.”

Sharpe sighed, but managed, “I have an entire load of vampires needing to be interned, professor. The most important—Richelieu—means a stop in Paris and a lengthy ceremony, I’m afraid.”

“I would not interrupt your official duties without urgent need,” Dumbledore said, absently adjusting his spectacles and cleaning them. He glanced up at the young Venatorum, who nodded for him to continue. “I received a letter this morning from Mr. Cygnus Black. He summons his daughters home, to his estate, for the weekend. As he is one of the twelve governors of the school, Headmaster Dippet has approved the request.”

“You are concerned what could happen?”

“Aren’t you? After all, you’ve met Cygnus and you’ve met Voldemort,” Dumbledore reminded him. “You know, magic can be wonderfully used; but it can be awfully misused.”

“I understand,” Achilles replied. “I’ll stay another day.”

“Excellent!” Dumbledore smiled. “And don’t worry, I won’t recruit you for classes today.”

“I appreciate that.”

“It’s nothing, the whole school already knows every detail of the adventure, and a few very interesting extra details, I might add!”

Sharpe opened the door, “I wonder, if I might impose, Professor, but I wouldn’t want my charges in the trailer to become—uncomfortable.”

“I’ll see to it, Achilles, thank you!”

That night, at midnight, the waters of the Black Lake were still, wreathed in fog, through which the Moon shone as a pale ghost. In the little inlet, the babbling of the stream emptying into the waters was a soothing whisper. The surrounding trees were shadowy sentinels, protecting the privacy of the two figures floating leisurely upon the waters.

“I like it when you tow me around like this, letting me stare up at the Moonlight,” Bellatrix said in an easy, relaxed, thoughtful manner. “It rather reminds me of you rescuing me from drowning.”

“I enjoyed that,” Achilles replied.

“Of course you did!” she shot back, stealing a wicked glance at him. “You ensured that your hand cupped my bosom just so, exactly as you’re doing now. You’re just like all Men, copping feels whenever you can, never missing an opportunity for taking advantage of a poor, innocent girl!”

“My dear, you are hardly poor, not very innocent, and definitely not a girl!”

“I imagine you rescued me all those times just to weaken my defenses,” she said firmly. Yet then she sighed, adding, “It worked!”

“It was all part of my cunning plan! You are worth all the deadly adventure in the world Bellatrix Black!” he smiled, turning her around in the water so he could kiss her.

She kissed back, full, and heartfelt. She held him close, putting her head on his shoulder, but looking away into the darkness of the forest beyond their momentary sanctuary. Finally, with a note of supreme sadness, tragic resolve, she reminded him, “But I am a Black. I am the eldest of the Black sisters, and alas, I have no brother. I have duties to my family; duties that the ghosts of my ancestors remind me of every day and every night.”

“Are they with us now?”

“Oh, assuredly they know, unless Dumbledore conjured up this fog to protect us from prying eyes!”

“He could, you know, but I don’t fear your ghosts—I have my own.”

“And they don’t approve?”

Achilleus chuckled, comforting her, “Not only do they approve, but they’re determined. They are on patrol against any and all Family Black ancestors that might try and get a glimpse of our Midnight swim.”

“How do you know so many ghosts, and why would they do that?”

“Part of my trade, a benefit, you might say,” he sighed, but he smiled. “Cardinal Richelieu destroyed many lives and chained many souls. My actions freed them, and now they gladly stand guard against any intrusion!”

“You mean some of those spirits in the fogs are former Vampires? Like the ones who attacked us last night?” Bellatrix was suddenly alarmed. “Are they here for revenge?”

“Indeed not!” Achilleus soothed her. “They are here in gratitude. They are no longer in the darkness; they are in the light, and they are joyous in that. They celebrate our triumph and your courage!”

“Imagine that, Vampire ghosts protecting my reputation,” she laughed. Then just as suddenly she turned sad. “And yet, I am still a Black. I have duties, responsibilities. I am betrothed to, to, what’s his name.”

“Bella, how thirteenth century of you!”

Bellatrix suddenly turned serious. She wrapped her arms around him tightly, putting her forehead against his, looking into his eyes. “Achilleus, I leave tomorrow for our estate. My father has summoned us home for the weekend—I’m afraid! Please, please, whatever happens, please don’t forget me, even if I forget you!”

“Bella, what do you mean?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know, I cannot say. Old families harbor their secrets. The family Black is no different. But if I am different when you see me next, please don’t let me get away with it!”

“What do you wish me to do?”

“Torment me, tease me, don’t let me forget a single moment—do you understand? My duty to my family may force me to renounce this very moment, this very night. Your duty to me is to preserve this only time that I’ve ever been truly loved. I may never experience that again. Please preserve it!”

“Beyond death, Bella, beyond death!”

They kissed, and the night enveloped them in its embrace.

The next day, as Sharpe checked his morbid cargo, a carriage arrived for the Black sisters. It was driven by an elf, who looked darkly upon Sharpe. The three sisters climbed into the carriage under the watchful eye of the elf. None dared to say a word, but all three looked in the direction of the Venatorium, thanking him silently.

Bella's eyes never left him, and she watched him as the carriage drove down the lane from the castle and up into the cool morning sky.

The carriage conveyed them to the estate of their father for the weekend. Cygnus Black did not meet his daughters at the entrance to the house, but in his study. The greeting was short, curt. "Narcissa, Andromeda, I will see you at dinner!"

They left, stunned at the cold response.

Alone with his eldest daughter, Cygnus then turned to Bellatrix.

"What have you done child?" he said sternly.

"What do you mean father," she asked with equal reserve. "Are you not pleased that your daughters are not Vampires?"

"Silence that tongue of yours!" he said sharply. His anger was plain to see. Cygnus Black stared hard at the eldest of his children. "Your rebellious nature has often tried to make up for my not having a son to carry on the family name, but this time your disobedience has put the future of the Family Black in danger."

"I rescued the family from danger, father," Bellatrix objected. "The Cardinal Richelieu was intent on destroying your three daughters and ending the ancient and noble Family Black forever!"

"Your vision is that of a child!" he told her harshly. "I promised you to the Cardinal Richelieu!"

"You admit it, openly father?" Bellatrix, though she knew the truth, was stunned.

"I am proud of it!" he insisted. "I, Cygnus Black, provided the gateway to immortality and power for my daughters! What more could any other father offer? The prestige and power of the Black family would rise under a new world! We would be the pre-eminent family of the New World Order!"

"What New World Order?" she demanded.

"My New World Order," said a voice, at once smoothly charismatic and yet demandingly threatening. Bellatrix turned to see Lord Voldemort enter the study through a side door. "Your courage, Bellatrix, is commendable. You are powerful, so powerful that both I and Dumbledore fight over you. That, my dear, is truly commendable." His expression hardened. "However, I told

you to be ready for my call. Why then did you join forces with this Muggle Venatorum and resist me?"

"Resist you, my lord. I assure you; I did no such thing!" Bellatrix objected. "I protected my sisters and myself from Cardinal Richelieu. As the elder, that was my duty."

"Yet you knew it was your father's will that you join him, not the Muggle!" Voldemort spat the word out with contempt. "For all your upbringing, all of your power, all of the laudable Black ancestry, you chose this Muggle over your family's interests."

"The Muggle Venatorum was noble! He saved both my life and my honor! Yet he had no part whatsoever in my decision to protect the sister's Black against Richelieu! That was entirely my doing, and I did not believe the Vampire's claims that my own father would sell his daughters out. Not for a moment! I was raised to honor the ancient ways and I have done so! How could the Black family be served with its daughters as Vampires, my lord—how?"

"Do you love the Muggle?" Voldemort demanded.

"Love the Muggle? Indeed not!" Bellatrix told him angrily. "He loved me, and can anyone wonder at that, a Muggle reaching for the stars! Yet, I did appreciate his courage and yes, his service to me and my sisters. I used him to my own ends as befits Magic over Muggle. I used him to further the House Black!"

"Your words are truly noble in their intent," Voldemort told her, seemingly satisfied with her defense. "Poor child, you cannot deal with these vermin without being polluted, even if it is slowly, subtly, through the subterfuge of their ignoble blood. I admit, the Muggle Venatorum appears admirable, and with a powerful wizard like Dumbledore as his sponsor, well, you as a child were deceived." He thought for a moment, before nodding and smiling at her. "Fortunately, there is a common thread, the only flaw in the glorious tapestry of Bellatrix Black. Such a thread needs only to be removed, and the Tapestry Black can again regain its rightful place in the wizarding world. Are you willing to accept this correction?"

Bellatrix realized her fate. Her only card was that of cooperation. "What of my sisters?"

"They keep their rightful place in this family, untouched by any scandal, knowing no prejudice! Let them be as they are."

Bellatrix was about to explode, but for her sister's sake, she steeled herself. Burying her fury at the coming outrage. "I am ready to undertake any correction for the Family Black!"

"Well said, my daughter," Cygnus nodded.

"Indeed, truly you are a queen amongst the ancient and noble Family Black!" Lord Voldemort pronounced. He approached Bellatrix and took out his wand. She did not move. Voldemort held it to her temple. A glowworm came forth and entered the tip of his wand. It wasn't long, but it was very bright. "Ah, they are powerful these memories, how nice it is to be rid of them!" He drew them out and the memories fell away. They descended in shining sparkles to the floor.

Voldemort looked at the expression on Bellatrix's face, and he admitted. "They do leave voids, though, so let me fill them in!"

His wand wove smartly through the air, but Bellatrix was agitated, her head turning this way and that, with sudden spasms, her eyes tightly shut.

"Do not fight me!" Voldemort ordered.

Bellatrix stood stone still, shaking.

Finally, Voldemort withdrew his wand. "It is done!"

Bellatrix began to sway. Her father caught her as she fell. Cygnus Black called for the House elf, but Voldemort retorted, "She is once again your daughter! You will take her to her chambers where she can rest!"

"Yes, my lord!" Black responded. He took out his wand, magically transporting the unconscious Bella up to her chambers, where her anxious sisters took her into their care.

Sometime later, as Bellatrix wandered in and out of fevered, incoherent dreams, the study was dark, silent, and empty.

A bookcase opened and Narcissa stole in. She took a vial and a small brush from her pocket. On her hands and knees, the youngest of the Black girls carefully collected as many of Bella's memories as she could find. Hearing the approach of her father and Voldemort, she stole back the way she came.

As soon as his duties were finished, Sharpe returned to Hogwarts at Dumbledore's request. When he arrived, Dumbledore met him at the gates. The wizard climbed into the vehicle's passenger seat, smiling, "I do love your automobiles! What's this one called?"

"It's a Jaguar sedan, but with some special modifications," Sharpe told him, driving out back to Hagrid's where he parked before.

"Obviously, all the modifications have to do with your vocation, I expect!"

"Some standard stuff," Sharpe nodded. "Silver infused paint, full spectrum lights, reinforced locks and glass, everything you'd expect. There are a few extras. A cathode ray screen that has a full library of reference material I can access."

"A full library in an automobile? You're joking!"

Sharpe pulled up next to Hagrid's and set the brake. He turned a rheostat on the console and the screen in the center console brightened. Beneath it was a small typewriter keyboard. As Sharpe typed in a command, he explained, "The computer memory has 10,000 volumes on the hard drive. I can access any one I want, and even have it search for specific words or people. For instance, 'The Magic Manual' and 'Albus Dumbledore.'"

He put in the commands and to the Wizard's amazement a picture of himself came up along with the first page of his biography. "Amazing! Although, I must say, the picture is dated."

"Unlike some of your reference material, these books do not update in real time."

"So, you don't know what has happened to Bellatrix?"

"What's happened?"

"She is alive and well, physically, at least," Dumbledore assured him quickly. "However, things have changed. It's best you come inside. We'll talk."

Dumbledore led Sharpe to the front door of Hagrid's hut. After knocking, he turned to Sharpe, and informed him, "I fear Headmaster Dippet is buckling under the pressure of Cygnus Black, which means, of course, Lord Voldemort. They are monitoring my chambers, and they will monitor yours. Hagrid's abode is, thankfully, quite secure."

The large door opened. Hagrid smiled to see Achilles. "Welcome, welcome Master Vampire Hunter! Come in, Achilles!"

Sharpe followed Dumbledore into the rustic quarters. Achilles smiled, "Now this is my idea of home!"

"You're joking," Hagrid exclaimed in surprise. "I thought you came from Rome and the Vatican. Living in marble palaces and such."

"I spent as little time there as possible, believe me," Sharpe admitted. "This reminds me of our family cabin in the mountains of Idaho. Really, Hagrid, this is very homey!"

"Well, glad to accommodate you," the half-giant laughed. "Now, can I get you a brandy, wine, what's your choice?"

"Brandy!" announced Dumbledore.

"Do you have any beer?" Sharpe asked.

"I just tapped a new keg yesterday! Came out right hoppy if you like a strong brew."

"Perfect!"

"Have a seat, and I'll get your drinks," Hagrid told them. "Make yourselves right at home. I'll go out and tend to the stock and give you some privacy."

"Really, no need on my part," Sharpe said, settling himself in a fur covered chair fashioned of the fantastic horns of some very fantastic beast. It was very comfortable. When Hagrid looked at him, as if to question his leaving, Sharpe said, "We've hunted together Hagrid. That is a Holy Bond. Besides, nothing about Bellatrix and I is secret, now is it?"

The giant sighed, "You got a right good point about that. Still, it's up to Professor Dumbledore." Hagrid handed Dumbledore a large glass of Brandy. Then he handed a frothing mug of ale to Sharpe. His own mug was rather larger.

“In this case I would welcome Hagrid’s presence,” Dumbledore said. “This game shall play out through the years, and it is well to know your allies as well as your adversaries. Hagrid will ever be at my side—I trust him implicitly—I would that you trust him equally, Achilles.”

“That’s all the recommendation I need,” Achilles replied. He held up his tankard and clanged it against Hagrid’s. They both drank. “There now. That’s settled. Tell me the bad news.”

Dumbledore swirled his brandy, and took a large gulp of it, before speaking. “The Black sisters returned from their weekend sojourn and several things were clear at once. The younger sisters were more fearful of what happened to them in their home than ever the Vampires could cause. As to Bellatrix, well, she had absolute contempt for me and a sudden new esteem for Rudolphus LeStrange. Her character has turned fearfully astray.”

“LeStrange, the worm? Why she was about done with him after the incident with Voldemort,” Sharpe said, surprised.

“Indeed, and though we’ve always had a strained relationship, as I have with her father, there was always a healthy respect from her. That being said, I could not account for the changes, until I received a visit from an unexpected source.”

“Who?”

“Narcissa Black!” the professor said. “Interesting interview. Her purported reason for seeing me, was this.” Dumbledore took out a stoppered flask. Inside were a swarm of tiny, tiny fireflies, or so they seemed.

“Are those,” Hagrid started, but stopped himself.

“Yes Hagrid, they are memories,” Dumbledore said. “More specifically, they are the memories of Bellatrix LeStrange’s encounters with the young Venatorum Achilles Sharpe.”

Achilleus immediately backed away.

“Have no fear, Achilles,” Dumbledore soothed him. “You cannot disenchant memories. Memories are real. However, magically implanted memories can theoretically be dispelled by your presence.”

“You mean to tell me that Voldemort removed Bella’s memories with me, and he replaced them with—what?”

“Apparently, he didn’t take much time,” Dumbledore said. “He was obviously troubled by what he saw, but he hastily repaired the holes in Bellatrix’s memories, depending on his skill and judgement rather than careful thought and reflection. For example, our little adventure in the classroom. All he did was to transpose characters. Instead of Voldemort casting the spell at you and putting Bellatrix in danger it was me who cast it, and of course Voldemort who stopped the chandelier.”

“Let me guess,” Achilles said bitterly. “Rudy protected her, and I dove under a desk.”

“Exactly,” Dumbledore said.

“Couldn’t we say Voldemort got infected by the Cardinal?” Hagrid suggested. “If he were a Vampire, or thought to be one, our Venatorum could take care of the problem. Young Rudy could be Vampire acolyte or whatever you call ‘em. Then give Miss Black her memories back and all’s well in the world!”

“I like Hagrid’s idea,” Sharpe agreed, and Hagrid refilled both tankards. They toasted the idea.

“You are both quite bloodthirsty,” Dumbledore sighed. “Your idea, Hagrid, is tempting but impossible. For now, at least. Maybe someday in the future, when all other magical avenues are exhausted, it will be your task. For by that time, you would have to protect the wizarding world and the mortal world. For now, Voldemort is a magical problem.”

“Still, there is Bellatrix,” Sharpe reminded Dumbledore.

“Yes, there is Bellatrix, but we must be very careful. Voldemort did great trauma in removing such powerful memories. Replacing them did even more trauma, especially in creating opposite lies to fill the voids. Those memories were so very powerful Bellatrix reacted physically to them—so she would still, and yet the current memory would confound her. We cannot, in my opinion, replace the counterfeit memories yet, maybe not for years. However, if we can remove these counterfeit memories that may actually help her heal. Therefore, you must see her Achilles—tonight!”

“How?”

“How else? You’re going to meet her for a Midnight swim!”

Sharpe chuckled, and answered their surprised expressions, “That is exactly what she told me to do, if something like this happened. Oh, poor Bella! I’m afraid she knew her fate. Yet I won’t let her forget me, or everything we’ve gone through. I especially won’t let her forget she was, and is, loved.”

Hagrid wiped a tear from his eye and sniffed hard, “It’s a right romantic story!” Then he chuckled. “I’d a never thought Bellatrix Black would be in a romantic story, no, not since I first laid eyes on her!”

“If you go into this with that motive, you will get her back in the end Achilles, and she will get you back.”

“That’s not important,” Achilles told them, his face turning grave. “The important thing is to save her; to save the good woman I’ve known.”

“Amen to that,” said Hagrid, draining the rest of his tankard.

The little inlet was once again shrouded in mist, thanks to Dumbledore’s interference. So, Achilles waited, and was rewarded with Bellatrix Black’s timely arrival at the lake, again thanks to Dumbledore’s interference.

The rest was up to Achilles, and he knew it.

His heart skipped a beat when she arrived, and then again when she stripped naked, and waded into the waters. When she relaxed and turned away, he too entered the waters, carefully, quietly. When she turned towards him, Achilles slipped underwater. Swimming to her, he progressed until he could define the ghostly, enticingly beautiful woman standing in chest deep water. He surfaced.

When his head broke the water, and she recognized him, Bellatrix exclaimed, "Achilleus Sharpe!"

"Bellatrix Black!" he smiled.

She covered herself. "What are you doing here!"

Achilleus floated backwards, looking up to the Moon. "I could say that I come here when I'm at Hogwarts because this is a decidedly enchanting place. However, I'd be lying."

"Why are you here," she demanded in an unpleasantly forceful tone.

"Why? Because you told me to come, or rather you ordered me to come here," he replied.

"I did no such thing!" she snapped. "I haven't seen you since Dumbledore's class! Anyway, there is no possibility that I would invite a Muggle to my Midnight swims!"

"Really?"

"Really!" she sneered. "Now, I demand you leave!"

"I can't," he told her.

"Why not?"

"Because you told me, quite explicitly," and he began to come towards her. She retreated, but she didn't leave. "I say again, you ordered me, quite explicitly to tease, to torment, to never let you forget a single moment!"

"A moment of what?" she asked, breathlessly.

"Our love, Bella, our love," he said softly.

She was dumbstruck for a moment, then suddenly she began to cackle and laugh, "Ah, the joke is on me, isn't it? That's the way you got me back for me shunning you. You've got a crush on me, always had!"

"I do," he admitted.

"Couldn't stand that I rejected you, eh?"

"I rather enjoyed the way you rejected me, Bella," Achilles smiled.

She grew angry, but just as suddenly she hesitated. "What did you call me?"

“Bella, my Beautiful Bella!”

“No one uses that name, no one except my sisters! And no one dares call me beautiful—but what is it about that—it’s there, or supposed to be there, but it’s not. It’s gone.” She held her head in her hands, looking in no particular direction, obviously confused. “Where is it?”

“It’s right here, Bella!” Achilles approached her, and she looked up, surprised. He grabbed her arms and pulled her to him.

“What are you doing?” she asked in shock.

“I’m reminding you that you are and ever will be loved!” Achilles kissed her, and he made it last as long as she would allow. When she pushed away, he let her go.

“Hey there, you can’t just go kissing me, Achilles Sharpe! What are you on about?” she protested, throwing her nose up in the air and turning away. “I should slap you, I should!”

“If it makes you feel better, you should, absolutely,” he told her.

She turned around and approached him, raising her hand to strike. She stopped, doubting herself, but finally struck him, albeit not very convincingly. “Did I tell you to do that as well?”

“I’m sure you meant for me to expect it,” he smiled.

“You’re teasing me now, right?”

“Just a bit, Bella dear.”

“Oh! This is maddening!” she exclaimed, turning about again. “I should blast you into oblivion for your cheek, but something stops me! This will not do, no it will not!”

“I know it’s hard Bella,” he began, but she interrupted him. She screamed, now turning angry. “You have no right to call me that! Bella or Beautiful Bella! You’ve no right!”

“I’ve every right! I’ve saved your life, your honor, your very soul! And I am oath bound to remind you of it!” Achilles said forcefully. He caught her from behind, holding her fast. “I swore an oath to remind you that you are and ever shall be loved by me! That you returned that love!”

“Then why didn’t you protect me when Dumbledore brought the chandelier down on me?”

“I did,” Achilles whispered in her ear. “It wasn’t Rudy, it was me who protected you with my life; just as I will do so in the future. One other point, if you will.”

Bellatrix gasped, but bit back a reply, and only said, “Yes? What is it?”

“It wasn’t Dumbledore who cast the Bombarda spell, it was Lord Voldemort!”

Bellatrix wrenched herself away from him, and he let her go. “No!” she exclaimed. “You’ve got it backwards! I can still see Rudolphus—what? I see him under his, no! But then you’re, you’re not there. You’re not there at all!”

“Voldemort removed me from your memory, putting Rudy in my place. Now that the artificial implanted memories are gone, so am I.”

Bellatrix cursed in frustration. “Why would Voldemort do that? He cast the spell. Why would Dumbledore save me? Why? He hates me!”

“No Bella, he does not,” Achilleus told her emphatically.

Bellatrix clutched her head, screaming. “I’m confused, I’m so confused!”

Achilleus reached her, hugging her close, as she screamed and sobbed. After a while, she settled down, and asked in a small voice, “Why are you still here?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Because I’m insane! I don’t know who or what to believe! I can’t believe you love me—why—why would you? But I can’t believe I’m letting you hold and comfort me either!”

“That’s all right, Bella! I’ll hold you for as long as you’ll let me.”

“Why?!” she demanded, looking up at him with red, miserable eyes.

“Why?” he answered, looking down at her. “Because you’re naked, and very, very nice to hold!”

She slapped him. Then she slapped him again. Then she kissed him. It was a long, luxurious, desperate kiss. At length she released him, laying her head on his shoulder. “It appears your Incantamus aura has destroyed Voldemort’s implanted memories, but I don’t have anything to fill the gaps.”

“I have your memories Bella,” Achilleus said.

“Yes, Achilleus, they’re in your head!”

“No, I mean I have them, or what’s left of them,” he told her. “Your sister Narcissa collected them from the study after Voldemort cast them off. She brought them to Dumbledore.”

“How is it that you have them then?”

“Dumbledore feared that Headmaster Dippet or someone else might demand them if it were known that Narcissa collected them. I am outside the magical world. Would you like us to restore them to you Bella?”

“No,” she said firmly. “They’d only be taken again, and then I truly would go mad, if I’m not already.”

“Oh Bella, please let me take you away from here!”

She looked up at him, asking immediately, “Who would watch over my sisters?”

“I could hide you all,” he promised.

She smiled and touched his cheek, shaking her head. “Narcissa would never leave her father! I am the eldest, Achilleus. No one knows responsibility better than you. I have no choice. I cannot turn against my family.”

“I understand—what can I do?”

“Fulfill your promise to me! Even it drives me mad, it gives me hope.”

“I am so in love with you, Bellatrix Black!”

She smiled, smiled through her tears, and told him, “Of course you are!”

The term ended. Achilleus did not see Bellatrix again. Dumbledore told him, “It’s too dangerous. Her condition is worse, more chaotic. I fear if Voldemort is forced to intervene again, she’ll become completely insane and vastly more dangerous.”

“Then I’ll remove myself from this until such time as you think I can do some good.” Sharpe said his good-byes and drove off. Once outside the castle he stopped and got out of the car. He looked up at the balcony of the Slytherin Girls dormitory. So many things had happened there.

The doors opened. The three Black sisters stepped out on the balcony, the wind in their hair. He bowed to the sisters, and all three blew kisses at him. Andromeda and Narcissa went inside, leaving Bella to make her own good-bye. She stared down at him, and he could feel her inner struggle and confusion.

“All you need to know is I love you, Bella,” he told the wind, and he knew it carried his words. “If you call me, I will come. Farewell for now!”

Thereupon, he drove off, and she watched him until he disappeared.

Achilleus Sharpe was praying on the Prie Dieu in his cell, not a prison cell, but the type of cell used by monks and Venatorum. It was a small, spare seven by twelve chamber. A bed, the Prie Dieu, a desk, and a wardrobe. A single candle provided light. Strangely, there was a laptop on the small desk, and what looked like an Alexa.

A knock sounded at the door. “Enter!”

The door opened. A man in white stood there.

“Holy Father!” Sharpe shot his feet.

“Achilleus, Achilleus—please—I’m so sorry to disturb your prayers! May I come in?”

“Of course, Father, or I could come to your study at your leisure.”

“No, that is not necessary or wise,” he replied, coming in and shutting the door behind them. “There are too many ears, and this is personal.” He walked in and sat down at the edge of

Sharpe's simple bed. He smiled, and said, "You know I stayed in a cell like this in Poland for years. I look back on that time with great happiness in the reflection it allowed me. But on to business."

"Yes Father, do you have an assignment for me?" taking a seat at his desk.

"Yes, but one that is unusual," he nodded. "First, let me ask you a personal question. When you pray, do you still include Miss Bellatrix Black in your prayers?"

"I do, Father, every day," Sharpe replied firmly.

"Good, she has need of that love you have in your heart," John Paul II said gravely. "You may not know, but Lord Voldemort was killed when he attacked the Potter family in Godric's Hollow. Both parents were slain, but God spared their boy. Harry is his name, I believe."

"What of Bellatrix?" Sharpe asked, his voice barely under control.

"She is in Azkaban. A frightful place, I'm told. I'd like you to go there and see her, if you would. Ascertain the situation. I'm also told that the Ministry of Magic admits that there is a possibility of Voldemort returning, how I know not. Yet once the Devil finds a useful tool, he rarely discards it. I know it's been 13 years, but I still remember reading your report. My heart went out to that girl. I would like to know if we can be of any help in saving her. The Ministry of Magic wholeheartedly endorses the attempt. They are terrified of her. Will you do it?"

"I will leave immediately Holy Father!"

"God be with you, my son!"

.....

The waves crashed against the walls of Azkaban Prison on a dark and stormy night. It was always stormy around Azkaban, that was part of its magic, its own personal idiom, so to speak. It was not cliché. It was sinister, oppressive, and it served its purpose.

A white, angular object flew through the tempestuous night sky out of the glooms, lights blinking on wingtips. It slowed, passed over the walls, and came to a hover. A bright searchlight sent a hazy beam down toward the castle courtyard. The machine slowly descended through the storm, but strangely, even more strange than the presence of the machine itself here in the dark core of the magical world, strangely the storm abated around the machine.

Everywhere else the storm raged on. Yet around the machine there was no rain, no wind—nothing.

The machine set down.

Quite suddenly the rain stopped. A transparent but effective dome covered the courtyard. Out of dark doors a score of Aurors came out and surrounded the machine, wands out. A set of double doors then opened, and a small party came out, stopping in front of the machine.

The machine's engines whined as they shut down. A transparent canopy opened. A lone figure took off his helmet and placed it on the right rail. Climbing over the opposite rail, he came down a ladder. While the machine was white and emblazoned with the red Papal Cross, the man was in a black one-piece flight suit with Silver decorations. Prominent was a pair of Silver Crusaders Crosses on his lapels, as if protecting his throat.

When he reached the cobblestones of the courtyard the Warden of Azkaban addressed him without any sign of welcome. "Achilleus Sharpe, I will not allow you on the premises of Azkaban. Turn around and get that Muggle contraption off my castle!"

"The Ministry disagrees almost as much as I do," Sharpe said forcefully. He took a parchment out of his breast pocket. Approaching the Warden, he held out the orders. The Warden retreated, directing an Auror to collect the document. Sharpe smiled, and then his voice turned grave indeed. "I will see Bellatrix Black, and I will see her now."

"Bellatrix LeStrange!" corrected the Warden. "We have her husband here as well, as you no doubt know."

"That can be mended. Would you like me to take care of that problem for you? If you are too squeamish to execute him yourself, be assured I will take care of it promptly!"

"We need no help from Muggles in our affairs!" the Warden warned him, perusing the papers. "These are out of order! Your request is refused. Aurors, please escort Mr. Sharpe back into his machine, by force if necessary!"

Two Aurors, surly looking men, as you couldn't serve in Azkaban without having the nefarious nature of the place infect you, strode towards Sharpe, wands at ready. They cast binding spells, ethereal shocking cords, to capture and punish the Muggle. The spells instantly rebounded, and instead of attacking Sharpe the cords wound around the Aurors. They began to cry out at the very pain they meant to inflict on Sharpe, but seeing they were now incapacitated they had no way to stop the spells.

They writhed on the ground, their astounded compatriots watching in horror, and Sharpe admonished the Warden, "Didn't you tell them I'm an Incantamus?" Shaking his head, he approached the two agonized Aurors. As he leaned over them the spells dissolved. Reaching down and grabbing one in each hand, Sharpe hauled them to their feet. "Up lads, no hurt to me, but you'll sting a while from your own doing. Your boss should've let you know about me."

The two Aurors looked darkly at the Warden and drew away.

"Now to business," Sharpe said.

"You shall not see her!" the Warden exclaimed. He drew his wand. It flared brightly, and he called, "Dementors!"

A pair of Dementors dropped out of the night sky, one on either side. Each latched on to one of Achilles' arms and began to suck at his life force. Sharpe exploded into fury, breaking their holds and grappling the Dementors by their throats, one in each hand. The Dementors screamed.

The thin, ethereal cries of anguish caused even the brutally insensitive Aurors to cover their ears, cringing.

Sharpe's supernatural immunity sucked the very magic out of the Dementors. In essence, he did to the Dementors what they tried to do to him. The Warden and the Aurors looked on in horror. With a final high piercing screech, the Dementors cracked and vanished.

As the Warden and the Aurors looked on in disbelief, Sharpe said, "Well that's that."

"Impossible! A Muggle can't kill a Dementor!"

"Seems I just did—twice!" Sharpe announced, brushing the Dementor residue off his hands and suit. Smiling, Sharpe approached the Warden, who stood stock still. Shaking and pale. When he got within three paces the Warden clutched his heart and dropped to a knee. The parchments drifted to the wet cobblestones. Sharpe stooped down and picked them up, perusing them.

"They seem to be very explicit to me," Sharpe told the Warden, who was now gasping for air.

The Aurors looked on in shock but did nothing.

"What's the matter Warden?" Sharpe asked in mock concern. "Now wait, the Minister of Magic warned me about something—what was it? Oh yes, your heart. Seems it's being held together by spells. He told me not to get too close to you. Am I too close, Warden?" Sharpe stepped away from the Warden, who began to breathe again. The color came back to his face.

Two Aurors helped him up.

"You destroyed them! You destroyed both Dementors! No one has ever destroyed a Dementor!" he gasped.

"Whatever you say," Sharpe answered. His brows drew together sternly. "Now, I've been patient with you. I will see Bellatrix Black, and I will see her—now!"

"Very well, but you can't take her," the Warden said breathlessly.

"That remains to be seen," Sharpe told him gravely.

"She's dangerous! She is the most vicious dark witch in the world, don't you understand?"

"Why do you think I'm here?" Sharpe said angrily, but then, unexpectedly, his voice dropped. Without anger, he told the Warden and the Aurors, "I am here in the interest of the Wizarding World as well as my own. If Bellatrix is a danger to either world, here she will stay. That is, until He Who Must Not Be Named comes again to claim her."

"He's gone!" the Warden said emphatically.

“No! He is exiled. He will be back,” Sharpe replied. He sighed. “Don’t you see? His return is driving Bella’s madness. When he does return, she shall be more dangerous than ever, and she will remember you, Warden, be assured of that. Is that what you wish?”

The Warden trembled.

“I am the only link to what was once human within her,” he continued. “Now, if you please, let me try to find her and lead her away from the darkness and back to the light.”

The Warden, now in full realization of his personal danger—and his family’s—dropped his prejudice. “Can, can it be done—with her?”

“Probably not, but anything is possible with the Lord’s help,” Achilleus admitted.

“You’re really going to try, I mean, it’s Bellatrix, you understand?”

“No one understands better than I,” Achilleus told the Warden. “I promised her that I would never abandon her.”

The Warden suddenly seemed to understand.

“Very well,” the Warden acquiesced. He directed the Aurors to lead Sharpe to her dungeon.

When Sharpe left the courtyard, the Warden turned to his assistant and told her, “He’s going to be deucedly angry when he finds out He Who Must Not be Named wiped her memory of him clear. You keep an eye on him and see to it that he leaves. I don’t want any more to do with him!”

The way was not easily remembered other than by the horror of it. Sharpe had been in many dangerous catacombs in his career, if never one as dark or filled with the sounds of torment. At length, the Aurors collected the jailor, who brought them to a narrow cell. Sliding aside the metal panel, the jailor peered in.

“She’s quiet right now, sitting there talking to herself, staring at that tattoo on her arm,” he said. He looked at Sharpe. “You’re sure you want to go in there? She’ll kill you if she can, she will. Seen it before. If she doesn’t kill you. She’ll likely drive you mad with her screaming. She’s a Fury, I’m telling you.”

The jailor stepped back, and one of the Aurors looked through the slit. “She’ll stare at the Death Eaters mark for hours, poking it, prodding it, calling Him.” He looked at Sharpe. “It’s all she thinks about; all she cares about. Just warning you, Sharpe. There’s nothing left of the Bellatrix you might have known.”

“Then you’d better let me in,” he replied dourly.

The jailor stepped forward, keys rattling. He slipped the proper key in the lock and waited.

Both Aurors drew their wands and then held them at the ready.

When they both nodded, the jailor turned the lock and pulled open the door. It groaned in protest. “In you go!”

Sharpe slid through the opening.

The door clanged behind him. The lock turned with a harsh CLUNK!

There she was in chains, huddled in the corner under a narrow, barred window open to the elements, seemingly oblivious to the cold wind and the rain. Sharpe’s heart broke in that moment, and her name escaped his lips in an involuntary groan.

“Who’s there?” Bellatrix whispered.

Achilleus could see little of her face as her tumbled mane of dark hair was wilder than ever. She did not look up from her arm but appeared to be kissing it and licking her pale flesh. He stepped forward carefully. With a force of will, he steadied himself, and his voice.

“It is I, Bella, an old, old friend. Achilleus Sharpe!”

“What a strange name. Who are you; did *He* send you?” she mused. Glancing up he saw her expressive eyes gleaming in the dim light, like two lanterns glowing through the forest of her trailing locks of black hair.

“No, I came because I wanted to see you again. Bella, do you remember me at all?” He tried to hide the anxiety in his voice. Sharpe was not worried over his safety, no, but it was a sudden shock that Bella did not even recognize him.

“Should I?” she said. “You’re not family, are you? There are family who fight with us; there are family who betrayed us. Who are you? Are you a member of the Order, or a loyal Death Eater?”

“*He* could certainly tell you Bella; *He* remembers me,” he said carefully.

“Are you one of *His* followers? I don’t know your name. I’d know your name if you were with *Him*,” she shot to her feet, angry, thrusting out her chin. Her eyes blazed. “Declare yourself!”

“I am Achilleus Sharpe, a Vatican Venatorum,” he told her. “I protected you and your family from Vampires, Werewolves, and monsters—don’t you remember?”

Bella leapt forward with a scream, but the chains stopped her short of Achilleus. Enraged, she whirled her hands above her head as if she held a wand. “Avada Kadavra!” She tried several times, but nothing came forth except a pale greenish glow emanating from her hands.

“Is that it? Is that all you wish to do to me—why?”

Bellatrix breathed heavily with the exertion of trying to cast such an emphatic spell with heavy chains. Still, she stopped, and looked at him. “Why? You dare ask why? If you are not with *Him*, then you are nothing! What do you want here?”

“I want Bellatrix Black,” he told her calmly.

“Oh, she’s not here,” the witch responded, cackling. “I am Bellatrix LeStrange, a Death Eater for the Dark Lord. His most loyal servant!”

“The Bellatrix I knew was her own master, and served no man,” Achilleus reasoned. “What happened to change that?”

“When did you know me; I have no memory of you,” she looked at him suspiciously. Still, the aura of madness momentarily left her eyes, and a flicker of curiosity shone through the fury. “You’re toying with me. What are you about?”

“I met you at Hogwarts and knew you afterward,” he told her.

“Did you? Then why don’t I know you?”

“I suspect it’s because Mr. Riddle didn’t want you to remember me. Is that it, what do you think?”

“Riddle? You mean Lord Voldemort! That is his name!”

“Lord Voldemort then,” Achilleus acquiesced. “But then why is Lord Voldemort afraid you’ll remember me? Am I a threat to him? Is it because I saved you from the Merman, from Greyback, from the chandelier?”

“Afraid of you?” she scoffed, laughing. “He’s not afraid of anyone—chandelier? What did you say?”

“Chandelier,” Achilleus repeated. “Yes, you see I was teaching at Hogwarts, teaching you, specifically, about Vampires.”

“You? No, it was Dumbledore who covered Vampires—wait—what, what happened?”

“Dumbledore invited me. I’m a Vampire Hunter,” Sharpe told her. She wavered in her attention, so he got right back to the trigger—the chandelier. “Lord Voldemort cast a spell on me, it rebounded, striking the chandelier. The chandelier fell, heading right towards you!”

Bellatrix cried out, curling up into a fetal position, covering her head with her arms, “Yes, yes, it was going to crush me! But something—no—someone—threw himself over me, protecting me. It must have been Rudolphus, yes, no, he didn’t. He saved himself, but then who was it that, that saved me?”

Achilleus bowed, but he didn’t take his eyes off her.

“Why?” she said, and it was hardly a whisper. Then she repeated herself. It was a demand.

Sharpe shrugged. “Isn’t it obvious?”

“No!” she replied harshly. “Answer me!”

“Because I was, and still am, in love with you, Bella,” he said simply.

She laughed, harshly at first, as if she thought he was making a jest. Yet his expression did not change, it remained sincere, loving. “You, in love with me? Why?”

“There’s no, why, to these things Bella, maybe that’s why Voldemort fears me,” Sharpe told her. It was too much, and he instantly realized he’d made a mistake.

“He fears nothing! You don’t know the Dark Lord! How dare you!” Again, she was straining at her chains, trying to get to him. Screaming. Finally, when Sharpe did not respond, but simply stood there calmly, her tantrum ended. She slumped back, breasts heaving. She said breathlessly, “He is the most powerful being in this world. He will bring order. You are nothing!”

“Exactly,” Achilles said, trying to salvage the situation.

“You agree? What’s your game now?”

“No game, Bella, you’re right,” Achilles told her. “He is the most powerful being in the world—that’s what he cares about—power.”

“And?” she demanded.

“I can understand how you are enamored with him because He is powerful,” he told her, sitting down just out of her reach.

“Yes,” she admitted.

“Then, can you understand why I am enamored with you because you are not only powerful, but beautiful and charming.”

“Come again?” she pouted with disbelief. She grabbed a handful of her own hair and threw it aside. “Really, you’re putting me on. Beautiful? I haven’t had a brush since I’ve been here. The only shower I’ve had is from the bloomin’ rain through the window. Beautiful? This striped rag is all I’ve been living in since the day they dropped me to rot in this cell. I have Dementors waking me up if they think I’m sleeping too soundly, I do! For years, Achilles Sharpe, for years! How beautiful do you think I am?”

“Very beautiful Bella, but the Dementors, I have to admit, I don’t like them much,” Sharpe told her.

“Don’t like them, yes, wait till they haunt your dreams, then you’ll know how I feel about them,” she grumbled.

“Well, let’s try that shall we?” Sharpe said, calmly.

Bellatrix was confused, and anxious. “What, what do you mean?”

Sharpe got up and went to the door. “Jailor, I need a Dementor please.”

“What? No, no, no, you don’t need to do that,” Bellatrix told him emphatically.

The jailor was of like mind, but Sharpe insisted.

Bellatrix backed away into the corner of her cell, terrified.

The cell door opened, and a black cloaked Dementor floated in. It wafted toward Bellatrix.

Sharpe allowed it to pass him, hearing the jailor tell the Aurors, “This should be fun! She’ll squirm she will! I love it when the Warden sets them on her, brightens my day it does!”

Bellatrix looked on in horror as the Dementor approached her. It began to torment her.

“Bella! Use your power! Use the Patronus Charm!”

“I, I don’t have a wand!” she screamed.

“You don’t need one! Think of a happy memory!”

Screams.

The Dementor cackled and tormented her.

“I don’t have any!”

Sharpe didn’t wait any longer. He threw himself on the Dementor, grappling it from behind. It struggled, but it couldn’t escape his grasp. After a terrifying moment it disintegrated under the overpowering aura of non-magic. It was gone.

Bella sat there gasping, “It’s gone, it’s gone! How did you do that?”

“That is my power, Bella,” he told her. “I am an Incantamus. I am immune to magic, even magic as powerful as the Dark Lord’s. I think that’s why He took your memories away.”

“You saved me from the Dementor,” she repeated in disbelief.

“Are you all right, Bella?”

“I, I don’t know,” she replied.

He offered his hand to let her up. She took it, and he pulled her into his arms. “There now, my Beautiful Bella. Do you have a good memory now?”

“Yes, well, that’s definitely a better memory than anything else I have!” she laughed, almost sane. Then she shook her head. “Who are you, Achilleus Sharpe?”

“The man who loves you, nothing more, and nothing less.”

“Then why don’t I remember you?”

“Because *He* took you from me,” Sharpe said firmly.

Bellatrix pushed herself away from him, but not completely. Her hands, no, her fingertips still touched him, though she turned away. It was as if the very cells of her body recognized and remembered Sharpe, but her mind was overthrown by the brutal reality of her world. “My family, my father is devoted to the Dark Lord. I am the eldest, the heir. I have responsibilities. Duty-duty-duty, Bella! I am a Black—we are one of the first families of our world.” She turned

back to him, withdrawing her touch, and snarling, “You’re trying to trick me! It won’t work, Achilleus Sharpe. It won’t work! Leave me!”

She repeated that over and over again, until Sharpe grasped her by the arms and said, “Enough!”

The show of force was something she understood, and she quieted for the moment.

“Very well, Bellatrix. I will leave you,” he assented.

“Good then. Come to your senses, you did,” she teased him triumphantly.

“I will leave Bellatrix, but never—never—will I leave Bella!” Achilleus forced a smile, then he pulled her to him and kissed her. The action caught Bellatrix by surprise, but struggle as she might, there was nothing she could do in his iron grip. “You’ve won Bellatrix, for now. You’re rid of me for a year. I will come back and visit you every year on this day for as long as it takes.”

Unconsciously, she reached up and touched her lips, lost for a moment, trying to make sense out of the madness. She looked back at Sharpe, now focused, at least partially sane, “What’s so special about this day?”

“It’s the day of our Moonlight swim, Bella. You seduced me and captured my heart,” he said, and Achilleus let her go. He backed away. She stood in absolute shock.

“No, you? Never!”

“You don’t remember me, but what about the lake, the Merman, Greyback? Think about it Bella! I’ll see you again my beautiful Bella, next year, on our anniversary!”

“Don’t bother, He will come for me! Keep your sweet kisses, Achilleus Sharpe! When He rises again, He will come for me. I am His most loyal servant!”

Sharpe stopped. Her declaration triggered a thought. “I believe you Bellatrix, but you must realize that as long as you’re in Azkaban *He* can never return.”

“What? What are you saying?”

“You are his most powerful and faithful servant,” he admitted.

“Yes?” She waited impatiently.

“All of his other servants are in here with you,” he said, and she waited.

“Well, what of it?”

“It takes great magic to resurrect someone, but he is without body, without wand. He is a spirit wandering alone, gnawing at himself. He cannot return without help, and yet there is no one out there to help him.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Achilleus Sharpe,” she cackled coquettishly.

“No, all the others claimed He coerced them through the Imperious Curse. They are being watched by Aurors. They don’t dare act. Your cousin Sirius Black was the last to be caught. That’s all of them.”

“Sirius Black—here?” she exclaimed.

“I’m sure that depresses you,” Sharpe replied.

“That traitor! Here? I’ll kill him myself!”

“Why? He’s the one who betrayed the Potters.”

“Sirius? No! He betrayed us, the Purebloods, his own kind! He sided with those of the Order—against us! He’ll pay for it, he will, and I’ll be the one to do it and save our family honor!”

“You’re wrong, Bellatrix,” Sharpe pressed her. “They got them all. Sirius was the last. The Ministry convicted him of killing Peter Pettigrew and a dozen Muggles, as well as betraying the Potters to their deaths. It’s over. He can’t come back without help. Bella, there’s no one left.”

Bellatrix cackled with laughter, kicking her feet with glee. “Oh yes, leave it to the Ministry to get everything backwards! Peter Pettigrew! The little imbecile, he always gets overlooked! Yes, why watch an insignificant rat when you can blame the wolf! Well, the wolf is caged, and the rat is still playing!”

“Very well, Bella. I’ll be back on our anniversary next year. If you want me sooner, all you need to do is call,” he said.

Achilleus left the cell. The door closed. The viewport slid shut.

Bellatrix screamed, “Don’t bother! I never want to see you again Achilleus Sharpe, whoever you are!” She repeated it time and time again, laughing diabolically. The door stayed closed. It didn’t open again. Eventually she got tired of screaming.

“Achilleus Sharpe!” she snarled. “Fie on you! What are you to me?”

She stood there, glaring at nothing. Then she answered herself, “Nothing! That’s what you mean to me!” Then, her expression changed. “What am I to you?” Her face, still hiding behind a matt of wild, dark hair, softened.

Sitting down in her corner, the rain lashed her. Looking up as if realizing the rain for the first time, Bellatrix moved to a spot out of the weather. The Moon appeared in her window. “A Moonlight swim with a Muggle. What am I to you, Achilleus Sharpe?” A ghost of a smile played upon her tormented face. “You can believe what you want to believe, can’t you? So, if Achilleus Sharpe believes I’m his beautiful Bella—why not?”

Collecting the rags she used for blankets around her, Bellatrix curled up in a fetal position, muttering, “Achilleus Sharpe, I’m his beautiful Bella!” into the night until, mercifully, sleep took her.

The jailor escorted Achilles and the Aurors out of the cell block. “Told you she was bat crazy, didn’t I?”

Sharpe grabbed the jailor by the shoulder and thrust him against the stone wall. Clutching the surprised man’s throat, he squeezed, and said, “I will be back in a year. If I hear that you have tormented Miss Black, especially with Dementors, then I will enlist some of my Vampire friends to pay you a visit. Do you understand me?”

One of the Aurors leaned in and told the jailor, “He’ll do it. I’d walk softly mate.”

“Right sir, I understand,” the jailor said.

Sharpe let him go, and straightened his jacket, saying, “Now if you really feel the need to torment a prisoner, then I suggest you try Mr. LeStrange. I have no qualms of you entertaining him!”

“Yes sir,” the jailor said, turning to open the cell block door.

Achilles Sharpe was good to his word. Every year for the next eleven years he visited Bella. Every year she sank deeper and deeper into her madness. The only thing that kept him coming back was his word, and a seemingly strange reality, for Bella could never recall him or their past, but for her dreams.

“That’s why I let you come back, Achilles Sharpe,” she admitted this year. “I don’t remember the dreams, but I know you’re in them.”

“Does that bother you, having a Muggle in your dreams Bella?”

She looked uncomfortable, and then whispered, “It’s about the only time I’m not, I say it as I shouldn’t, but I’m not tormented. I’m not happy, mind you, so don’t get your hopes up, I’m just sad, not tormented.” Then she cackled, sticking out her tongue. “Course, I do know you’re coming back every year. It’s nice that; it’s nice tormenting someone else!”

“Well, I’m glad that I give you some joy in this Hellish place!”

“You could always take me with you, Achilles Sharpe,” she said, pouting, and batting her eyes at him. “I’d promise to be good!”

“Oh Bella, while he’s still out there it’s impossible—you’re too powerful,” Achilles told her with deep regret.

Bellatrix didn’t rage at his accusation. “I’d go straight to Him, you’re right. Then I’d cast you aside. If you’re not on His side; you’re not on my side. It’s as simple as that.”

“You’re that final, there’s no grey area,” Sharpe asked.

“None! Even my turncoat relatives aren’t safe,” she volunteered. “My sister Andromeda dishonored us, marrying a Muggle, and having a half breed whelp. I hear she’s part of the Order now, along with my cousin Sirius. I’ll hunt him down one of these days, I will.”

“Your cousin? Your niece?”

“Aye, they’re the one’s who betrayed the family, who left the old ways. That’s what it means to be a Black, don’t you understand?”

“Yes, I’ve met your father—remember?”

“No, I don’t remember,” she scowled. Then she relaxed and asked him to tell her the story.

“It will make you question yourself, it always does, and then you get angry and fly into a rage,” he warned.

“What else have I got to do?” she said, quite of sound mind. “I take pleasure in hearing how I’ve got you wrapped around my finger.”

“I would assuredly not return here every year for anyone else!”

“Ha ha! It’s probably my wild hair, the demonic light in my eyes and my green teeth that keep you coming back for more, Achilleus Sharpe!”

“No, It’s the beautiful young woman in the lake, naked under the Moonlight. I can’t get the thought of you out of my head.” He was being honest, and she knew it.

“Have you been faithful to me, despite this,” she asked, tousling her unkempt hair.

“I have,” he admitted.

Bellatrix leaned in closer to him, whispering, “You know what’s pathetic? I’ve been faithful too. I’m married, but I’ll not share my bed with Rudy—I mean—Rudolphus!” Her cackle sounded almost like a giggle as she pointedly accused him, “Look what you’ve done to me, you wicked, evil man!”

They laughed, and for a moment, just a few heartbeats, her laugh was real, and his laugh wasn’t tragic.

“There now, enough of that, now tell me the story so that I can be mad at you!”

He did, and she was.

So, he left her again.

The jailor and the two Aurors shook their heads.

“She can’t be saved,” they said. “Why do you subject yourself to her insanity?”

Sharpe, defeated, just shrugged. He was no longer sure why he put himself through this annual scourging.

As the jailor went through his keys, muttering the spell that spun the proper key from his prodigious key ring, the Auror turned to Sharpe.

“You look like you’re at your wits end with Bellatrix, I mean Miss Black.”

“That’s an accurate statement.”

“It may be of no help, but we have her cousin here. Perhaps he has a missing piece to this puzzle.”

Sharpe stopped, “I hadn’t considered that angle. She wants to kill him more than me.”

“Yes sir.”

“Take me to him,” Sharpe ordered the jailor. The jailor hesitated. The Venatorum was firm. “If I am to have a chance of defusing her madness, I need all the information I can gather. He Who Must Not Be Named has tried to come back twice already. At some point he will succeed. When he does, he’s coming for Bellatrix. She has a long memory. Everyone she has come into contact with here in Azkaban and their families will be in dreadful danger. Now what do you say?”

The Auror turned to the jailor. “Take us to Black’s cell—now!”

Sirius Black’s cell was not far away, but it was much the same, horrifying. The jailor slid open the plate and announced, “Sirius Black, you have a visitor!”

Sharpe slid in. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. Sirius was lying on his bed unchained. “What is it you want? Is this another attempt at wringing a confession out of me?”

“Actually no, I was simply wondering what you’re doing here?”

The unexpected response caused Black to sit up and swing his feet over the edge of the bed. “Are you serious?”

Sharpe stepped forward into what little light there was, “Yes. I don’t know you, but I’ve known of you for many years.”

“Who are you, and how do you know me?”

“Achilleus Sharpe.”

Sirius laughed. There was only a bit of madness in it, but enough. “Of course, the Venatorum who is tragically in love with my demented cousin. Yes, I know the story. Poor bastard! What do you want from me? Certainly, you know my cousins’ character better than I.”

Sharpe moved closer to Black, and his voice sank to a grave baritone, making it impossible for the Aurors or the jailor to hear, if they happened to be listening. “I find myself confused, Mr. Black. According to Bella, you’re number one on her hit list. As a family member who has *dishonored* the ancient and noble family Black, a member of the Order of the Phoenix, one of those opposed to Voldemort, you should be in the Ministry itself. And yet here you are.”

“Twelve years I’ve been here, Mr. Sharpe—twelve years,” Sirius told him with a strained voice. “If it were true that I betrayed the Order then Bellatrix would be the first to applaud me, but that I did not do. So, I’m the pariah in both worlds. The world I sought to save believes me to

be one of his creatures. His creatures believe me to be a traitor to wizard kind. I am truly a man with no home.”

“This event that put you here, what can you tell me of it?”

“The explosion that killed all of those poor people, it wasn’t me, I was framed by Peter Pettigrew. He left a single finger at the crime scene to show his innocence and put the crime on my back! I was certain that Voldemort could come back—I listened to my demented Pureblood cousin—but the Ministry didn’t want to hear it. They were more than happy to put me in here to keep me quiet!”

“Yes, that fits with Fudge,” Sharpe mused. “He’s weak. He’s terrified after the last two years as Voldemort has attempted to return.”

“He has attempted to return—you’re serious!”

“Absolutely.” Sharpe explained the events of Voldemort’s parasitic takeover of Professor Quirrell, and then Tom Riddle’s diary. “It’s only a matter of time before he succeeds.”

Black leaned forward; his agitation clear. “Sharpe! I must get out of here! Voldemort is gathering his forces. He’ll enlist Malfoy again. He has others: Crab, Goyle, and Pettigrew is still free—more importantly, they think Pettigrew is dead! No one is watching him!”

“Even if you do get out, how are you to find him?”

“There is a way,” Sirius said. “He’ll have to be around Hogwarts. Young Harry Potter is the key. Voldemort will have to use Harry to come back. Then he’ll kill the boy. That is, unless you can protect him. You bested Voldemort before his exile. You could kill him before he gets to Harry.”

“I am forbidden to interfere,” Sharpe said with obvious frustration.

“Why?” exclaimed Sirius. “Voldemort is as much a danger to your world as mine.”

“That is precisely why I cannot interfere.” At Sirius’ quizzical expression, he added. “There is a Prophecy. One must kill the other, but it doesn’t specify who. The Vatican views the Prophecy as an edict from God. They find hope in the vagueness of who will triumph. There are powerful forces at work here, but it is obvious that this is to come down to Potter and Riddle,” he paused, thinking. “However, you are Harry Potter’s Godfather, if I am not mistaken.”

“Yes,” Sirius confirmed.

“There was a ceremony?”

“Yes,” Sirius replied, knowing where Sharpe was heading. “We’re not simply bound by words.”

“It is a sacred contract; therefore, you too are bound to Harry Potter, and his fate.”

“So, what you’re saying, I won’t change the Prophecy, I’m already bound to it,” Sirius whispered. Looking at Sharpe, his expression grew conspiratorial. “I can’t do anything from in here, Sharpe.”

“No, you can’t,” Sharpe mused. “I guess I’ll have to take you with me.”

“That will go over well!” Sirius replied. “How do we manage that?”

“We’ll keep it simple. We’ll walk out.”

“Oh, I’ll just walk out, shall I? Is there some Muggle trick you want to teach me,” Black asked.

“Try not to irritate me, Black, I’m putting a lot on the line helping you,” Sharpe warned.

“All right, sorry, I just don’t see how this is going to happen, and I’ve been in here twelve years! If we fail, the repercussions for me are severe,” he shuddered, and it was apparent that those repercussions terrified Black.

“I know you’re talented at transfiguration,” Sharpe smiled. Reaching into his suit, he withdrew a long, narrow box. Handing it to Sirius, he explained, “It’s a wand—don’t open it yet—it’s sealed in a case that protects it from my tendency to disenchant things. I carry it just in case I had to break Bella out; just in case I could turn her away from Voldemort.”

“Not much chance of that, I’m afraid, Sharpe,” Sirius sighed. “I know that you love her, you must, to visit her here! You know it’s not just Bellatrix, nor even Voldemort you’re up against. You’re fighting against centuries upon centuries of the ancient and noble Family Black and the entire weight of the ‘Pureblood’ Magical World!” His voice turned harsh and sarcastic. Then he shook his head, and Sirius added, “I know something about going against that family and that world. I don’t know what you saw, or discovered in my cousin, but I’m sorry you did. In a way, yours is as dark a fate as mine.”

“Mr. Black, I hunt Vampires for a living; it doesn’t get much darker than that,” Sharpe replied. He took Black’s eyes, impressing the plan upon him. “I will address you on the way out. Wait until I’m through. That way they’ll know I didn’t take you out. The rest I leave to you. Just follow me out with the Aurors, everyone will have eyes on me until I leave. When we get to the courtyard they will go over my jet. I’ll have the cargo bay open. They always check the jet before I leave. Wait for the Aurors to look it over. Ready?”

“More than ready!”

“Good! One more thing. When you’re outside do not come within three paces of me. I will involuntarily undo any spell you have, got it? Let’s go,” Sharpe moved to the door and pounded on it. “Jailor! I’m ready!”

The door opened. With a single glance at Sirius Black, Sharpe said, “Good luck! Maybe someday I’ll see you on the outside!” He slipped through the door.

“You can count on it, Sharpe!” Sirius yelled after him.

The Aurors looked at Sharpe, and asked, “Any luck?”

“Many threats, but no luck,” Sharpe answered. “Still, he’s not hopeless, not like his cousin, not like Bella.” Sharpe shook his head and the Aurors led him out. The jailor checked Black’s cell, slid the viewport closed, and let them out of the cell block. He locked the door behind them and then turned to his little chair and table. He was about to hang his keys on his belt when he saw Black standing there with a wand.

“I’ll take those,” he said, and his wand flashed. “Imperio!”

The jailor slumped, his eyes turning vacuous.

“Now, you just go about your daily routine, but every time you look into my cell you’ll see me—right?”

“Right you are, sir. Have a good day, sir!”

“Good lad,” Sirius patted him on the shoulder. He turned to leave, but then stopped short, whispering into the jailor’s ear. “Oh, by the way, about an hour before your shift ends, I want you to call a Dementor and have him torment you. Just like you used to do to me, understand?”

“Yes sir,” the jailor replied.

Black turned the wand on himself, and his image transformed into an Auror. He let himself out, and disappeared down the dark, dank corridor after Achilles Sharpe.

Sharpe followed the Aurors out. When they reached the courtyard, there were only his escorts and the Warden’s assistant with her two guards. Otherwise, the courtyard was empty. The assistant was a serious woman, and she told the Aurors to search the jet.

“We wouldn’t want you to be taking home something you shouldn’t, now would we, Mr. Sharpe,” she said unpleasantly. “Will you please open your cargo hold?”

“Of course!” Sharpe acknowledged. He climbed up to the cockpit, switched on the power and primed the hydraulic system. The pumps whined as the two clamshell doors opened. Sharpe climbed down the ladder and three Aurors went around back to check the cargo hold.

“Thank you!”

“Whatever gets me out of here.”

“You do not like our little hotel for malcontents?”

“No, I do not. There’s only one thing I would take from this place, Madame,” he replied.

“Miss Bellatrix, yes? I wonder about your sanity or are all Muggles like you—strange and somewhat unbalanced.”

“You employ Dementors, and you call me unbalanced?”

“We employ them for what they are good for,” she retorted. “However, we do not go about killing each other by the thousands, by the millions. We are not like Muggles.”

“So, I assume Grindelwald was planning on setting up an amusement park with the Muggles? Charming man, if I remember correctly. No, I’d say you are very much like Muggles, Madame.”

“You know little of Grindelwald or Magics! For instance, he is in prison this very day,” she retorted.

“I know that many in the Wizarding World were and are empathetic to his philosophy. I see them every day I’m in contact with you people,” Sharpe shrugged. “You may not want to enslave Muggles, but then again you may. It’s hard to tell with people, and that’s just what you are—people.”

“And you’re such a good judge of people, are you, Sharpe?”

He shrugged again. “More than some, less than others. You’re simple. You share Grindelwald’s prejudice. If he were still in power, I daresay you’d be jailing Muggles or Mudbloods.”

Two Aurors came out from behind the jet. They approached the Warden’s assistant but did not engage her. They didn’t want to insert themselves into the argument.

Her expression turned stern in the extreme. “You are barbaric, all of you! Leave Azkaban, Mr. Sharpe, and do not come back!”

“You just proved my point, Madame,” Sharpe smiled thinly, and he took a step toward her. “I’ll be back. So long as Bellatrix Black is here, I will return. Or would you rather Voldemort takes her when He returns?”

“We do not use his name!” she exclaimed.

The Aurors shuddered.

“Good luck with that!” Sharpe chuckled grimly.

The Assistant Warden was momentarily speechless.

Taking advantage of the pause, the Auror told her, “The cargo bay checks out, Madame. All clear!”

“Very good,” she said. Then turning to Sharpe, she sneered, “You may leave now Mr. Sharpe.”

“Gladly, this place gives me the creeps!” He climbed up the ladder and put on his helmet. Shouting down to the Assistant and the Aurors, “I’ve been in Vampire castles far more civilized than this place!”

“He has a point,” One of the Aurors said.

“Leave Mr. Sharpe!” she ordered.

“I’m leaving—for now—but you better stand back or you’re going to get fried! My engines don’t distinguish between stupid Muggles and stupid Magics!”

The assistant scurried away under the shadowy eaves of the courtyard. Sharpe closed the cargo doors and started the twin engines. The whine caused the Aurors to cover their ears. The jet blast created a whirlwind within the walls. Sharpe cleared the area before pushing the throttles forward. The jet rose, hovered momentarily, and then turned and climbed away.

Sharpe climbed to 20,000 feet, far beyond any broom powered Aurors and headed back toward Britain. He keyed the intercom, and announced, “Mr. Black, you are clear to come up to the cockpit. Just open the hatch.”

Shortly thereafter, the hatch opened, and Sirius Black squeezed into the aft seat under the canopy. He looked out over the evening North Sea, looking East to Ireland, England, and home.

“Extraordinary,” he said. “I never imagined anything like this. Really, it’s amazing what you accomplish with machines and no magic. I’d love to learn more about it.”

“I can take you to a little pub I know, I imagine you’ll want something stronger than tea to celebrate your freedom!” Sharpe replied. “Aberforth Dumbledore runs the place. You’ll be safe there.”

“Never mind that, what is the date?”

“The Date?”

“Yes, the date!”

“August 26,” Sharpe told Black.

“Take me as close to Harry’s as you can!”

“Sirius, we should at least get you fed and get some new clothes on you. You’ve been through Hell!” Sharpe observed.

“There’s no time,” Sirius told him. “Voldemort’s on the move and Hogwarts term starts in five days! Don’t worry about me, you’ve done enough. Just get me there, please!”

It was night by the time Sharpe set his jet down in the field next to Little Whinging’s Grammar school. Sirius reached over Sharpe’s shoulder to shake his hand.

“I’ll never forget this. I can never thank you properly, Sharpe!”

Sharpe took Black’s hand, “Buy me a beer at Aberforth’s, and we’ll call it square.”

“I’ll do that,” Sirius laughed. “Be careful Sharpe, be careful with Bellatrix. She can be vicious!”

“No one knows that better than I,” Sharpe replied, then he smiled. “She’ll settle down after we’re married.”

“Hah! I guarantee I’ll be at *that* wedding!”

“Keep Potter safe, Black! Good luck!”

“Thanks!”

Sharpe watched Black disappear into the night. He closed the cargo doors and lifted off. As he left Little Whinging the Moonlight illuminated a fairly good-sized balloon. At the last moment, Sharpe banked away, barely clearing it. It got caught in his wake vortices, swirling and twirling on its way.

“Strange,” he muttered to himself. “That balloon looks like someone’s aunt!”

Sharpe looked out over the dark waters of the lake. The castle lights twinkled on the surface. A fast-moving wrack of clouds momentarily covered the Moon, but when they passed on, she was there. He didn’t turn, he simply said quietly, “Hello Bella.”

“Hello Achilles Sharpe,” she replied menacingly.

The Venatorum felt her step up from behind. Then the sharp edge of her cold, cold dagger was on his neck. “I could cut your throat just now, why don’t I?”

“It’s up to you, Bella,” Sharpe said, turning toward her. The knife didn’t leave his flesh. It cut.

Bellatrix’s beautiful face came into view, smiling, and she drew the knife across his flesh then whipped it away with a flourish just before it got to his trachea. “Oh my, it looks like I’ve just cut the throat of Achilles Sharpe! Isn’t that delicious!”

The Venatorum’s brows knit sternly over his jade green eyes.

Sharpe was about to speak, but Bellatrix put a finger to his lips. “Don’t say a word, sweetie, not a word. Just die for me, there now, that’s a good boy!”

The Venatorum stepped away, confused. Bellatrix had cut him to be sure, but not deep enough to do him harm. She missed the jugular and the trachea, which for her, was patently impossible. “What’s your game, Bella?”

“You’re a bore, Sharpe, a bloody, bloody bore! Damn you!” Bellatrix said, but then she cocked her head to the side. “Look what you’ve done; you’re bleeding.”

Sharpe daubed his neck, “Yes, just bleeding, not bleeding out.”

“I think maybe I’ve ruined your scar, that’s a healthy bit of blood, but not fatal.” She withdrew the dagger and then seductively licked the blood off the blade. “The blood of Achilles Sharpe, Vampire Slayer, and oh my does it taste so sweet!” The witch cackled and slid the dagger back into its sheath.

“Have you turned Vampire now Bella?”

“I’ve already been close enough to that bit, but you rescued me from Richelieu, didn’t you? You’re a naughty, naughty Venatorum, you are!”

Sharpe crossed his arms over his chest, but his expression didn't lighten. "Do you care to enlighten me on what's going on?"

"Oh, bloody Hell, lighten up Achilles!" she cackled at her pun. Then, as she did, her mood switched, and the pouting face appeared. "Is my adoring Vampire Hunter mad at me for murdering my cousin Sirius?"

"What is it, Bella?"

She changed again. Now she was the half-sane, insanely loyal servant to Voldemort. Yet, in her words and actions, something of Bella remained. She reached out and put her hand on his chest, then walked in a leisurely, seductive circle about him, lolling on him, touching him, always touching him.

"What was I to do? Do I hate Sirius enough to kill him? Yes, when the noble and ancient Family Black mood hits me. Still, it was merciful, it was quick," she stopped, and looked up to him, taking his eyes. "It was also a damn sight better than what the Dark Lord would've given Sirius. You know that!"

"Yes, I do," Sharpe admitted.

"He was marked by the Dark Lord, and you know what that means." She buried her head in his chest, "You were marked too, but now I've gone and assassinated the only other man besides Harry Potter who can kill the Dark Lord. The deed is done."

Sharpe realized what she meant. The blood on the knife. "The memory of the blood will be you, cutting my throat."

"You were paying attention in Dumbledore's class! Five points for the Vatican!"

"Bella," he hugged her close. "What happened, what's changed?"

"You were right, about everything, the Dark Lord stole my memories of us—he admitted it," she said. "There was enough, just enough Bella left to realize how awfully he'd used me. How wonderfully you've loved me."

"My beautiful Bella," Sharpe kissed her. She didn't resist, but after their lips parted, she cautioned him.

"It's not enough Achilles, I, we, there's not enough of that Bellatrix that you loved left to fight off the witch of Voldemort. I'm insane, I'm broken, I'm damaged so deeply that a moment like this is almost a dream. It's not my reality."

"Bella!"

"Shush!" she put a finger to his lips. "I must return, but before I do, I want something from you."

"Anything," he assured her.

“After Sirius, I asked the Dark Lord for something, I don’t know why, and you’re going to damn me for it. I just know it!”

“What?”

“A child!” Bellatrix told him, almost sobbing. “I don’t know why I asked, but his answer changed everything. He told me, ‘It’s an unusual request Bellatrix, but one that I should expect. It’s a need, probably formed when you were toying with that Venatorum at Hogwarts. Yes, you had visions of love, a family, things that interfere with power. That is why I removed those memories from you. I’m a merciful lord.’ I was stunned, I was. He’d really done it. He removed you from my memories.

“As I stood there in shock, he kept thinking, and finally he told me, ‘Perhaps the way to remove the last vestiges of these primitive, bestial desires is to give in to them. Another generation of Bellatrix LeStrange would be useful, and certainly we can’t count on your husband’s blood! Very well. But there is something you must do for me first. Remove the source of these inconvenient truths. Kill the Venatorum for me, and I will grant your wish.’ What could I do but say yes. He would’ve killed me on the spot if I hadn’t done his bidding.”

“And so here you are,” Achilles said softly.

“Here I am, Achilles Sharpe, on our anniversary, at our lake, under the Moonlight,” she replied breathlessly.

“You need a child.”

“I need a child,” she agreed.

Achilles stepped forward and kissed her. Her dress fell swiftly to the ground. His raiment followed, and then Achilles Sharpe swept Bellatrix off her feet and carried her into the lake. Mists congealed about them, and the Moon shining through cast a sensuous glow over their moment.

Later that night, Bellatrix returned to Malfoy Manor.

The Dark Lord met her in the great room by the fireplace. Draco and Narcissa nervously witnessed the interview. Voldemort looked sternly at her, demanding, “Is the deed done?”

She withdrew her bloody dagger and presented it to him. “It is my lord.”

Voldemort took the dagger and divined it. A smile spread across his lean, sallow features. “You slit his throat and drank his blood, how appropriate for a Venatorum’s demise!”

The Dark Lord looked over to Narcissa and Draco, saying contemptuously, “At least someone in the Malfoy and Black family still serves me with distinction! I do not tolerate failure! My slippery friend Lucius pays for his failure in Azkaban. There let him rot until he learns his lesson!” The Malfoys and Bellatrix shuddered.

“Ah but worry not, for I am a merciful lord. I shall collect the Patriarch of Malfoy Manor in due time. Yet now for the reward of my loyal servant Bellatrix.” Voldemort thought for a

moment and then sighed. Walking to the stairs, he said with no emotion whatsoever, “I will start the next generation of my army this night. You may attend me, Bellatrix.”

Dutifully, not daring to look at her sister, Bellatrix followed Voldemort upstairs.

Narcissa and Draco looked on in shock and horror.

Bellatrix steadfastly avoided Narcissa for the next several days until, by chance, the Dark Lord left on an errand to the Continent. Even then, it wasn't until other Death Eaters and lackeys, who made themselves available to the Dark Lord for profit or ambition, quit the house for other ventures, that she took tea with her sister.

They did so not in Narcissa's chambers, as was their habit, but on the grounds by a small lake. It was a folly, such as those buildings were known, and the interior was windswept and adrift with leaves. Still, it was secrecy the sisters wanted, and for that it was perfect.

“I couldn't risk talking in the house, Cissy, it's too terrible, and there are too many ears,” Bellatrix told her.

“My dear, whether you want to admit it or not, it must have been difficult,” Narcissa offered, pouring the tea. “At least you don't remember what he meant to you.”

“Not exactly, but I've been dreaming of him for years and years, especially in Azkaban,” Bellatrix admitted. “Still, I always doubted whether the dreams were real, that is, until the Dark Lord admitted to me what he did, taking Achilles Sharpe out of my memory. That, made everything more poignant, more painful.”

Narcissa reached out and touched her hand. “Poor dear!”

Bellatrix took the hand and held it. “You don't know the half of it, Cissy.”

“You mean last evening?”

Bella shook her head. “No! He's not dead Cissy. I couldn't do it. I, Bellatrix LeStrange, couldn't kill him—I!” Her sister gasped, but Bella looked up, as if still trying to figure it out. “You know, when I'm around him, whether in truth or just thinking about him, I'm not Bellatrix LeStrange anymore. I'm Bella Black; I'm his beautiful Bella.”

“Oh, Bella, if the Dark Lord finds out!”

“Oh, Cissy I know, I know!” she exclaimed, in distress, but then calmly sipped her tea. She sighed. “Of course, that's not the worst of it.”

“No!” Narcissa exclaimed.

“Oh, I'm afraid so, yes, yes, yes, yes,” Bella sighed, wavering between happiness and panic. “I'm going to have Achilles Sharpe's baby.”

Narcissa stared at her, mouth agape.

“It rather complicates things, doesn’t it,” the elder Black sister admitted.

“So, the other night was for show,” Narcissa asked, and Bella nodded. “He must never find out!”

“Assuredly not!” Bella agreed. “Yet a week ago the idea seemed very natural to me, but when the Dark Lord assigned me to kill Achilles Sharpe and explained exactly why I was the one to do it, well, things changed.”

“Tell me what happened when you saw him!”

Bellatrix related the entire affair, leaving Narcissa breathless. “After all this, after everything, he was willing to put his life in your hands!”

“Oh, I know, that evil man! There was no surer way of taking away the pleasure I would have had in doing the deed; that is, if I ever could have done it! I’m so angry at him for complicating my life, but at the same time it would be like parting with you, dear sister—forever. How could I? How shallow a life is it to not know the love of a sister, or in his case, the love of a truly devoted, strong, admirable man?”

“What if the Dark Lord had ordered you to kill Rudolphus?”

Bellatrix was flippant. “Tish, tosh, done in a moment—no regrets—oh, but I’d make Rudy dance first, I would. He’d pay for hiding under the desk that day the chandelier came crashing down!”

“It was Achilles, who protected you that day,” Narcissa noted.

“Sure enough, it was,” Bella answered, and then she got a queer look in her eye. “You know, if father hadn’t been so high and mighty about ‘Purebloods’ and the Black Family honor, things might have turned out different for me. That brings to mind something strange that father did when he interrogated Sharpe at Hogwarts. It was just after Sharpe’s infamous kiss! Then father sends Fenrir Greyback after us and he catches us skinny dipping in the lake! After Fenrir reports back father comes out to have a little talk with our young, rutting Venatorum!”

“Yes, yes, I know the story. What of it?”

“I don’t think I ever related this, maybe I didn’t think so much on it myself, but when Achilles admitted to father that he loved me, and that I had sent this statue of me to him just to remind him of what he couldn’t have—”

“—To torment him, yes,” Narcissa finished for her, so eager was she for the story and its hidden message.

“Yes, but the statue was actually me, you understand?”

“Yes, yes, what of it?”

“You know what father’s reply was?”

“What? What!” Narcissa demanded.

“Father put his hand on Achilles’ shoulder, on his Muggle shoulder, tenderly. Tenderly, as if father actually had feelings! As if he felt sorry for the Muggle!”

“Feelings? Father? He never gave us any indication that he had feelings!” Narcissa exclaimed. “You’re quite sure he wasn’t trying to strangle him?”

“No, it was like this,” she said, laying her hand firmly on her sister’s shoulder. “Just like that, and he gave it a little squeeze, as if to say, I feel your pain.”

“Our father?”

“Quite so.”

“How dare he! Did he say anything?”

“He told Achilles, ‘That sounds like Bella!’ that’s what he said.”

“The cold-hearted, authoritarian bastard!”

“Well, none of us were boys Cissy. Father needed a boy!” Bellatrix blew a wayward lock of hair out of her eyes. “Between you and me, that’s what I had to endure the other night. A boy doing a man’s job!”

“Bella!”

“It probably wouldn’t have been half so bad if it hadn’t been right after Achilles ravished me. In the lake.”

“In the lake,” sighed Narcissa.

“Again.”

“Just like the first time!”

“Under the misty Moonlight!”

“Bella, you’re making my heart flutter!”

“Don’t tell me that Muggle doesn’t know about magic!” she sighed. Then she shook her head, “Achilles Sharpe, I hate you!”

Narcissa gathered herself, and then turned serious. “Sister, it does sound magical, but think; think of our future. What do we do now?”

“We let things go on as they are,” Bellatrix said, now falling back into her conniving ways. “The Dark Lord doesn’t know, and he won’t get it from me or you!” She rubbed her tummy and looked down at the now growing child. “As far as the world knows, this is the Dark Lord’s child. But one day, should the Dark Lord fall, I want the child to know who their father really was.”

“How?”

“I brought two gifts from the midnight tryst with Achilles,” Bellatrix admitted. She withdrew a crystal vial. “One was my child. The other is this. These are all of the memories Achilles Sharpe has of Bellatrix Black as well as the memories you rescued from the Dark Lord’s exorcism of Sharpe. The child shall at least know the love of their parents, and if only one of us survives,” she paused. “If I do not survive, the child will know who to trust. I leave this with you Cissy.”

Narcissa took the vial back. “Can you carry this off, Bella, I mean without him discovering you?”

Bellatrix cackled, admitting, “The only time I’m ever sane is with you or with Achilles. I suppose that’s what love does. As soon as the Dark Lord returns this part of me goes and hides, and I have no say in the matter.”

“Oh, my poor Bella!”

“No time for sentiment Cissy,” Bellatrix told her forcefully. “The war is heating up. The Dark Lord let drop that he’s going after Dumbledore this year. Something about the old man getting too close to one of his secrets.”

“Do you have any idea what he is planning?”

“Not a clue, excepting what he let on back at the manor—we’re involved,” she laughed. It was not a nice laugh anymore. Narcissa noted that, and she shuddered. “Who cares? I’d dearly love to see old Dumbledore again and give him what for! Come on, back to the house with us!”

Narcissa joined her sister, wondering whether the conversation of the last half hour ever really occurred. Bellatrix held out her hand, but it was then that Narcissa realized she still held the vial. Swiftly, she secreted it into her pocket and then took her sister’s hand. So, they walked back to the Manor together.

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As Achilles and Bellatrix missed dinner, Lucius kept to the family routine. After the meal, he retreated to his study with Draco. The younger Malfoy retired to his room at about eight, as it was growing dark outside. Lucius poured himself a brandy and left the fire, wandering without resolution to the large French doors that led to the garden.

That's when he noticed a solitary figure standing in the darkened garden looking into the eastern sky. It could only be Achilles Sharpe.

Much against his character, but in keeping with their unofficial camaraderie, Lucius gathered another glass and filled it with the exquisite brandy. He met Achilles, who glanced momentarily in his direction, and proffered the glass.

"This will help keep out the October chill," he said affably as Achilles took the drink. He noted the man swirling the brandy before taking in its scent in a long luxurious sniff. At least the Muggle was civilized! Achilles took a sip and emitted a proper exclamation of delight. Malfoy followed the man's eyes, for Achilles Sharpe appeared fixated on something in the sky. Considering the man's vocation there was always a certain amount of peril to be suspected in his focused attention. "What are you looking at Sharpe; not portents of doom I hope?"

"No, not yet at least," he replied coolly. "The powerful amongst the undead have their routines even as you and I. They won't hurry out into the night, even if they do have something particularly nefarious planned."

That did not comfort the elder Malfoy, but still, he asked, "What then are you looking at?"

He pointed up at the constellation of Orion. "The middling bright star above and to the right of Orion's belt, that's Bellatrix."

"Ah yes, the Black family's tradition of celestial naming," Lucius smiled. "You know, I've always wondered how it happened that you and Bellatrix met again after her unfortunate demise." The Vampire Hunter sighed, and Malfoy smiled uncomfortably, "I hope I'm not prying."

“That is our world, that is life, Lucius,” Achilleus replied, looking back up at the star. He was silent for a long moment. “It started that night at the Battle of Hogwarts. I saw her die from across the great hall. I had just killed Rudy, and felt quite good about it, but then I saw Bella. We locked eyes for just that moment, but it was enough for Molly to seize the advantage and, well that was it.”

“A surprise that was, Madame Weasley besting Bellatrix. No one saw that coming.”

“Beware a mother defending her cub!” Achilleus growled, shaking his head. “Bella was in one of her moods, driven perilously mad by you-know-who. It wouldn’t have surprised me if she were to turn on Draco—or you—that night. Even Narcissa would have defended her family valiantly against her sister. Poor Bella. Still, it was better that she died at the hands of love rather than hate. Still, I’d have wished for her to last a bit longer. Once he was gone, she would have been free.”

“Yes,” Lucius admitted, allowing a long pause, and sipping his brandy. “Many of us were freed that night. “Strangely, Potter’s victory was ours as well.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Achilleus smiled, and they touched glasses.

They chimed.

A sudden, cold breeze whipped around them, but it was thin, teething, and without power.

“I wonder, I wonder if he can find a way back,” Lucius said uncomfortably. “He is clever.”

“Clever, yes, but weakened to the point that he cannot even manifest a threatening whisper. The Magi working in the Vatican told me that the loss of all his Horcruxes crippled what was left of his spirit. He cannot even manifest a thought unless it is as a parasite upon another’s thought, such as speaking of him.”

“A shadow of what he did to Quirrell,” Malfoy noted. “And so not naming him is, ironically, the best policy.”

“Yes, I’m convinced we’re quite rid of him.”

“Back to the aftermath of the Battle, which mercifully I played no part,” Lucius said, sipping his Brandy. “I was always quite amused at your dispensation of Rudolphus. Crucifying him to an upside down cross. I wonder, did that have some religious significance?”

“It did indeed,” Achilleus smiled.

Lucius coughed, “And Bella? Lord knows it would not be safe to leave her there.”

“No!” Achilleus agreed. Again, he paused. “I took possession of Bella and drove her to Italy. There’s a small church in the hills outside of Rome. The star Bellatrix peeks into her crypt during the winter months.”

“Hallowed ground? Bellatrix?” Malfoy exclaimed. “Achilleus, I do not mean to be indelicate. I know you love her, and it’s always been obvious that she loved you in her way, but—her crimes! Even those within her own family, Sirius Black and Nymphadora Tonks, poor lass.”

Achilleus sighed, “Oh believe me, I thought the good Lord might chase me out of the graveyard with a host of thunderbolts, but in the end, I was allowed to place her in the crypt. Well, after I brushed her hair, laid her hands over her deathly still breast, and I kissed her good night, I closed the lid. I walked outside and sat down on the cold, frigid cold, stone of the crypt. I looked up at Bellatrix, the star.

“My love was gone. I felt empty and utterly alone, an eternal loss. Thereupon, I groaned, ‘Oh Bella, what am I going to do without you?’ Well, not a moment later there she was, next to me, her ghostly head on my shoulder, looking up at me with those beautiful, dark eyes.”

“What happened then,” Lucius asked in amazement.

Achilleus chuckled, and said, “She smiled and stated with great finality, ‘You don’t think you’re getting rid of me that easily, do you Achilleus Sharpe? I will haunt you from here to eternity!’”

Malfoy took a long draught of his brandy. “There’s no doubt that was our Bella now is there?”

“None!” Achilleus smiled. “And so, our penance began.”

“Our?”

“Yes, that’s the way these things work.” Sharpe drained his brandy, and then looked at Lucius. The expression in his eyes caused Malfoy to stiffen. “The world circles around time and again until there is closure. God does not leave loose ends.”

“So, you are here for a reason, aren’t you?” Malfoy’s pale features grew even more pallid.

“Richelieu,” Sharpe told him.

“Richelieu!” Lucius staggered over to a stone bench and collapsed. “But how? I watched you stake him! You removed his head—everything!”

“Yes, all was done according to the orders,” Sharpe told him. “We went so far as to separate the head and body. The head was retained in the Defense Against the Dark Arts vault.”

“Well, Richelieu certainly wouldn’t be lonely there!” Malfoy exclaimed. “Where was the body placed?”

“Deep, deep in the vaults of Notre Dame,” Achilleus replied. “There is no more Hallowed Ground outside of the Vatican or Jerusalem. Somehow, someone stole Richelieu from a magically protected vault and a sacramental vault.”

“How could such a thing be done—and why?”

“I do not know, yet. However, my first order of business was to come here. If Cardinal Richelieu was again at large, he would seek to re-establish his coven. He would come here. Therefore, I needed to come directly to Malfoy Manor.”

“I appreciate that, Achilleus. It seems my past will always come back to haunt me.” He looked up at Achilleus. “How long do we have?”

“Hard to say,” Sharpe admitted, sitting down beside Malfoy. “He could be here already, of course. However, a Vampire Lord as old and experienced as Richelieu knows he has time on his side. Also, there is his,” he paused, “his motivation.”

“Revenge, obviously,” Lucius said.

“Obviously, there is that angle,” Achilleus agreed. “In this case, Lucius, there’s more to it.”

“What else could it possibly be?”

“Narcissa,” Achilleus told him.

“What—what do you mean, Narcissa?” Lucius stammered. “It was Bellatrix that Richelieu wanted. We heard that together from Laird Maclaren’s ghost!”

“Perhaps we should continue this inside. Narcissa needs to hear this. Also, Andromeda should be arriving presently,” Sharpe’s voice became firm and insistent.

Lucius swallowed hard, whispering, “Andromeda? We haven’t seen Andromeda in twenty years! The schism within the Black family,” he took a deep breath, trying to comprehend this turn of events. “It was altogether terrible, just terrible. Narcissa and Bellatrix exiling their own sister! I knew why, but still. I can’t grapple it.”

“It stops tonight, Lucius,” Sharpe told him firmly. “It stops tonight! What I didn’t tell you back at Hogwarts, when Richelieu attacked—what was kept from Narcissa and Andromeda—was that Richelieu was after more than Bellatrix. He was after all the Black sisters.”

“All of them?”

“All of them, but it gets worse,” Sharpe said gravely.

“Worse? How could it possibly get worse?”

Sharpe put his hands on Lucius’ shoulders, steadying him. “You’re going to have to be strong for Narcissa!”

“What do you mean?”

“Cygnus Black served *him*.”

“Yes?”

“*He* wanted to recruit Vampires into *his* army, just as he had Lycans,” Sharpe told Lucius, and the wizard’s face grew deathly pale. Malfoy couldn’t speak, so agitated was he, so Achilleus

finished his charge. “You remember what *he* demanded of you, in order to prove your loyalty: that your son, Draco, should be the one who killed *his* greatest rival—Dumbledore. The proof of Cygnus Black’s loyalty to *him* was a contract, selling his daughters—all of them—to become Richelieu’s wives.”

“Monstrous!” was the only thing Lucius could say.

“Exactly! This idea—this need—to have a harem is decidedly of the Devil,” Sharpe said, rather sharply. “It goes against the very nature of man.”

“So that is the purpose of your visit,” Lucius whispered, as if to himself. “You are putting your life, your very soul in danger, yet again, for my family.” He held out his hand, unasked, of his own volition. With supreme self-control, yet not without feeling, he said, “I know it is your job, Achilleus, but I am grateful. My family is everything to me. It is all I have left. I can never repay such a debt.”

Achilleus took the proffered hand, well aware of what that meant. “Your consideration is worth a great deal to me, everything, especially as you are family, Lucius.” To the senior Malfoy’s questioning glance, he added, “Bella and I eloped. The Holy Father himself performed the brief ceremony. I think it rather tickled his humor to marry one of his Venatorum to a ghost, of a witch, but overtly, he agreed to do it to help redeem Bella.”

“So, you are wed—to a ghost? How extraordinary,” Lucius mused. “That would make for an interesting wedding, but—excuse me for being crude—an even more interesting Honeymoon.”

“You have no idea,” Achilleus smiled, but then he grew serious. “Pray, don’t tell Narcissa. Bella wants a real wedding here at Malfoy Manor when the time is right.”

“My lips are sealed,” Lucius nodded.

“That being said, we have work to do here, and now! I need your courage again, Lucius. As before. Narcissa needs your fortitude, just as she did in those three nights at Slytherin House!”

Malfoy pulled himself together, “Of course! Of course!” He took a deep breath, glancing at Sharpe, and downing the remainder of his brandy. “Fortitude! Yet, oh my, Narcissa will not take this well!”

“Not take what well, Lucius?” asked Narcissa, suddenly appearing out of the darkness. Malfoy stared at her for a long silent moment. Narcissa, unable to interpret his silence, continued with her errand. “Mr. Potter is here, waiting in the front hall. He apologized profusely for the indelicacy of visiting so late, and he tried to set my mind at ease, but he won’t tell me anything about it. Would you please come in?”

“Yes, quite right,” Lucius replied. “Please bring Draco down. We have some important family matters to discuss.”

“Everything is *not* all right, is it?” she said, looking from Lucius to Sharpe. Her expression grew cold, defensive, and imperious. “Is this a Ministry affair?”

“No, the Ministry has nothing to do with this!” Lucius informed her. “Achilleus was just informing me of some troubling news, but it’s not the Ministry. Come, let us welcome Mr. Potter!” Lucius took Narcissa’s hand.

Narcissa looked at Sharpe. “Is my family still under your protection, Achilleus?”

Achilleus bowed his head, “More than ever, Narcissa!”

“Very well, let us go meet Mr. Potter, shall we?” Narcissa took Lucius’ arm.

They went inside.

Draco was coming down the stairs, surprised to see Harry Potter in his front entry. “Potter! What on earth are you doing here?”

“Business,” Potter said, but seeing the anxious expression on Draco’s face, he quickly qualified his statement. “Not the Ministry! I’m not here as an Auror, Draco. Actually, the Venatorum, Achilleus Sharpe asked me to escort someone to your estate.”

“Who?”

“I was instructed to bring them inside when Mrs. Malfoy and your father were present—and Mr. Sharpe—that’s all I can say at the moment.”

There was an uncomfortable silence.

“Did you get your wand?”

“I did, thanks.”

“Don’t mention it,” Potter said. He looked about, and added, “It seemed rather forlorn, lying there, your wand that is. Then, I heard you were going to take your OWLS to finish at Hogwarts.”

“Yes, thanks. I appreciate it,” Draco replied, taking the wand out and looking at it. “It’s been a while, and I think we have to get to know each other again, but it only seems fitting that we finish what we started together.”

“Exactly my thoughts,” Harry agreed. He looked and saw the elder Malfoy’s and Achilleus Sharpe coming from the study. “Ah, here they are. We can get this settled! Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy, good to see you. I hope all is well?”

“Is everything well, Draco?” remarked Narcissa, looking between the two.

“Fine, we were just catching up.”

“Good!” Lucius smiled stiffly. “Now, Mr. Potter, what can we do for you?”

“For me, nothing sir,” Potter said firmly. “I’m not here on official business. Mr. Sharpe asked me to escort an important member of your family. She’s waiting outside in the car. May I bring her in?”

The last was directed at Achilleus, who nodded and said, “Please Mr. Potter!”

“Her?” Narcissa remarked.

“Patience dear,” Lucius told her, as Potter went to the door and opened it.

“If you please, Miss,” he said.

A woman entered, hooded and cloaked. Narcissa looked confused for a moment, and then the woman threw back her hood. It was Andromeda.

Narcissa whispered her name, and then rushed into her arms, hugging her sister close. “Oh Andromeda, how I’ve missed you!”

“I’ve missed you too Cissy!”

Narcissa looked at her, tears in her eyes, and said, “Now that father’s gone there’s nothing that can separate us again—nothing!”

Andromeda smiled through her own tears, when a strident voice exclaimed, “Nothing?”

Harry Potter gasped, “Bellatrix LeStrange!” He drew his wand.

Narcissa and Andromeda stared at Bellatrix’s ghost, floating threateningly on the stairs. Narcissa gasped, “Oh Bella no!”

“No? No!” Bellatrix said angrily. “I dare anyone to keep me from my sister!” She flew down the stairs, and embraced Andromeda, turning almost solid as she did so. “Oh, Andromeda, forgive me! Forgive our family and their prejudice! I was wrong, oh so wrong! I was mad, oh so horribly mad—forgive me!”

“Oh Bella, I know it wasn’t you, it was *him!*” she cried.

The three sisters hugged each other close, crying and laughing.

Sharpe approached Potter and held out his hand. “Thanks for getting her here safe, Potter.”

“Glad to do it,” Harry said, putting away his wand and taking the proffered hand. He stiffened though when Bellatrix left her sisters and peeked over Achilleus’ shoulder. It was an understandable, and understated reaction to be sure. Yet before Harry Potter could say anything Bellatrix apologized profusely.

Hiding behind Achilleus, with only here transparently dark eyes peeking over his brawny shoulder, she emoted how very sorry she was for the murder of Sirius. “I know I can’t go back and change things, I wish I could. All I can say is, I’m so, so very sorry. Sorry for Tonks, Sirius, and that little elf Dobby—all of the bad that I’ve done—especially to you! You were just a child brought into all of this, and, and, well I can’t undo what I did back then, when I was,” she stopped, at a loss for words.

Harry Potter stayed silent for a moment, and then replied, “Strangely enough, I had a visitation from Sirius a while back,” Potter began. At the mention of Sirius, Bellatrix interrupted.

“Yes, yes, he’s my cousin you know! Dear, dear man, bit of a prankster, I’m so very sorry I killed him!”

“Yes, yes, he told me that,” Potter nodded, knowing that patience was always a necessity when dealing with ghosts. “Well, Sirius told me what happened to you, what Tom Riddle did to you, what your family did to you. Sirius told me not to hold it against you, his death that is. He thought if your situations were reversed, he’d have probably gone equally mad, and done the same.”

“After I crossed over, we had a talk, we did,” Bellatrix said wistfully. “Lovely man, my cousin. Surprising how death can give you a change of heart. I was really damaged then, but now, it’s really the first time I’ve lived since I was a girl—being dead that is!”

“I’m happy for you,” said Harry, but then Bellatrix scooted around Achilleus and came to Potter’s shoulder. He looked at her ghostly face, only inches from his own, surprised.

“Can I ask you something, Harry Potter?”

“Yes, of course, ask away!”

“I believe you are friends with Neville Longbottom—sweet lad—but his parents are in a bad way because, because of the bad things I did,” she whispered.

“Yes, yes they are,” Potter admitted.

“I have an idea,” she whispered, very proud of the concept. Bella looked about, as if anyone was listening, which of course they were. “The doctors can’t help them, but they’re not ghosts like me! They can’t actually get inside them. Now see, I remember what it’s like to be mad—truly, truly mad—and now I know what it’s like to be not so mad. I don’t mean normal, you know, I could never be normal.”

“Yes, well, I can understand that!”

“You see, to be mad is to be lost, I mean it’s as if you were on a raft in a wide, wide river with no pole, not knowing where it’s taking you. I’m not lost now—thanks to Achilleus—I’m found, you see. He showed me the way because for some strange reason, I still don’t know why, but he fell in love with me—imagine that.”

“I can’t, really, but do go on.”

“Well, Harry Potter, I thought, what if I go to dear Neville’s parents and go on inside them, in their heads, and try and lead them back? What do you think?”

Harry Potter shrugged, and said, “Well, it’s worth a try now, isn’t it?”

“Then, you think I should do it?”

“Definitely, it certainly can’t hurt!”

Bellatrix kissed Harry on the cheek. “Thanks so much! Again, I’m sorry, I was so mean to you in the living world. Really, I am.”

“We were all damaged, Bellatrix, but truly, thank you for trying to make amends,” Harry smiled.

Bellatrix wafted over to Achilles, waving to Harry as she did so. “Isn’t he a sweet lad, that Harry Potter?”

“Yes dear, very sweet.”

Draco leaned over to Harry, and whispered, “I think she’s still mad as a hatter!”

Potter shrugged, “Maybe,” he replied, watching the three sisters homecoming, for the first time in decades. “Maybe, but I actually like seeing a family put back together.”

“Even mine?” Draco said, appraising his great rival at school.

“Especially yours, Draco,” Harry said.

“Thanks,” Draco nodded. After a pause, he asked, “How’s Ginny and your son?”

“Yes, James, they’re doing fine, thank you.”

“James, excellent. Well Harry, since you’re not on the clock for the Ministry, can you take time for a glass of wine or brandy?”

Harry shrugged, “Why not?”

The two young men went on to the study.

After a few more minutes of the Black sisters sorting things out, the entire party ended up in the study. It was Narcissa, who brought gravity back into the conversation. “Lucius, you told me on the way in that there was something serious to what is going on, but that it didn’t have anything to do with the Ministry. Has it to do with our reunion?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact it has everything to do with Andromeda being here, my dear,” Lucius said anxiously. “We are all gathered together as we were in our last year at Hogwarts as students for the same desperate reason.”

Andromeda and Narcissa clutched each other.

Draco asked, “What’s this all about?”

“It was obviously before your time son,” Lucius replied. “It does have to do with the adventure I described to you, concerning Mr. Sharpe. This is not simply a social call. Somehow, in some way, Cardinal Richelieu has returned.”

“But Lucius, Bella is a ghost!” Narcissa objected. “He can’t collect her as he tried too before. Why should we be in any danger?”

Lucius stirred uncomfortably, but it was Bellatrix, who wafted before her sisters and explained, “I’m afraid that back then, I was less than candid with both of you, dear sisters. In order to spare you the horrors that you might have felt, I didn’t tell you all there was to tell.”

“Didn’t tell us what, Bella?”

Sharpe stepped forward, and said, “We discovered that Cardinal Richelieu wanted more than Bella. He wanted you all. He wanted all the sisters Black, for his wives.”

Narcissa and Andromeda were horrified.

“There’s more,” Bella said.

“Bella, are you sure?” Achilles cautioned her.

“No Mr. Sharpe,” interjected Narcissa. “We must know it all, no matter how dreadful.”

“Yes, everything please,” Andromeda added.

“It will be hard to hear, dear sisters, I wanted to spare you, but,” Bellatrix started, yet she couldn’t relay the truth. “Please, Achilles, please tell them.”

“Contractus Diabolicus, my fair Black sisters—you were sold to Cardinal Richelieu under a Devil’s Contract. You were to become his wives. Indeed, that is why it was imperative that I destroy the Cardinal when he came to collect you. It was the only way to invalidate the contract.”

“Why, why did he want us?”

“Power and beauty are an intoxicating combination that the Black sisters have in abundance, however, Cardinal Richelieu was not simply lusty, he was ambitious. He knew, the Dark Lord had already gained the services of the Werewolves through Fenrir Greyback. He knew, the Dark Lord wanted the Vampires as well. Yet, seeing as Prince Dracula would have nothing to do with him. Richelieu offered the Dark Lord his services, at a price.”

“We were his price dear sisters,” proclaimed Bellatrix.

“The Dark Lord? Even he could not sell us!” Narcissa exclaimed.

“No, he could not,” Sharpe assented. “Indeed, he did not. However, he demanded that payment be made as proof of loyalty.”

“Payment by whom?” Andromeda said, with a quivering voice.

“By Cygnus Black,” Achilles Sharpe told them. He withdrew a parchment from his frock coat and unfolded it, showing it to the sisters. “We knew about it from the Cardinal himself before the second attack, but this was on his person when I destroyed him. It is signed with your father’s name in your father’s blood. Your father sold you to Cardinal Richelieu.”

“How could he?” Narcissa whispered.

Andromeda covered her face to hide her tears.

“This was your father’s proof of loyalty to the Dark Lord.”

Bellatrix went to them and hugged them closely. “I’m so sorry, but I couldn’t bring myself to burden you with this.”

“Oh Bella, you took on all this horror for us! The secrets, the loss of your memories, the destruction of your love! All for us! No wonder it drove you mad! And to think, it was all because of Voldemort and his lust for power! Father, and his maniacal subservience! Well, the Dark Lord got what he deserved! Thank you, Mr. Potter, thank you for delivering us all from his evil!”

Harry Potter was formulating a response, when a smooth, wicked voice cut the air.

“Evil is in the eye of the beholder, and Lord Voldemort did what was necessary in the past, just as he will do what is necessary in the future!”

They turned to see a striking young woman standing at the entrance to the study.

Lucius stared at her. “Who are you and how did you access this house?”

“Who am I?” she smiled, looking at Bellatrix. “Why don’t you tell them—Mummy?”

“Mummy? Young lady, you’ve been led astray,” Bellatrix responded. “I have no child!”

Narcissa interrupted, “Pardon sweet sister, but you do. Delphini, a lovely daughter but four years old. Yet she is upstairs with Nanny Rowle right now.”

“I have a daughter?” Bellatrix exclaimed, stunned.

Narcissa soothed her, “The Dark Lord scourged your mind of both Achilles and your daughter. He thought it weakened you. It drove you further into madness. I could not say anything, you wouldn’t have believed it.”

Delphini smiled, “Well mother? Nothing to say? No hug for your daughter?”

Bella clutched her ghostly head, “My daughter? I can’t, I can’t remember!”

Achilleus came forward, and as only he could, guided her within himself, “Easy dear, easy, calm now! Look within me. See what I saw. There was the Moonlit night when you came to me before Voldemort’s travesty!”

Bellatrix sighed, calm now, and pulled away. She looked at the young woman, and said, “Lass, I see my daughter now, but it is as my sister said. She is a girl of four. I cannot be you!”

“Oh, but it is,” she said, drawing a time-turner from beneath her blouse. Caustically, she told the assembled family, “I am Delphini! I’ve come from the future to restore my father’s place in the world. Once Cardinal Richelieu takes the Black sisters to wife, he’s promised me a vessel for my father, Lord Voldemort!”

“So, it was you who was able to break into the Hogwarts vaults and steal Richelieu’s head,” Lucius said. “No doubt, you are a powerful witch like your mother!”

“Yes, but I have an added advantage. As powerful as I am as a witch, I am equally unaffected by magic. Most of the defensive spells of the vaults washed off my back like rain on a tortoise shell!”

“Just like your father,” Lucius pointed. “In case you didn’t know, Achilles Sharpe is an Incantamus; he is unaffected by magic.”

“Just because I’m resistant to magic doesn’t make him my father!”

Achilleus stepped forward. He closed his eyes, and after a moment, he looked at her. “I could sense Tom Riddle’s presence. He had a significant negative energy to him. He could never have penetrated the Notre Dame vaults.” He took a step closer. “I don’t sense that in you. Tell me, how did you get to Richelieu’s body?”

Delphini smiled. “Once in possession of the head it was a simple matter to use an Imperius curse on one of the Notre Dame priests, and Cardinal Richelieu returned!”

“Ingenious Delphini! I am suitably impressed,” Achilleus nodded, putting himself between Delphini and the party. “Still, you must have had guidance. Who was it that communed with you, the Cardinal, or the Dark Lord?”

“I communed with them both!”

“Then, they lied to you,” Sharpe said simply.

“How so?”

“Oh, the Cardinal was truthful when he told you how to resurrect him, but he lied when he told you he could create a vessel, a host, for your father. As for the Dark Lord, he lied about you being his daughter. In death, we see the truth, but that does not mean the dead tell the truth.”

“What are you saying?”

“Simply, that you are the daughter of Bellatrix Black, the most beautiful, haunting, and lovely creature this world has ever known. Yet you are not the daughter of Tom Riddle!”

“Impossible!”

“No, not impossible. Let your mother show you!”

Bellatrix floated over to Delphini, and a soft smile lit her face, “Now dear, mothers aren’t supposed to be this candid with their children, but under the circumstances, well, I hope we don’t scar you for life!”

She flew into Delphini, and the young woman’s face revealed a cascade of emotions. After a moment, Bella withdrew.

“You all right dear, did you see what you needed to see?”

Delphini couldn’t grasp it immediately. “I was taught, I was the Dark Lord’s daughter! It was a lie?”

Achilleus stepped forward. “My dear, you’re my daughter, not Tom Riddle’s. He lived his life alone. He died alone, not caring about anyone but himself. He came to you, not caring about you, but trying to get you to undo his death using the time turner.”

“And you mean better?”

“My dear, I’m your father, naturally, I mean better for you!”

“I don’t know what to believe,” Delphini said miserably. “I guess I’m like you now Mum.”

“No dear, I see what’s true is true now,” Bellatrix said, almost motherly. “Now come sit down. We’ll get you some tea!”

Delphini allowed her mother’s ghost to guide her, but her eyes had that haunted, hunted look now. “Everything’s gone all wrong, always has. This matron, Ms. Rowle, took me away when I was young. She never liked me, not a bit, just did it for the gold.”

Lucius turned to Narcissa, “Fire Mrs. Rowle, won’t you dear?”

“With pleasure!” Narcissa whispered.

“Then I got sickly in her old drafty place, with the swill she fed me, and I didn’t even get my letter from Hogwarts!”

“Poor dear!” Bellatrix soothed her.

All three sisters crowded around her. “We won’t let that happen to you dear,” Narcissa assured Delphini. “You have a room here—now—why you’re just upstairs with the nanny, although we’ll be getting you a new nanny presently.”

Andromeda looked at Narcissa, “Could I be her Nanny, I mean when Bella’s not around, I really don’t know the schedules ghosts keep. I could bring my little granddaughter; Delphi would at least have a friend.”

“What a wonderful idea, Andromeda,” Narcissa smiled.

Lucius observed, “Your granddaughter, isn’t that Nymphadora’s daughter?”

Andromeda answered, “Yes Lucius, it is.”

“Just making sure I got this straight!”

“So, I am upstairs in the care of a nanny who betrayed me, but you are going to replace her with my—aunt?”

Bella said, “Seems like a right better solution, don’t it?”

“I suppose so. I can’t stay here,” Delphini said miserably. “What happens when I go back?”

Harry chimed in, having done this sort of thing before, “Not to worry. It looks as though everything that was broken in your life is fixed now. So, when you do go back, I imagine you’ll have already graduated from Hogwarts. Everything should be fine.”

“Oh, really, I think I’d like that,” Delphini smiled. “My life didn’t have a lot of potential. Now, well, maybe it does.”

“It does indeed,” said an aristocratic voice, heavy with a menacing Gallic accent. Everybody looked to see Cardinal Richelieu, himself, standing just inside the front door. He smiled at their surprise. “Oh, I am sorry to interrupt a wonderful pastoral family gathering, but time presses. I wish to collect my wives and take them to a proper house, far away from the mists and rains of Wiltshire!”

“Cardinal, you’re right on time!” Achilles Sharpe informed the Vampire, walking towards the red robed figure. “I was expecting you! But, did you come alone? I’m surprised. Did none of your family stay amongst the undead when I staked you?”

“Come my children, greet Mr. Sharpe and my wives,” he replied dryly. Two dozen dark cloaked Vampires came in from outside. Richelieu smiled and approached Sharpe. “I respect your courage, Mr. Sharpe. I will make an arrangement with you. Since Mr. Black died, and poor Bella died, Miss Andromeda is now the head of the Black family, and legally, she is also my wife. Therefore, the affairs of the Black Family are my affairs. Recognize this and I will offer you death, all of you. I will not turn a single one of you. We will simply feed off you and you can go peacefully to God. What say you?”

“Tempting,” Sharpe said, smiling and shaking his head, “But you forget.”

“Forget what Sharpe?” Richelieu eyed him suspiciously.

“I already knew you were back—that’s why I’m here—did you think I came unprepared, or alone?” Sharpe opened the collar of his coat to reveal a radio handset hanging on his shoulder. “Venatorum—now please!”

Immediately, two dozen Vatican Venatorum emerged from adjoining rooms. They set upon the Vampires. Caught by surprise, the Vampires tried to flee, but there were others outside, waiting for them.

“I’ll be back for my wives, Sharpe! Don’t forget, time is on my side! We have eternity together, but you, soon enough you will be dust!”

By the time he finished speaking, Sharpe unfurled his whip. SWISH-CRACK! The silver tipped tongs lashed around Richelieu’s legs, and Sharpe yanked the Vampire onto the floor.

Bellatrix flew towards him, “Achilleus, your knife!”

The Venatorum cast his Silver dagger.

She materialized enough to snatch it out of the air, and just as Richelieu began to transform into mist, Bellatrix plunged it into his eye. Richelieu’s body regained its corporeal form. He stared in terror at the Venatorum, who took out a stake and a Silver hammer. Sharpe plunged the stake between the Vampire’s ribs. A fountain of dark blood erupted.

“No Sharpe, no! Anything you desire!”

“I have everything I desire, Cardinal, now go to the Devil!” He raised his hammer.

The last thing Richelieu saw before the hammer drove the stake through his heart—again—was the inverted face of ghostly Bellatrix Black laughing at him.

“Bye, bye Cardinal Vampire!”

THUNK!

The stake drove through the Cardinal’s breast and split his heart.

Withdrawing his great Silver cutlass, Sharpe severed the head and stuffed garlic in his wide-open mouth. The remaining Vampires chose death this time. Once again, in a twinkling, it was over.

Sharpe wiped the gore off on the Cardinal’s robes, and joined Lucius, Draco, and Harry Potter. The elder Malfoy was astonished, “Well, that happened swiftly. I didn’t even cast a spell. That’s all rather, disappointing.”

“I had all Venatorum available for this lot,” Sharpe said. “We wanted to eradicate Richelieu’s coven, and by God we did. We were ready for them, and Richelieu, well, he didn’t know what we knew. Having just reanimated after death he wasn’t nearly as powerful as he was before. When we attacked with surprise, he simply couldn’t recover, and Bella ensured he couldn’t flee.”

“Can he come back again?”

“Each time he is destroyed he will come back weaker. The urge to repent and face judgement grows. Plus, now that he, as head of the Black House, is dead,” Achilles took out the contract and threw it in the fireplace. It immediately caught fire and turned to ashes. “The contract is now dead as well. Even if he were to return, the contract is no more.”

“Then it is a joyous night! Lucius, pray invite the Venatorum into the study for wine—we shall celebrate!”

“My dear, am I to understand you are directing me to throw a party for Muggles?”

“Yes dear, see to it!”

“Of course!”

Achilleus and Bella approached Delphini, who stood alone by the fireplace watching the contract burn. She looked at them, as they approached, wonder and doubt in her eyes.

“Well, now you know what your parents do for a living,” Achilles smiled.

Bella wafted closer to Delphini, “He’s always making bad jokes like that. Thinks he’s funny, he does. Well, you’ll get used to it.”

“I can’t stay, you know,” she said.

“I know dear, I know, but you can go back knowing you’re loved,” Bellatrix told her. “Even at my maddest, when I did things so very bad that I still shiver about them, I knew that my Achilles loved me. It didn’t matter why, or how, but it kept part of me sane. We want you to return and live your life to the fullest knowing just that! That you are loved.”

“You’re our girl,” Achilles said tenderly. “We not only want what’s best for you, but we also want you to be better than us. Remember though, when you get back, if I’m alive, I’m going to be very hard on your boyfriends!”

“And if he’s not alive, we’ll haunt them, be warned!”

Delphini stifled a laugh. “I don’t have much time, but I was wondering, could I see me? I want to give myself a message.”

They shrugged, and a few minutes later, after passing a rather angry Mrs. Rowle, who was leaving the house, Delphini came face to face with her wee self. She stared into the beautiful blue eyes, and told the child, “You be a good girl for daddy and mummy, will you? Trust me, do what they say, and everything will turn out all right. Remember, you are loved!”

Delphi kissed the child, and she hugged them both. “I hope I see you both in a few minutes!”

“Don’t worry luv, you will!” Bella laughed. “We’re getting married here in the manor. I mean we have a daughter; we wouldn’t want to be living in sin now, would we? You need to be raised proper.”

Their daughter couldn’t help but laugh, and the years of plotting and revenge fell away from her. For the first time in her life, she actually wished for what they said to be true. That kind of hope had never been a reality in Delphini’s life. Then, just before she was set to return, her father said, “God be with you daughter, don’t worry, our lives are now centered on one thing—you!”

With those words she closed her eyes and returned to her own time.

Delphini opened her eyes to a strange room. It was obviously hers, but not the one she left, or so she thought. The walls were the same, but not covered in dark coverings. The portraits of Voldemort and Bellatrix LeStrange were replaced by a single portrait of Achilles Sharpe and a beautiful Bella, hugging in a Moonlit pool, waving to her, and saying, “We love you daughter!”

She headed downstairs, almost in disbelief. Could it actually be true? Could she leave behind the life of blind vengeance and pain?

It was the same manor house, but it wasn’t dark, with a feeling of foreboding and vengeance. It was wholesome. She found her way to the study where she saw Achilles in his big leather armchair. He was reading a Muggle paper—the Daily Prophet burst into flames near him—and moreover he was reading it through the transparent form of Bellatrix. She was snogging him, and he quickly gave up and started snogging her back.

“Oh, you two are at it again! When will you act your age!”

They just laughed.

EPILOGUE

The hospital staff was surprisingly interested when Neville Longbottom showed up for his usual visit with Harry Potter and a large, wild looking Muggle in tow. When they found out their purpose, they were even more interested. The Longbottom case had long since progressed beyond any hurt pride in their failures. No, if someone could solve the tragic Longbottom case, even if it were Bellatrix herself, well, more power to her.

They met the Longbottoms in their room.

“Hello Mum, hello Dad,” Neville said. They smiled and held out candy wrappers. Neville turned, and said, “That’s about all I can get from them.”

Sharpe sighed, “All right Bella, it’s your show!”

Bellatrix popped out behind them so as not to give them a shock, saying, “Here goes! Alice, you first dear!” She entered Mrs. Longbottom. Her eyes grew wide, looking terrified. Neville reached for her hand and held it. Mr. Longbottom, seeing his wife in distress, grasped the other.

“She looks like she’s just seen a ghost!” Neville blurted.

Harry and Achilles exchanged glances, and Harry said, “We expected this Neville, let it play on for a bit.”

“Right, right, of course; we’ve nothing to lose,” he replied, and took a deep breath, calming himself. Strangely, that seemed to help Mrs. Longbottom. However, now Frank Longbottom’s eyes were wild with fright. He began to back away toward the wall.

Bella popped half out of Alice, and said, “She’s stopped running from me, that’s a start, but he’s still running. They’re in here together!” She jumped out of Alice and into Frank. “Your turn!”

Frank was against the wall, trembling. Alice moved over to him and silently took his hand. Calmly, she closed her eyes. After a long moment, Frank seemed to calm down and he too closed his eyes. Bella popped out of him, saying, “They’re together and yet apart, so I’ve got to move both along little by little.” Then she was back in Alice. For the next few minutes, Bella darted back-and-forth between them. The Longbottoms grew visibly tired, so they eased them into their chairs, still holding hands.

Twice, Bellatrix flew out of them and into Achilles for energy. “Thanks luv, who’d of thought this would be such hard work?”

After half an hour Bellatrix popped out, and asked Neville, “Where’ve they been these twenty years, they want to know?”

“Why here, in the hospital,” he stammered.

“No, that won’t do! Someplace nice! Where would they go on a long holiday?”

“Well, let me think,” he replied, frowning. Suddenly, he brightened. “My Gramps has a cottage in Derbyshire! They loved going there.”

“Right!” she nodded and back she went.

A few minutes later, Bella popped out. The Longbottom’s were asleep in their chairs. She went to Achilleus. “I’ve done it, I think. We have to take them to this cottage in Derbyshire. Right now, they think they’ve been sitting out the troubles there, and we don’t dare let them wake in the hospital. They might remember the wrong things.” She turned to Neville. “They’re going to stay asleep until you wake them up, and that can’t be until we get to this cottage.”

“Right, right, let’s go then!”

The cottage was a charming little place full of flowers and sunlight, butterflies and songbirds. The Longbottoms were laid on their bed as if taking an afternoon nap. Neville took the time to boil some water and get out some cakes. He even poured a cup of tea so that the little cottage filled with the aroma of sugar and tea leaves.

“They always liked taking tea in the garden!”

The moment came. Neville, leaned over them, and whispered, “Mum, Dad, time to get up!”

Immediately, they opened their eyes. Blinking, they looked up at their son.

“Neville? Son, oh my what is the time? Oh, are you making tea?”

“Goodness sakes, I nodded off hard!” complained his dad. “I feel like I’ve been sleeping this twenty years!” He rolled out of bed, and then offered a hand for Alice. She rose as well and slipped on her shoes.

“You don’t visit us nearly as much as I’d like Neville,” she scolded him.

“Now Alice, he’s been busy with the war and all that,” Frank told her. He glanced at his son. “I hope you’ve some good news and it’s all done and wrapped up. This is as nice a place in exile as can be, but there’s too much of a good thing, you know.”

“Why yes,” Neville stammered, tears in his eyes.

“Now what’s the matter son, is something wrong?”

“Yes son, you’re upset at something, what is it?” Before he could speak, Frank and Alice noted Harry and Sharpe in the main room. “You brought guests? Is there something we should know about Neville?”

“No Mum, nothing’s wrong,” he said, introducing Harry and Sharpe. “They just came up to let us know everything’s done. It’s all wrapped up as you say Dad, and your exiles over. We can go back home!”

Frank and Alice hugged each other, and then their son, and shook hands all around. “Now that’s news! Let’s all go out to the garden and have tea, there’s so much to talk about!”

