

Black as Snow

by Celestial Melody

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Created for the wonderful rita_skeeter in MNFF's Ravenclaw Christmas Exchange, 2006.

Snow-Doused Fire

Chapter 1 of 4

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Author's Notes

As I do on so many of my other stories, I will take the time to thank everyone who has helped me with this story on the first chapter ... and the first chapter **only**.

That said, I would like to give a huge bouquet of dark pink roses and many *huggles* to:

- Jan (Magical Maeve), of MNFF
- Theresa (notsosaintly), of TPP
- Evie (apollo13), of MNFF
- All the wonderful Moderators/Administrators of MNFF and TPP

Snow-Doused Fire

1943

A cold sleet fell lightly to the frozen ground. Each minuscule drop of frozen rain shaping the ice sheet shattered sharply as it touched the dead and brittle earth, adding its unique hexagonal shape to the steadily growing frost graveyard slicking the barren ground. Strangely, there wasn't the slightest hint of wind; nothing stirred the spindly gray branches of the trees reaching upward like so many skeletal fingers, grasping futilely at the hidden stars, reaching, hoping, searching for an answer, a spring that seemed never to come. It was not a normal winter's night. Where was the whirling blizzard? Where was the tortured scream of the late-migrating birds tossed and turned brutally by the gusting zephyrs? Where was the snow, turning the skeletons of winter into objects of beauty? Gone...never there, really. This winter's night was not one in which to be out wandering; yet, beneath the branches of one of these trees (a truly magnificent Horse-chestnut, standing thirty-five meters tall, its uppermost branches tangled together to form a crown-like mass of brittle, brown, skeletal limbs) huddled a cloaked figure, its head bowed and held tightly by raw, wind-bitten hands.

This depressing, wintry scene was watched closely by the heavily-bundled figure of a tall boy of about seventeen, his handsome, white face shadowed by a tangle of dark locks. No expression lit the angles of his finely-boned face as he moved closer to the tree, his hand shoved deep into his pocket, protectively clutching something. The boy's eyes narrowed against the driving needles of sleet as he neared the huddled figure.

The form under the Horse-chestnut shook violently, whether from the cold or from some inner emotion, it was hard to tell, but whoever it was did not seem to notice the stealthy footsteps of the approaching seventeen-year-old boy. Perhaps it was the patter of sleet on the dead earth that masked the crunch of the boy's gentle footfalls, but as the handsome lad stepped ever nearer, the cloaked, prone form continued to quiver and tremble beneath the frozen branches of the Horse-chestnut. Coming closer, the boy heard a whispered plea, repeated over and over in a petulant, high-pitched feminine voice:

"Please give it to me. I need it. I love it. It's mine. Give it to me. I want it."

The voice, infinitely girlish, soared occasionally into the deep alto of womanhood, yet held a high note of cold cruelty and loss that rang an answering and similar cry in the bosom of the watching boy. Creeping closer, the tall pale lad stooped to the crouched figure on the ground...it was his duty, as Head Boy, to care for all other students ... Not that he upheld this duty stalwartly, but he'd be thrown out of Hogwarts, the only home he'd ever known, if he left this ridiculously ignorant student out here to die of frostbite.

"Hey, you," he whispered, drawing his clenched and gloved hand from his pocket; in his firm grasp, he clutched a long thin wand. "Hey, you," he repeated as the figure on the ground continued to shake, rocking back and forth, the same plea issuing forth brokenly from the black hole in the hood of the cloak. "You shouldn't be out here. What House are you from? Fifty points from whatever it is for failure to observe school rules. Now, come inside; you must be freezing. Don't you know that you shouldn't be out here this late? Who are you?"

During this speech, the girl on the ground had paused, her movements stilled in fright, but as the lad ended his admonishment, and reached out a derisive hand to the small figure opposite him, she suddenly sprang into action. With a gasp, the cloaked girl started jerkily, jumping to her feet, her thick, fur-lined hood falling back as she did so. Despite himself, the crouching boy gasped as a completely unexpected sight met his staring eyes: the surprised girl, whose own heavily-lidded eyes were wide in shock and surprise, was exquisite. Never had the tall youth ever seen a more stunning figure; she had dark, almost black, hair..."Raven," the youth whispered to himself, his chiseled lips silently forming the word, oblivious to the girl's probing stare...and brown eyes flecked with amber, their deep glow as ever-changing as the fire that gave 'burn stone' its name.

Those same striking eyes quickly settled under steamy, exotic lids, though they continued to flicker with ill-concealed emotion as if lit from the inside by a golden candle flame, and stared condescendingly down at the boy crouched on the frozen ground. But not for long did they stay proud, for those eyes were accustomed to quelling the heart of any they deemed too insignificant of their interest; however, once the glowing pair had settled arrogantly on the pale lad kneeling on the icy ground, they flickered again, confusedly, and a red flush crept guiltily up the eyes' owner's pale neck, flushing her white cheeks.

The boy, not long speech-bereaved or embarrassed, rose swiftly and gracefully to his feet and looked down at the stunning girl standing cowed before him. Neither spoke a word, but for the lad's earlier questions. Possessively, lustfully, the boy's gaze traveled over the trim body of the slender girl, no, woman, standing before him. Her cloak masked her body from head to toe, but a light burst of wind...its presence, along with the heavy, snow-laden clouds, signifying the oncoming blizzard...swirled the dark material to the side, revealing an elegant waist, full bosom, and the Hogwarts' school ensemble of stockings, skirt, and sweater.

His dark eyes traveling slowly and lasciviously up the girl's body, pausing briefly to caress the woolen material covering her ample bosom, the boy noticed, too, the quick rise and fall of her chest, and smirked. He often had this nerve-wrecking effect on girls, but never on one as captivating as the creature shivering before him. Why hadn't he ever seen her in the halls at school? "What House are you in?" he asked abruptly.

The girl, her high cheekbones flushed scarlet, blood against the snow white of her skin, seemed to lose her poise and, stammering a little, said, "S-Slytherin House; do I know you?" A confused look had settled on the girl's elegant brow; hers was a face that recalled centuries of specialized breeding, yet the indecision displayed so prominently in its fine lines served only to empower the lad watching her: He loved seeing others' confusion, fright, or fear, for, despite her beauty, she was still a pawn to him. Smiling a gorgeous, clear smile, the tall boy stepped deliberately towards the girl. With an involuntary squeak, she stepped back, her booted foot scrabbling a little at the tender, exposed roots of the groaning Horse-chestnut tree, clipping off pieces of silver root-bark in the process.

The boy's response was coordinated, intimidating, and perfectly suave; he looked the beautiful girl straight in the eye and, his high voice scintillating downward into a warm drawl, murmured, "Of course you know me. How could you not? I am He, remember?"

She, of course, had no idea who this handsome stranger was; she had made it quite clear that she'd never set eyes on him before in her life, yet the lad's easy manner produced the desired affect on the prostrate young woman before him, drawing her passionate emotions like a moth to a candle. The girl stood, frozen, transfixed by the black eyes of the handsome boy standing before her; her throat was working quickly as she tried desperately to swallow, but no sound issued forth. Something about this boy was making it impossible for her to function properly. She couldn't breathe. Flecks of ice crusted her lustrous dark hair, her finely-shaped eyebrows, and the wind...which had picked up dramatically by this time...whipped the ice-laden strands into her eyes, obscuring her vision as the boy moved fractionally closer. Breathing faster and faster, the girl's wind-whipped hands rose to her throat, clenching the antique clasp of her cloak tighter as the tall boy finally reached her.

Smiling, the beautiful lad swept his eyes once more over the girl's body, finally allowing his gaze to creep slowly back to her flushed face; his black eyes bored into her glowing, glistening dark brown ones. At that searching look, the girl completely lost her carefully-controlled demeanor. With a carnal growl, she flung herself into the boy's arms; he seemed to know this would happen and tightened his hold around her waist, lacing his hands possessively around the trim figure. As she tilted her sharply-

pointed, lovely face up to his, the girl saw a flicker of answering passion reflected in the boy's midnight-black eyes, and suddenly his red, feverish lips were pressed to her own, greedily seeking, pulling, biting.

Viciously, the boy bit into the girl's thin lower lip, eliciting blood and a mewling cry from her that was quickly silenced as the boy's tongue pushed itself into the girl's mouth. Sighing, the girl collapsed against the boy's taut, carefully-maintained body, her hands scrabbling up his back, his neck, to finally tangle in his dark hair. The two bodies burned with boiling fire despite the freezing sleet raining down on their entwined bodies, and, as if in answer to the flame within their bodies, a shimmering green glow emanated slowly from their embracing figures, growing steadily brighter and highlighting the couple's dark features even as snow began to fall softly then thicker and faster on the couple.

Suddenly, as if the white snow had woken him from a dark, forbidden pleasure, the boy pulled his mouth from the girl's, his flushed face a contrast to the creamy winter around him. Panting, he pressed a long, gloved finger to the girl's equally flushed forehead, the chill of his finger creeping forth from the wool. "Who are you?" he asked again. Never before had a woman had this effect on him; never before had he allowed a woman to get close enough to have this affect on him.

The girl, her heavily-lidded eyes as dreamy as if she had been drugged, also seemed to wake from her trance. But as she opened her swollen, red mouth to answer, a particularly vicious gust of wind whipped around the couple, and the girl's outline began to fade, her beautiful body losing color as if she were only a drawing: First her outline blurred, then her voice disappeared fully, lost to the winds of winter, the brown of her eyes faded fractionally, and then her entire body began to lose its substance.

With an animal cry, the boy flung himself closer to the girl, desperately trying to hold her. Her vague features frightened, the girl lifted arms of light to the boy, reaching for him as well. Despite their efforts, however, the girl continued to evaporate at an alarming rate as thick, pelting snow dashed the boy this way and that. As she disappeared, the boy began to cry, true tears of pain and anger flowing down his smooth face; another possession belonging to him, perhaps the most precious one he'd ever owned, was being taken from him. Cold tears, not of love but of cold, quiet fury, ran down his structured, pale cheeks, clouding his eyes, freezing his elegant nose with their icy rivulets of moisture, but, somehow, despite the swiftly-falling snow and his tear-clouded eyes, the boy managed to catch the last candle-like glimmer of light in the girl's enchanting dark eyes before a final gust of wind swept her fully away.

*

In the Slytherin dormitory dungeons of Hogwarts, a flushed young boy of about seventeen years woke with a start. Raising himself on shaking elbows, the boy reached up a pale, long, thin hand to his head and pushed the damp, dark locks from his eyes; if the hand hadn't been, in fact, a *hand*, one might have received the illusion of a long-legged white spider creeping brazenly into a flattened patch of rain-beaten weeds. Tom Riddle sighed shakily; his dream had seemed so real ... and that girl had been positively stunning! He could still remember all her characteristics very clearly: Her taste, her smell, but her eyes most of all, her captivating, flashing eyes burning with that carefully concealed fire. She was enchanting; he *had* to see her again.

Though his reminiscences were pleasant, such dreams were not the stuff of greatness ... or remembrance. With a yawn, Tom dragged himself wearily from his bed and, shivering in the damp cool of the dungeons, padded across the heavily-carpeted stone floor to a trunk containing his most prized and precious belongings. Flinging the trunk's lid open on rusted hinges, Tom pulled out a half-melted tallow candle, a brass candlestick holder, a heavily-embellished book of blank parchment, a paring knife, and an owl quill with a pot of black ink. Holding the items delicately in his elegant hands, Tom strode back to his bed onto which he promptly plopped, spilling the various possessions clasped in his hands onto the mint green wool sheets.

A distant cough sounded, echoing through the catacombs of the Slytherin dormitories. *Yet another reason not to live in the dungeons*, Tom thought as he rolled his eyes and concentrated on the task of shaving his quill into a point. Oh, but how Tom loved the dungeons. They had the closed-in comfort that towers and the open air withheld.

Sniffing greedily, Tom inhaled the sharp, clear scent of winter that permeated his room, conducted into the depths of the dungeons by a specially-made air hole connected and cleared (magically) to the roof of Hogwarts castle. Tom had been offered special quarters due to his status as Head Boy in the upper regions of Hogwarts, but he preferred the safe feel of his room in the dungeons to the open-air terraces of Hogwarts. The room reminded him of an armoire he'd once owned ... long ago, at the orphanage. Tom's face contorted in silent rage at the unwanted memory of the orphanage; he dropped the knife and quill, snatched up his wand and, in a clipped whisper, muttered, "*Accio* table."

Instantly, a heavy table zoomed across the room, making no sound at all as it skimmed several centimeters from the stone surface; Tom savagely plunked the brass candleholder down on the rich ash surface of the heavy table he'd just moved, a dark scowl marring his lovely face. Fiercely, Tom jammed the tallow into the candleholder and, pointing his wand at the unlit candle, mumbled, "*Incendio*." Immediately, the candle flame flared to life, and Tom found himself thinking once more of the flickering flame buried deep in the enigmatic, vision-girl's beautiful eyes.

As he stared dreamily...a position possessing sure embarrassment if he were to be found...at the stone ceiling of his room, Tom felt something moist creeping onto the knee of his pajamas. "Damn!" he yelped, leaping agilely from the bed like a graceful, long-legged antelope. The pitch-black ink from his overturned, insecurely-capped inkpot had begun to leak and soak into his pajamas like drops of dark blood. With another muttered curse, Tom pointed his wand at his knee: "*Scourgify*," he spat, and again, "*Scourgify*," as he pointed his yew wand at the creeping pool of darkness on the warm, woolen sheets. Sighing in exasperation, Tom grabbed the bottle of ink and set it beside the candle on the table before climbing back into bed. Grasping the quill, a rather commonplace feather in such elegant hands, Tom dipped the sharpened end into the bottle of ink and, opening his book, placed the ink-soaked tip to the parchment; it spread, shining and grasping, on the parchment before Tom, contemplating the point of this midnight writing, began his first sentence. "Last night, I dreamed of a temptress..."

Through Showers of Crystal

Chapter 2 of 4

Bellatrix and Tom Riddle--two of the most enigmatic characters in *Harry Potter*--have puzzled writers and readers alike since their equally horrifying introductions. Why did Bellatrix believe she was Lord Voldemort's most dedicated and favored follower? Why did the Dark Lord indulge a woman whom he could have squashed like an insignificant bug; why did he allow her to continue in her 'delusions,' if, indeed, they were delusions?

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Through Showers of Crystal

1962

An eerie, whistling wind whipped down icy Knockturn Alley, shrieking in torture as it was ensnared within the shadowy recesses of the begrimed shops lining the street. Dull lamplight flickered moodily onto the oozing cobbled street, illuminating little yet *just* showing the vague outlines of swift passers-by. Moving along spectrally, one could hear the retching, rasping coughs of various shoddy witches and wizards as they leaned, reeling drunk to ward away the bone-chilling cold, against sooty brick walls. The warm acrid breath of this tattered rabble froze as soon as it was delivered from their quivering mouths to the foggy street where it was captured and stilled by the vicious gusts of wind.

The cobblestone-paved alley seeped cold brackish water that combined with the sooty grime puffed out of several shop chimneys to form a frosty slush that proved extremely slippery for the hurried shoppers. This bleak winter's evening was *not* the day to be out and about, shopping for goods. Still, though, a myriad of customers clustered together, their combined warmth easing the cold, over barrels of frog's eyes and troll blood or solitarily haunted the alley, their cloaked figures strangely hazed by the constant winter mist falling softly from above. In this depressing atmosphere, two hooded figures...a tall man and a small child...strode swiftly through the dimly lit streets.

The taller figure, imperiously clicking down the alley in polished boots, clenched the mittened hand of the child in his own as several leering vagrants, who had been clustered around the feeble glow of a cracked and tatty wand, slouched towards the cloaked gentleman and child. The man's strong-jawed face grew sharper as he walked through the ragtag crowd, yet he did not slow his step. The throng, licking their chapped, wind-bitten chops, scrunched together, their shivering blue lips pulling back grotesquely to reveal cracked, yellow-toothed, hideous grins.

One of the younger witches let out a soft, insane giggle, and the tall man froze momentarily, a flash of fear, and then annoyance, creeping into his eyes. He glanced down quickly, barely moving his chiseled face, to assure himself of his daughter's safety. But the child did not seem frightened at all. As the creatures of the dank alley crept towards her, she simply turned her proud little nose up as though she'd smelled something awful. Her primness seemed to delight the crowd who thought such airs were pretentious and pathetic. They chuckled nastily, pressing closer to the wealthy pair before them. The unfortunate witch who'd cackled freakishly moments before appeared to be reaching forward to touch the little girl's ermine-lined cloak; as she approached the pair, she was quickly stopped by a sharp rap to her grasping claw from the man's ebony-tipped cane accompanied by the young girl's heavy-lidded cold stare.

A low murmur sprung from the multitude as the wheezing witch cawed and grasped her smarting hand to her thin chest. *This man injured one of our own. Kill. Hurt. Daughter...*...but the man had taken enough opposition from the rabble. Stopping mid-stride, he released his daughter's hand and placed his cane into her small grasp; she gripped the cane stylishly, pushing it forward to rest in a thirty-degree angle with her body. With a flourish, the man swept his hood off his head and beady eyed the crowd, his dark features and hawk-like nose examining all assembled. Each and every potential beggar and would-be pickpocket dropped back in cowed submission at the sight of the cloaked man's face: Everyone, poor or wealthy, pureblood or Muggle-born, knew Cygnus Black.

*

Dunno why he keeps comin' back; boy left years ago. Spooky face, that 'un has; makes me nervous, like.

Terry Burke, the shabby, elderly proprietor of Borgin and Burke's, warily raised his milky gaze to meet that of a man in his mid-thirties standing before him. The man's dark eyes smoldered quietly in his paper-white face as he anxiously awaited the shopkeeper's answer.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Riddle,"...*Used to call 'im 'Tom'...*...the shop owner simpered, practically groveling under the pale man's gaze, "no-uns brung in nothin' with an eagle on it. 'Tisn't a very good market these days; ruddy Ministry's clamped down tighter'n ever." Mr. Burke ended his speech with an apologetic grimace, then backed away slightly, gripping his dog-eared account book tighter as the knuckles of his grimy, callused hands whitened.

Upon hearing the shopkeeper's negative verdict, 'Mr. Riddle's' white face paled still further, and he clenched his patched and faded robes tightly with smooth, bleached hands. In his dark eyes sparked a red light, its glimmer throwing the dusty relics of the shop into still deeper solemnity. Quick as a flash, Tom thrust his shaking hand into his pocket and grasped his wand; lifting the instrument high above his head, Tom stared menacingly down at the terrified figure of Mr. Burke, though no words escaped his thin lips.

The shopkeeper's murky, pale blue eyes flew open in shock; mumbling incoherently, he inched along the rough-hewn wall behind the front desk, his canvas shirt snagging and ripping on a protruding nail. The wand brandished over his head exuded a sickly green glow, illuminating the quivering shop owner's pale, sweat-dotted brow.

Tom's entire body trembled, his still-silent fury contained completely in his blank face. Poor Burke knew instinctively as if he were a cat cornered by dogs that he would die in minutes. Trembling, he tried desperately to remember the words of the Catechism, hoping against hope that God would not desert him now. When not one line, not one truth or verse would enter his brain, Mr. Burke actually squeaked in terror. Tom continued to stare mutely down at the man, but suddenly, as if an entire wave of calm passed through Tom, he lowered his wand and, without a word, spun on his heel, crossing the dingy room in five lanky steps. The petrified proprietor crouched behind the front desk melted instantly, his bandy legs giving way as he slid to the floor, the expression on his face one of utmost horror and utter terror.

*

In the smoky fog of Knockturn Alley, the little girl gazed contemptuously around at the bizarre displays peeking through the filthy windows of the antiquity shops. In one particularly peculiar shop, a patched and bloody jack-in-the-box sprang erratically up and down, back and forth, desperately waving its little arms about. The expression on its faded, painted face was frightening to see ... the 'toy' seemed to be tortured by its constant movement, and yet it could not stop. A single black tear trickled eternally from its plus-sign eye. The clown jack-in-the-box was a pitiful sight, indeed, yet it was at this window display that the little girl stopped, her wide exotic eyes filled with an insatiable fascination, the deep light in them glittering, burning, scorching, as she stared at the tormented toy.

As the little girl pulled petulantly away from her father (who indulgently released her and watched her proudly from a distance) and scampered towards the gruesome display, a strong burst of Arctic, biting cold whipped down the alley. Just as the blast reached the girl and her father, throwing back the hoods of both, the water gutter on the roof above the window cracked, loosening the clogging silt within. Seconds later, as the girl knelt to the ground, crouching to protect her slight body from the freezing wind, the drainpipe broke, drenching the little girl in icy water. As she gave an aggrieved cry and clutched wildly at her dripping hood, desperately trying to force the soggy mass back onto her head to protect herself, the child was wrenched from the crackling, crystalline stream by the tall spidery figure of a lanky man.

The man, though he was showered in stabbing icicles, sprinted towards the stunned Cygnus Black with the quivering form of the child clasped in his arms. Once he'd reached the incredulous gentleman, Tom Riddle...for the lanky man was he...dropped the little girl unceremoniously to the ground, tipping her feet downward so she could stand. He then straightened and, with a quick nod to Black, pivoted quickly on his shabby heel and strode away leaving the proud pair staring open-mouthed after him. The little girl, shivering violently as gusty zephyrs rattled happily and maliciously through her wet clothing, gave a little squeak and turned to bury her face in the warmth of her father's cloak. Without one word, the man scooped his small daughter from the ground and, pressing her to his chest, wrapped his robe around her. Whimpering, the girl gazed after the retreating figure of the shabby but elegant man. *He's beautiful*, she thought, adoring her silent rescuer even as her father turned on his heel and clicked rapidly down the alley, heading for the Knockturn Alley entrance to Muggle London.

"It's all right, Bella," he whispered comfortingly to the little girl, "I've no idea who that was, but at least he had enough sense to leave right away. I don't know if he was a Mudblood or not, but there'll be no need of him ... especially around my favorite little girl."

Though Bellatrix nodded silently, acquiescing dutifully to her father's comment, inside she burned red-hot: Her father *never* ought to have said those horrid things against that wonderful, beautiful man. *He* didn't save her, the horrid old man. Yes, she was eleven, but she wasn't a child. There was nothing wrong with that man; in fact ... he was perfect.

Snowflake, Part One

Chapter 3 of 4

Bellatrix and Tom Riddle--two of the most enigmatic characters in *Harry Potter*--have puzzled writers and readers alike since their equally horrifying introductions. Why did Bellatrix believe she was Lord Voldemort's most dedicated and favored follower? Why did the Dark Lord indulge a woman whom he could have squashed like an insignificant bug; why did he allow her to continue in her 'delusions,' if, indeed, they were delusions?

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Author's Notes

Bellatrix's middle name, Aludra, is my own creation; this isn't a canon fact, so don't think you missed anything. Aludra is a star in the Canis Major constellation and means 'the maiden' or 'the virgin' in Arabic. I choose to go with the former interpretation in this story.

Canonically, Tom showed up at Hogwarts only one time after leaving: when he was applying for the job as the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor in 1957. However, I'm going to be radical and change things around.

What happened to him from 1957 to 1970? Nothing? I am going to infer that Tom came back to Hogwarts at some point in the 1960s...in this case, 1967...in order to scope out possible Death Eater candidates. As of right now, many of his followers are young: Bellatrix and Rodolphus are only sixteen, Lucius is thirteen, and Narcissa is only twelve.

Snowflake, Part One

1967

Slowly, delicately, a snowflake floated softly by a lighted window; its translucent arms, fractured and fissured beneath a thin coating of outer-layer ice, sparkled jewel-like in the yellow sheen thrown from the nearby behemoth building. The lone snowflake scudded closer to the building, bumping insistently against the paned glass as its quivering, fragile body strove to enter. All that existed for the snowflake was the allure of unknown worlds behind the glass pane, yet while it raged its silent battle against the windowpane, countless other restless ice-shapes flitted silently by in the deep blue winter's night, ignoring their companion's soundless struggle. But the snowflake, too, seemed ignorant of the serene passage of its fellows, for it neglected the frozen freedom and peace of the night sky for the mere possibility of beauty beyond the glass.

*

"Bloody bastard!" Bellatrix Aludra Black snarled vehemently as she swept angrily up a flight of slippery stone steps leading to the upper, warmer corridors of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. The sharp clap of her Oxfords echoed the staccato beat of her incensed heart as her agitation grew. "Bloody, bloody *wretch!*"

"Now, now," remarked a passing ghost reprovingly as it floated effortlessly down the flight of steps, its nose buried in a transparent book. "Nice girls don't talk that way."

"I am *not* a nice girl," Bellatrix spat, gritting her teeth in anger as she rushed headlong past the apparition, leaving the dark Slytherin common room far behind her.

A scowl on her elegantly-boned face, Bellatrix fiercely ripped off the dark green cardigan she was wearing. An expression of utter revulsion quickly replaced the sneer on her thin lips as she glanced disdainfully down at the garment. *He* had touched it. Holding the unfortunate jumper at arm's length, she walked quickly to a small window, and, laying it on the sill, dug into the belted wand-sheath encircling her trim waist.

Peevishly, Bellatrix cursed the impracticality of wearing skirts. It was nearly *impossible* during the school week for a girl to wear anything other than an A-line skirt under her black robes. If any one of the professors caught a girl wearing trousers, she was assigned detention.

The women professors were the worst about assigning detention ... especially that skag, McGonagall. Bellatrix snorted at the thought of the strict, tartan-wearing professor. *She only hates to see girls wearing trousers because she can't.*

Secretly, Bellatrix *knew* that McGonagall was a man; no real woman could live that long without sex and McGonagall was quite possibly the most standoffish "woman" who'd ever lived.

A-line skirts, damn them to Hell, didn't have pockets, so the girls...and *only* the girls...had to wear scabbards at their waists. Earlier, Bellatrix had been dressed in her school robes, which, mercifully, had one small pocket sewn into the lining, but it was after-hours and robes could get heavy. Besides, wearing shapeless black robes obscured her figure, and Bellatrix was *proud* of her womanly figure. Of course, it was that same figure that had encouraged *his* advances in the first place.

Wrinkling her nose at the thought of *him*, Bellatrix pulled her wand from its scabbard. Rubbing her long, thin fingers possessively up the polished walnut wand's length, a sadistic smile twisted Bellatrix's lips at the thought of punishing *him*. Surely no human alive could be more deserving of a thoroughly nasty, stern rebuke. But as she lounged by the window imagining, a chill breeze blew through the cracks lining the glass pane and shattered her fantasy. Teeth chattering, she held her wand to the window. "Alohomora!" she whispered, as, with a click, the ancient window mechanism yielded to her ministrations.

Deftly flicking her slim wrist, Bellatrix wrenched the archaic window up, letting in a burst of freezing wind. Shivering violently in the cold, she hugged her arms to her cotton-

covered chest and carefully took a deep breath, letting the frigid air pass her blue lips and inflate her lungs with pure, unadulterated winter oxygen. Slowly, she let the breath out, watching as the moisture hung heavily in the night air before being whisked away by a wandering wisp of winter wind. Her wand clenched safely in one hand, Bellatrix carefully poked her head out the window and looked down, taking care to avoid the limp cardigan lying on the sill.

The winter night was crisp and clear, and the south side of Hogwarts commanded an excellent view of the starry night sky reflected in the black lake below. After the initial blast of wind, a very light breeze gently lifted Bellatrix's hair as, squinting her eyes against the cold, she stared down at the glassy waters of the lake.

Pleased with herself for finding such an advantageous spot, Bellatrix withdrew her head and contemptuously poked her wand into the folds of the green cardigan. Scowling, she lifted the article of clothing from the windowsill and, stretching her arm out the window, flipped the sweater off the wand.

Down, down, down it fell, flipping and twisting slowly 'til it landed lightly on the mirroring lake; it floated for a moment, until, saturated with icy water, it was sucked under the smooth surface, its presence shown only by a ring of crystalline ripples, which fanned once and then were no more.

Bellatrix gazed down at the rippling lake, her arms clenched tightly in the cotton broadcloth shirt she wore, as the offending jumper sank from view. When she was sure that the cardigan was forever gone, Bellatrix stepped away from the window and leaned against the stone wall, wishing eternal damnation on the boy who was her constant source of aggravation and discomfort, Rodolphus Lestrage.

Ooh, you idiot, she fumed silently. You think, just because you have my father's blessing, that I'll fall at your feet. Have you got a lot to learn...

*

Bellatrix lay curled on one of the green sofas in the Slytherin common room, her nose buried in *The Compendium of Torture (Fully Illustrated)* by Vordam Clinxley. She ignored the other Slytherin students, many of whom were engrossed in their homework, while others played quiet games of wizard chess. Off in one corner, several older students were harassing a frightened first year, demanding candy or something, but Bellatrix paid them no mind; it was the normal hazing ritual that every new Slytherin went through at some time during his or her first year. Usually, Bellatrix was with them, but she wasn't in the mood tonight. Besides, Rodolphus Lestrage was with them, and she wasn't in the mood for him tonight, either.

Turning a leaf of yellowed parchment over, Bellatrix's dark eyes lit up in fascination: On the page before her was a sketch of an H-shaped structure with a diagonal blade in its center. The picture bore a caption: "Invented by the French wizard, Dr. Joseph-Ignace Guillotin, and sanctioned by the supporters and instigators of the French Revolution."

Murmuring a little sigh of interest, Bellatrix flipped the page, scrunching down further into the sofa in order to be more comfortable. However, as she did, a shadow fell across the sheet of parchment. Another sigh...this one of aggravation...escaped her lips as she shut the book with a snap and jerked her eyes upward to meet his.

"What are you reading?" he purred, quite clearly thinking that the mere *sound* of his voice was enough to send Bellatrix into an auditory-induced orgasm.

"It's none of your business, Lestrage," Bellatrix snapped, her dark eyes dilating in annoyance. All right, so he was hot and occasionally Bellatrix really *did* want to fuck him, but most of the time, all she wanted was for him to mysteriously disappear. There were other blokes, after all.

With a small laugh, Rodolphus flipped his dark hair out of his eyes and sat down on the armrest of her sofa. "Oh, I suppose not, love," he said, reaching forward to finger a strand of Bellatrix's dark hair, "unless you and I want to go and conduct some of our own 'business'."

In blistering derision, Bellatrix laughed shortly and wrenched her head away from the boy next to her. "You're pathetic," she sneered.

Rodolphus merely stared at her, his fingers suspended in the air, a shiny strand of dark hair caught between them. Cocking an arched eyebrow at him, Bellatrix opened her book again and proceeded to peruse a purportedly "complete" list of "Madame la Guillotine's" victims. Unfortunately, this indifference was not enough to deter her tormentor.

"Oh, come on, Bella," Rodolphus whined, reaching forward to grasp her by the chin, forcing her to look at him. "Isn't sixteen *years* long enough for a truce?" He grinned disarmingly, dimples flashing briefly in his pale cheeks.

Closing her eyes, Bellatrix took a deep breath. "Get ... your *filthy* hands ... off my face!" she hissed. Snapping *The Compendium of Torture (Fully Illustrated)* firmly shut, Bellatrix reached up and, pushing Rodolphus's hand roughly away, sprang up from her nest on the couch.

A few of the other students in the room glanced at the pair briefly with vaguely curious expressions on their faces, but most of them had seen the two quibble often enough to know this was a regular occurrence. Only two people in the common room seemed truly interested. Lucius Malfoy, a third year, sitting with Bellatrix's younger sister, Narcissa, was watching the argument with a small grin dancing across his chiseled mouth. 'It's obviously foreplay,' his expression seemed to say. And with a chuckle, he turned back to the textbook he was gallantly sharing with Narcissa.

Narcissa, though, was not looking at the textbook; she was watching her older sister and Rodolphus with a worried expression in her large, pale blue eyes.

Bellatrix was practically *promised* to Rodolphus Lestrage. Seeing her children guaranteed safe and advantageous marriages was one of Narcissa's mother's pet interests, and she wouldn't take kindly to her eldest daughter's blatant disregard of propriety where Rodolphus Lestrage was concerned.

Narcissa bit her lip as Bellatrix glared angrily at Rodolphus. He was a hunk according to Narcissa, although she would never tell this to anyone, and her sister could do much worse. She would have to talk to Bellatrix later on that night, Narcissa thought, as she turned back to Lucius, smiling daintily.

Bellatrix, however, was aware of neither Malfoy's nor her sister's interest in her quarrel: her eyes were locked on Rodolphus's teasing, dancing dark ones, daring him to say *one* more thing to set her off. She didn't have to wait long.

"I love it when you're mad at me," he purred, reaching out with well-groomed hands to suggestively stroke Bellatrix's cardigan-clad shoulders.

"Mad? *MAD!*" A heated wash of scarlet flooded her vision, Bellatrix's hand snapped out and slapped Rodolphus across the cheek, leaving a stinging, sanguine splotch marring the ivory perfection. "You bastard," she growled, as she swept by him and stormed out the common room door. Rodolphus, hand pressed to his smarting face, merely stared after her, the warmth in his dancing eyes hardening to black frigidity.

Slowly, he turned to glare menacingly toward the small table where Narcissa and Lucius sat, their eyes wide as saucers. Narcissa's dismayed blue eyes met Rodolphus's angry ones, and without a word, she sprang out of her chair and, darting to the door, slipped quietly by the stern, rigid form of Rodolphus and into the cold of the corridor, her thin, porcelain-skinned arms hugged tightly to her cloth-covered chest.

*

"I don't know why you have come back, Tom." Dumbledore stared gravely over the tops of his thin, crescent moon-shaped glasses at the gaunt...almost to the point of emaciation...pale man before him. His graceful, tapered hand, resting lightly on a stack of parchment on his desk, twitched involuntarily.

The man standing in front of him kept his eyes focused on the aged hand instead of on Professor Dumbledore's eyes. "Affection, perhaps, Dumbledore? Or wasn't that what you always wanted me to possess?"

Sighing, Dumbledore closed his eyes briefly before answering. "It wasn't about me, Tom. It was about *you*." His own eyes zoned down to his hand, and an impatient

expression flitted briefly across Dumbledore's face. Without a word, he sat down in the plush, burgundy chair behind his desk and folded his hands in his lap, leaving Tom staring at the pile of parchment. "Tom. Look at me."

Raising his eyes to the Headmaster's placid, pleasant face, Tom did so. Beneath the dead, black darkness of his eyes, tiny, glittering, red lights danced furiously as Tom folded his bony hands behind his back, assuming a mocking position of youthful diligence.

"There is no rule, Tom" the Headmaster began slowly, as if he was choosing his words very, very carefully, indeed, "that says you cannot be here, but I am Headmaster and, as such, can choose to run my school as I think best."

Tom Riddle sucked in his cheeks soundlessly and bit the tender flesh on the inside of them to keep from cursing the Headmaster where he sat. 'What a fool,' his red-tinged eyes shouted, although he himself said nothing.

"Do you know what I am saying, Tom?" Dumbledore asked; then, without waiting for an answer, continued. "I'm asking you to leave, Tom. Now. There is no reason for you to be here." With that, Dumbledore placed his ancient, blue-veined hands on the arms of his chair, sat up straight and tall, and, with a nod of his dignified head, gestured toward the door.

Eyes sparking, Tom spun around and, with shoulders stiff under the shabby fabric of his dark coat, stalked toward the door. Just as he was opening it, however, a soft voice behind him made him pause.

"Tom," Dumbledore murmured, his voice obscured as though he had placed his hand before his mouth, as though he had not intended to speak the words that he was going to. "I'm glad you came."

Without turning around, without answering, Tom yanked the door fully open and, grabbing his wand from the spelled, wand-holding bay beside the password-protected entrance to Dumbledore's office, clattered angrily down the curving stone staircase. The next time he met that useless old man, he swore to himself, he would kill him.

*

Leaning against the cold stone wall, Bellatrix vigorously rubbed her arms, somewhat regretting her decision to rid herself of the contaminated cardigan. *Well, no matter*, she decided fiercely, *I have more jumpers in my room* Which was all very well and good, but to get to those jumpers, Bellatrix would have to go through the common room ... and she wasn't going anywhere near the common room while Rodolphus was there.

Bellatrix was no coward, but she was ...*slightly* intimidated by her father, and he was completely, pompously satisfied with the impending marriage negotiations between the Black and LeStrange families. Oh, yes, Bellatrix knew about her parents' matchmaking schemes; she simply chose to ignore them. But at this moment, even she would not be able to guarantee Rodolphus's safety should he treat her as he had earlier that evening. Not that she hadn't enjoyed it, a very, *very* little. At this begrudging concession, Bellatrix felt a twinge in her groin and mentally stomped at the undeniably gorgeous image of Rodolphus conjured up by her lustful mind.

Angrily, she tried to concentrate instead on the mocking expression in Rodolphus's dark eyes, the expression that always drove her *insane*, but instead of causing her lecherous mind to abate, the thought of Rodolphus's eyes gave Bellatrix a prick of intense libido. Oh, God, it was no use!

Grimacing, Bellatrix plopped down on the icy stone floor of the corridor and concentrated fiercely on the freezing cold flagstones beneath her. *Okay*, she thought, as her body temperature cooled by aching degrees, *that's better*.

However, just then, she heard the click of men's shoes on the stone hallway and her desire came flooding back with a vengeance. Just *trust* Rodolphus to come searching for her after she'd made it clear she didn't want anything to do with him. *Merlin help the bastard if he comes around that corner*, she mused, clenching the material of her skirt in one clammy palm while tightly grasping her wand in the other.

But as the footsteps grew louder, came closer, it became quite evident that it wasn't Rodolphus at all. Rodolphus LeStrange, despite his many and varied faults, *did* know how to dress properly and was always attired in elegant and, more importantly, expensive clothing. If he hadn't been, he would have brought shame to his wealthy, snooty family. This approaching male, on the other hand, did *not* know how to dress properly. Bellatrix, having grown up with a fashion-forward mother, could tell almost instantly that his heel, left or right, it didn't matter, was worn with use.

Great, she thought petulantly, *another charity-case, Muggle-born fool come to steal my hiding spot*. With this impression firmly in mind, she rose swiftly to her feet and brandished her walnut wand, a dangerous sneer flitting across her thin lips. Harassing someone might be *just* the balm she needed after Rodolphus's... *Oh, fuck him!* she thought as her body gave another greedy twinge.

Just then, the shabbily-shoed man rounded the corner in the corridor and Bellatrix's wand-clutching arm fell slowly to her side, for, there before her, was the man who had rescued her five years before in Knockturn Alley, albeit several years older and much thinner. But, God, just as gorgeous as he was five years ago.

Forget Rodolphus, Bellatrix's lust-crazed mind crowed as her stomach turned nervous flip-flops of apprehensive delight, *this man is so much better*.

The man, it seemed, recognized Bellatrix, too, for he froze at the sight of her, and simply stared, the dark smudges under his weary eyes even blacker in the moonlit corridor. With chilling and familiar ease, he held Bellatrix's wide eyes with his own black hollows as, stepping forward, he brought his wand up. "*Lumos!*" he hissed, sibilantly drawing out the 's' at the end of the incantation.

A bright light flashed before Bellatrix's eyes and her head snapped back reflexively. But as quickly as the spell was uttered, she heard a muttered, "*Nox!*" and her world returned to the dimly-lit glow of moonlight, although with a certain degree of brightly flashing residue inhabiting it.

Gasping, Bellatrix ducked her head and rubbed her eyes hard, taking great care to avoid poking out her eye with her wand. But she had not completely regained her vision when a cold-as-marble hand, colder, even, than the wintry night outdoors, grasped her by the chin and forced her to look up. Although her eyes were watering profusely, she said not a word, for her gaze was transfixed by the dark, slightly serpentine eyes of the man standing before her.

He's beautiful, her dazed mind sighed, sharing her lusty body's obvious admiration for the tortured-looking man before her, but ... to be honest, her chin was starting to ache from the harsh grip the man's skeletal fingers had on it. Pulling back, Bellatrix tried to break free from his iron grip, but she had no luck. "Who are you?" she finally gasped, after giving up from sheer exhaustion. Surely there would be red finger marks on her face in the morning.

"I am He," he murmured, his voice slightly amazed, yet at the same time completely assured as, stepping forward, he covered Bellatrix's thin mouth with his own.

At first, Bellatrix was far too surprised to react, but within moments, all of her unfulfilled lust came crashing over her body like a wave and she was tangling her fingers in the jet black locks of the man pressed up against her, was opening her mouth wider in order to provide better access for his insistent tongue, was throwing her head back as he then bit his way down her neck. Bellatrix could hear nothing but the thumping of her heart in her ears as every fantasy she had ever had about this very man was torn away and replaced by a more intense and more wonderful reality.

But as quickly as her passion erupted in a blazing red fire of whorls and licking flames, the man pulled back swiftly and stared over Bellatrix's shoulder. "Who is that?" he demanded, the dispassion in his voice freezing Bellatrix's heart within her chest even as she obediently turned to discover their voyeur.

Oh, no, Bellatrix thought as her frozen heart skipped a beat and then came pounding back with full-force. For there, looking at her with wide, astonished eyes, was her little sister, Narcissa.

"Um..." Bellatrix began, but she was cut off as the man pushed her unceremoniously out of the way, strode rigidly past her little sister who followed him with her wide eyes, and clicked unevenly down the hall, flexing his white hands stiffly. The two sisters, silent as the drifting snow beyond the castle walls, watched as his outline faded from view in the dim corridor.

Finally, Narcissa turned back to her older sister, who had replaced her shock at Narcissa's sudden appearance with a sullen, rebellious expression, and said with a tremor in her high-pitched voice, "Bella, who was that man?" Then she did something that she had not done in years, something that she never did unless she was absolutely terrified or bemused ... or a little bit of both. Narcissa, blue eyes still wide in her elven face, raised her thumb to her mouth and began sucking on it.

Frowning, Bellatrix sprang forward and yanked her sister's thumb from her mouth. "God! How old *are* you?" she demanded as Narcissa's blue eyes flooded with tears. Rolling her eyes, Bellatrix tugged the little girl to her and awkwardly patted her sister's head. "Look, don't sweat it," she said, gritting her teeth as Narcissa buried her damp, salty face in her older sister's cotton shirt, "he's just a man."

Sniffing snottily, Narcissa looked up, lower lip trembling. "I know," she said, "but we don't know him."

Bellatrix laughed shortly...more of a bark than a laugh...and pushed her sister away from her, holding Narcissa at goose-fleshed arm's length. "And if we *did* know him, it would be cool?"

"No," Narcissa whispered, clearly amazed at her own daring, "because he's old enough to be our dad."

"He is *not*!" Bellatrix snapped. Narcissa simply stared back at her older sister, an inscrutable expression settling over her small, pointed face. Bellatrix bit her lip and shivered as a winter zephyr swept madly down the hallway, squirming wickedly through her thin clothes. Her sister never fought back, and, God, it was so annoying! For the one-thousandth time, Bellatrix wished that her sister possessed more backbone, but the little girl was determined to be completely true to her family's decisions and beliefs.

Calling her sister's silent bluff, Bellatrix continued. "*You*, I suppose, would rather I pay attention to that idiot, Rodolphus, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," replied Narcissa, and as Bellatrix turned away with a snort of disgust, reached out to grab her sister's arm with a tiny, translucent hand. "That's why I'm out here, Bella. You are going to make mum and dad *very* angry if you're not nice to Rodolphus. He's a nice bloke, Bella, and whether you like it or not, you're going to marry him."

"Marry?" Bellatrix asked incredulously and, at Narcissa's affirmative nod, broke into peals of mirthless laughter. When Narcissa nervously tried to shush her, Bellatrix only shrieked louder; none of the prefects ever roamed these halls anyway; the Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, and Hufflepuff prefects were too scared and the Slytherin ones didn't care what their Slytherin contemporaries did after-hours. "Do you *really* think that marriage is what it's all about?" she demanded, once she had caused Narcissa sufficient discomfort.

Narcissa nodded quickly and Bellatrix's thin mouth twisted into a bitter smile. "Well, let me tell you something, sister," she hissed, leaning down to the girl before her and glaring angrily at her, "it's not. There are *other* things in life besides a husband, children, and a family. Why don't you figure that out and grow up." With that, Bellatrix pushed past her sister in disgust, heading toward the Slytherin common room, leaving the pale, blonde-haired twelve-year-old biting her pale pink lips in the chill of the moonlit hallway as, outside, the lonely call of a returning post owl, pierced the winter night.

January: Love Thy Neighbor

Chapter 4 of 4

Bellatrix and Tom Riddle—two of the most enigmatic characters in *Harry Potter*—have puzzled writers and readers alike since their equally horrifying introductions. Why does Bellatrix believe she was Lord Voldemort's favorite follower? Why did the Dark Lord indulge this woman, who he could have squashed like an insignificant bug, and allow her to continue in her 'delusions,' if, indeed, they were delusions?

I believe that this is not simply coincidence. Why should the most feared dark wizard of all time cater to a pawn? There must have been prior connections between the two to create this bond. In "Black as Snow," we glimpse a snippet of Tom Riddle's life at Hogwarts, his (hypothetical) introduction to Bellatrix, and, afterwards, the special bond the witch and wizard shared ... then, and now.

Created for MNFF's Ravenclaw Christmas Exchange, 2006.

Author's Notes

Thank you to notsosaintly for her modly help. =)

THIS IS NOT A JOKE: If you don't like sex scenes, don't read this chapter. It's not explicit, but ... nevertheless. There. You have been warned. *grins* Oh, also, before I forget, this chapter also contains the usual smattering of "strong language." I don't talk like this (usually), but I'm writing like this for the sake of my characters. Those who are cruel or young with plenty of bravado cuss; those who aren't, don't, for the most part.

And, credit where credit is due: The song "Witches, Vamps & Slags" by Circe is quite obviously (I think) a parody of "Gypsies, Tramps & Thieves" by Cher. And, um, the stanza that I parodied is as follows:

"Gypsies, tramps, and thieves

We'd hear it from the people of the town.

They'd call us gypsies, tramps, and thieves,

But every night all the men would come around

And lay their money down."

January: Love Thy Neighbor

The light bulb was swinging again...back and forth, swaying back and forth...and Mamie Sparks looked up from her knitting in annoyance. Her sinking features, already grooved and sliding south, pulled themselves into a gargoyle-like scowl. "That slattern," she grumbled gravelly, reaching a shaky hand over the arm of her chair to grasp the broom lying on the matted, carpeted floor. Unsteadily, Mamie struggled to her slippered feet and shuffled into the quavering circle of light thrown off by the lone light bulb. Cocking a grizzled, salt-and-pepper eyebrow up toward the ceiling, she hoisted the broom off the floor...

Mamie hated her next-floor neighbor: the young woman was cold and dangerously pretty with too nice a wardrobe to live in Carnebie Flats and too unfriendly in demeanor to be a neighbor of any sort at all. Never a pretty woman herself, Mamie inherently distrusted those females who happened to be blessed with physical beauty; surely no good ever came of someone who looked like *that*. Mamie did not know her next-floor neighbor's name, but she had...upon the woman's arrival to the Flats...hacked and coughed her way up to the next floor, eager to catch a glimpse of the new tenant. It wasn't every day that someone new moved into the Flats. In fact, in the twenty-some odd years that Mamie had lived in the rundown area close to Camden Town in which Carnebie Flats was situated, no one at *all* had moved in. Of course, the building had *lost* occupants...there was that skeleton of a girl with a heroin addiction, and that boy poet who slit his wrists...but, overall, there was a lamentable lack of activity ... and Mamie thrived on gossip and scandals.

Of course, *she* would have adamantly protested otherwise, declaring herself a good woman who knew how to mind her own business, thank you very much. But, to be entirely truthful, Mamie had a deplorably nosy character. And, so, it was because of...or, rather, the fault of...her overly inquisitive mind that Mamie found herself on the fourth floor of the Flats, her knobby, arthritic hands clutching the stringy lengths of her upper arms as she leered at the fine physique of the moving men. Naturally, not one of those splendid specimens of masculinity deigned to glance at her, but Mamie more than made up for the lack of attention as her hooded, green eyes swept lasciviously over tight, toned buttocks, broad chests, and strong chins.

In and out of apartment number four-forty-two, back and forth to the erstwhile lift, the movers scurried, lugging huge, leather-bound trunks, an ornate, black walnut, queen-sized bed frame (Mamie, uneducated wretch that she was, fancied the priceless piece merely painted wood and nearly drooled in smirking, supercilious mirth), an unwieldy feather mattress, and a few other domestic necessities. Besides the bed and trunks, however, apartment four-forty-two appeared to be facing a fairly cold, stark future as far as apartments go. Why, even Mamie had more furniture in her apartment and, God knows, *she* was poor enough. Checks from the government hardly sufficed to pay for Mamie's rampant cigarette addiction not to mention her food and utility expenses.

Whay-el, now, Mizz Sparks, Mamie chortled to herself, absently clawing the dirty, pink cardigan closer to her bowed, shriveled self, *this new 'un's a bloody beggar. Yah're pract'ly a duchy compared to the loikes of 'em whot's movin' in*.

Wheezing in barely suppressed mirth, Mamie turned to shuffle back down the flight of dimly-lit stairs...it was rarely worth the trouble of waiting for the lift, which was usually as slow as Christmas and nearly as popular as that particular holiday with the residents of the eight-story high Carnebie Flats, so Mamie trudged the stairs instead...but as she did, a flicker of dark movement from the direction of the tetchy lift caught in the corner of her eye and she turned back in curiosity.

Mamie's first impression was of a spider, elegant, long-legged, and venomously dangerous, and chills skittered up and down her spine. Her second was that the new occupant's furniture didn't really matter. Her third was of burning jealousy.

The new tenant was not only glamorous, she was also followed doggedly by the most beautiful man that Mamie had ever seen. He was tall, at least nine centimeters taller than the woman who was no cowering pixie, and he had the half-starved look of a male model. Dressed to the nines with long, shaggy dark hair and razor-sharp cheekbones, the man carried himself with a grace clearly born, not acquired. His lips were full, sultry, forming the kind of mouth Mamie only dreamed of ... had only ever dreamed of. No one that perfect had ever looked at Mamie, let alone actually kiss her. And he was trailing after the beautiful, terrifying woman like a puppy with an expression of intense misery but also a disgustingly ingratiated look on his godlike face.

As the regal pair strode swiftly by her without so much as a glance, Mamie felt the blood in her veins boil with hot envy. It *really* was unfair that anyone in the world could look so marvelous and be so unconcerned with anyone but him- or herself. The woman...tall, thin, completely smothered in black cashmere...had stopped in her doorway to pay the movers, and the man merely stood next to her...well, slightly behind her...his dark eyes locked on her lily-white face.

Satisfactorily compensated, the moving men...who had, poor blokes, lost Mamie's admiration and attention...departed in the lift, each dreaming his own, separate dream as he clasped his fee: a date with a pretty girl at the local pub; the prospect of big winnings at the horse races (he'd heard that Snapshot was a good bet); perhaps a doobie if he had enough money ... It had been far too long since the last.

But Mamie was unconcerned with the innermost thoughts of the movers, for her gaze was drawn like a magnet to the young pair standing in the doorway of apartment four-forty-two. The woman had turned 'round and was stroking the young man's sunken cheek possessively. Her long red fingernails left slight scratches on the pale valley, but the man didn't seem to mind as he only licked his lips furtively before darting down to capture the woman's thin lips with his own full mouth. Laughing softly, the woman pulled quickly back and shook her small, well-shaped head scornfully. With a commanding gesture of her gloved hand, she directed the man into her apartment and turned to follow him. Then, as the door creaked shut behind her, she glanced over her shoulder and her dark brown eyes glared menacingly into Mamie's narrowed green ones with such an expression of disgust and contempt, Mamie felt her claw-like hands aching to attach themselves to that thin, swan-like neck and just squeeze until the exotic brown eyes bugged painfully from the sockets.

Fury, bright, white fury as thick as winter snow flooded Mamie's gaze, and then the woman was gone, and Mamie was staring at a door with a brass plate on it: four-forty-two. Her new neighbors.

*

Mamie rarely saw the dark woman and man after that first "meeting," but she heard them often enough. They had sex nearly every day. Sometimes more than once in a day, which Mamie found utterly disgraceful ... And it was loud. There was next-to-no insulation in Carnebie Flats, so one heard everything in one's neighbor's rooms: quarrels, beatings, vocal performances in the shower, which were really awful. At first, Mamie had turned up her television to drown out the sound of the couple's lovemaking; it simply infuriated her to know that that gorgeous man was fucking that bitch, or was it the other way around? However, the inopportune visit of a rat and its nasty, sharp, yellow teeth chewing through Mamie's television cord soon eliminated her only means of covering up the moaning, and the screaming, and the squeaking of the damned bedsprings. So, she invested in a broom, and took to banging on the ceiling in hopes of eliciting some sort of response. The first time she used her weapon, there was a pause in the groaning and the squeaking, and then it started up again; the second time, there was no pause in the action, but Mamie lived in constant, delusional hope that one day, her efforts might, in fact, pay off. And, so, as she hoisted the broom from the floor and glared angrily up at the water-stained ceiling, her thoughts ran wishfully, crazily thus: *Mai-be it'll be to-dai. Mai-be, some'ow, she'll act'chly die to-dai.*

*

"Oh, my God, YES! Oh, more... Right *there*, yeah. More, more, MORE, GODDAMMIT! Oh, fuck, yes!" Crying out in ecstasy, Bellatrix flung two sweaty palms convulsively across the heaving back of the man lying atop her slight form, digging her sharp, cat-like nails into him. She clung to his roiling form, her teeth embedded firmly into the rippled muscle of his shoulder, her legs clamped vice-like about her lover's slim waist, her eyes squeezed tight shut as deep tremors rocked through her body again and again.

"Bella... Oh, baby..." the man groaned, pounding, pounding as the bedsprings squealed angrily and the headboard thumped insistently against the wall. Luckily the next-door neighbors were an ancient, quite deaf couple who had, collectively, two legs in the grave, and a nymphomaniac who watched porn when Bellatrix and Rodolphus were not making love and listened eagerly at the wall when they were. Letting out a truly porn star-worthy moan, Rodolphus pulled Bellatrix's body flush against him as he found his own release.

As the mind-blowing high of her orgasm subsided, Bellatrix sank down into the bed, her face losing its ecstatic rigidity, her legs relaxing and slowly falling to the soft, feather mattress where sheets and quilts lay wet, tangled into ropes of fabric. The only sound in the room was the heavy breathing of Bellatrix and Rodolphus as their

heartbeats quietly thumped into a less frenzied rhythm. In the chill January air outside, sleet frosted the dimly lit street and pattered insistently against the grimy windowpanes of Carnebie Flats, clearly seeking to enter the sex-scented atmosphere of Bellatrix's bedroom and dispel the steam.

Rodolphus, his perfectly chiseled mouth widening in an arrogant, self-absorbed smile, leaned down to capture Bellatrix's thin mouth with his own, and she did not resist, pressing herself into him as their tongues dove and swirled around each other in a sensual, unhurried dance. Soon, though, she pulled back, licking her lips as she smirked into Rodolphus's face with feline guile. "Fancy another fuck?" she asked, snaking a hand down to grab Rodolphus's arse suggestively. But Rodolphus merely raised his eyebrows and stared stupidly at Bellatrix, utter exhaustion in every shadow of his sculpted face. In brutal retaliation, Bellatrix pinched him fiercely, her lips pursing in sudden anger. Grunting in surprise and shock, Rodolphus flinched, his own mouth twisting in pain as her filed nails pierced the sensitive skin of his bottom. "No?" she demanded, and pushed him roughly off of her, turning instead to the bedside table near her where Rodolphus's long apple-wood wand lay, conveniently placed for pre-coitus rituals.

"*Tergeo*," she muttered, angling the wand towards her nether regions and yawning unconcernedly as the spell quickly cleaned her up. Still yawning in a rather painful, jaw-cracking manner, Bellatrix rolled back onto her side to replace the wand, but was stopped by a muffled exclamation and the tentative touch of Rodolphus's smooth hand against her bony back. Smiling acidly, Bellatrix rolled in the opposite direction, bringing herself face to face with her lover. "Say something?" she asked sweetly...too sweetly.

Swallowing, Rodolphus tried unsuccessfully to mask the quick flash of fear in his eyes. Bellatrix, he knew, was a tiger in bed and when she wasn't satisfied...as she so often was not much to his embarrassment...anything he said could set her off. It was, for him, a dangerous and, yes, exciting game, but sometimes he wished that his girlfriend (after all, she was his girlfriend, wasn't she?) wasn't so ... vicious. "I, uh, I need to ... well, to clean up, too," he said, clearing his throat manfully in an effort to regain his composure.

Bellatrix glanced primly, dismissively down at the wand in her hand and, making a small mew of unconcern, made as if to turn back towards the table eliciting another protest from Rodolphus. Smiling her first true smile of the early January morning, Bellatrix flipped back over and gave the wand to Rodolphus, her fingernails grazing his delicate hands as she did. "Of course you do, darling," she purred, reaching up to stroke his high cheekbone as her cruel, humored eyes met his serious, defensive ones. "I like you so much, you know," she jibed. Shrugging in ill-contained mirth, Bellatrix sat up and swung her thin legs over the edge of the bed.

Bellatrix stretched her arms high over her head, moaning as her outstanding vertebrae aligned themselves to a cacophony of pops and cracks. For a moment, she simply sat on the edge of the bed, hands clasped between her bony legs, chewing on her lower lip and musing. Rodolphus, bless his stupid, little soul, was not good for much more than mind-blowing sex. Bellatrix sighed and smirked in satisfaction. Hmm... Her own little boy-toy...

It had been embarrassingly easy to convince Rodolphus of the benefits of having an open "relationship." He had just been so desperate to fuck her that he had jumped when she suggested that very thing during their seventh year. Bellatrix had never been fond of him, but he sure beat a dildo when it came to satisfying sex. Yawning again,...God, where was the coffee when she needed it?...Bellatrix flicked on the radio (upon which Circe, apparently the "radio choice" of early 1971 not to mention late 1970, was soulfully belting out "Witches, Vamps & Slags") before reaching down to the poorly carpeted floor and snagging the sleeve of one of her thin acrylic cashmeres. She shrugged one thin arm into the jumper as she stood, crimson-painted toenails glittering devilishly in the lowest, darkest recesses of her room, then froze suddenly as Rodolphus spoke, his words at the same time an accusation and a supposition.

"I thought you hated me."

Turning back to the bed, Bellatrix looked at the beautiful, sullen face of her lover, his dark eyes underlined with smudges of gray standing out in his pale face, a faint shadow on his jaw where five o'clock shadow was beginning to sprout. Smiling indulgently as one does to a favorite, though mistaken, child, she shook her head disparagingly. "I *do* hate you," she said simply. With that, she yanked her jumper over her head, smoothing the material down over her flat, barely-there breasts, and padded out of the bedroom, leaving a bewildered Rodolphus staring after her.

"Witches, vamps, and slags. We'd hear it from the Muggles of the land. They'd call us witches, vamps, and slags, yet for a very short time they'd us stand, for the fortunes in their hands." Bellatrix sang quietly to herself as she padded barefoot into the drab kitchenette that was rarely used except to make coffee.

Laughing quietly as the song played on in the background, she reached for the small carton of cigarettes that lay on the Formica counter-top. Lazily, she pulled one from the pack, poked it between her thin lips, and raised her wand. "*Incendia*," she mumbled incoherently as the fag dangled precariously from her mouth. With a minuscule sizzle and a brief puff of burned paper ash, the fag flared to life and Bellatrix took a deep drag, closing her eyes in bliss as the smoke filled her thin chest cavity. God, it felt good to smoke. Besides sex, smoking was one of life's finer pleasures, and Bellatrix indulged whenever she had the chance. Food, furniture, all that could wait, but smoking... Bellatrix laughed softly and took another lung-filling draw, holding her breath to feel the smoke swirling dizzily, pleasantly, magically inside of her before releasing it into the room. Oh, this whole, unsatisfactory arrangement was only temporary, anyway, to everyone's satisfaction, she was sure.

Her parents, for instance, hated the way she was living. After all, she was a highly privileged member of the noble and most ancient house of Black as well as the proud and beautiful Rosier bloodline. Blacks...and Rosiers...simply did not live *that* way as her "dear" mother took the most delicate pains to remind her of whenever she visited Rosier Manor perched precariously atop the wild, rocky, windswept cliffs on the blustery Cornish coast.

"Bellatrix, dear," Druella would tell her as they sat together in the austere, stone sentry-guarded gloom of the well-sheltered North Garden, teacups of Earl Grey and Lady Fingers ever before them on the hideous, Rosier family heirloom garden table. "You should be getting married. You're not getting any younger, you know,"...this, with a surreptitious yet clearly disapproving glance at the lines forming around Bellatrix's thin, cruel mouth; wrinkles hastened in their deepening by the constant cloud of acrid cigarette smoke that swirled 'round and cloaked Bellatrix's thin person...."and I was married when I was your age." Then, with a predictable and well-practiced semblance of deep thought, Druella would frown, tilt her head to one side rather like a wading bird, and utter the kicker: "Well, actually...if one really wanted to be specific about it all...I was married when I was *much* younger than you are now, and,"...she'd pause and smile charmingly at her daughter...*you* were born when I was twenty."

Oh, God. It was the same spiel every time, and Bellatrix would smile with her mouth and raise her arched, over-plucked eyebrows condescendingly, lift her dainty teacup to her lips with the same hand that held her cigarette, and think, *Yes, Mum, you did marry young, but only because the Blacks threatened to disown Father if he didn't marry you after you two were discovered banging in the garden shed, you old cow.*

The Rosiers, though slightly less influential in recent times, were, and always had been, a fiercely proud bloodline and were one of the oldest pureblood families in England. Such a match between the noble Black line and the arrogant Rosier family was not, therefore, something to be sniffed at, and, certainly, a loss of love between the two allies would have been disastrous. Thus, Cygnus had married Druella at the forceful "request" of his parents, and had, to his immense pleasure, managed to maintain his lecherous lifestyle as well, though he did dote amazingly affectionately on his daughters, especially his eldest whom he found to be gratifyingly like himself.

Druella, a willowy, colorless woman with pale blonde hair, loved her second daughter, Narcissa, best, but she did care for her eldest and wished the girl would make a good marriage as she herself had done. Thus, each time Bellatrix visited the Rosier Manor...passed down to Druella, an only child, and her husband for their pleasure, although such a Gothic and ornament-laden estate could hardly succeed in giving one true pleasure...Druella would set about the arduous task of making her blasé daughter admit to being in love with Rodolphus Lestrange and to setting down a wedding date. So far, Druella had not succeeded, but she had great guile...after all, she had made Cygnus marry her (she had been no more pregnant at nineteen than Bellatrix was now)...and although her daughter now seemed disinterested in marrying and perpetuating the pure blood of English wizardry, one day Druella would find a way to convince her eldest child of the importance in such a task.

Ah, yes... Bellatrix would cave one day. She was, after all, living with the Lestrange lad, wasn't she? It was a start. Small, a touch ungodly, but a start nonetheless. So, Druella never faltered in her quest to match Bellatrix with Rodolphus Lestrange, and if her eldest daughter's reticence to speak about such matters ever registered with her, she was quick to push down such inward intimations with excuses involving goodwill and happiness on her daughter's part. She was very good at making excuses for herself.

And as the two...white, calculating mother and dark, austere daughter...would sit among the formal statuary of the North Garden, the boom of the surf smashing into the high, craggy cliffs of Cornwall echoing beyond the garden walls, dark clouds scudding by above the high, railed battlements of Rosier Manor, Druella would launch into yet

another diatribe against Bellatrix's chosen lifestyle. Bellatrix should be living at home. Or, better yet, living in Rodolphus Lestrangle's family keep in Scotland beside the quiet Lestrangle Loch. What was Bellatrix doing living among Muggles? Didn't she find them vile?

As her mother droned on, Bellatrix would inevitably stand and amble distractedly toward the garden wall until she could peer out of the small windows cut into the stone and gaze into the gray of the Atlantic Ocean. Fresh, salt-scented, biting wind would snap energetically around her, tossing her black hair violently as Bellatrix would watch the snow fall lightly into the water below. The North Garden was charmed against snowfall within, but without was a different story. One could have garden parties at all times of the year at Rosier Manor, but garden parties did not interest Bellatrix just as her mother's wishes and hopes did not interest her at all.

Yes, she did find them vile. All of them. Her mother, Rodolphus and his snake-eyed brother, Rabastan, whom she had fucked out of boredom once and who now watched her in a way that was simply pathetic, her younger sisters, her cousins, even her father, sometimes, and, of course, the Muggles.

Sighing, Bellatrix would raise her cigarette to her lips and find that it was merely the burnt remains, a butt, but she would still take one last drag before pitching it into the ocean below. *It's only temporary.* And she would suddenly turn back to her mother and mumble, "Well, smashing visit, Mum," as she fished out her carton of cigarettes and, placing a fag between her thin lips, lit up. "Unfortunately, I've got to dash."

Then, she would Apparate swiftly away, and Druella would stare, open-mouthed, a little stupidly, at the spot her chain-smoking, independent, oh, so infuriating daughter had momentarily occupied. With a sigh of her own, however, she, too, would rise from the table and wander towards the far garden wall, touching, as she passed, the heather that grew, weather-be-damned, quite rampantly beside the stone-flagged pathway, perhaps picking a sprig to tuck behind her ear. She would reach the wall and the windows cut jaggedly into the rock and, hands folded before her prayerfully, gaze out into the open ocean, watching and hoping for a miracle as the fog of winter twilight rolled suffocatingly inland.