

Catch a Falling Star

by scaranda

The war is over, but for some the fight has just begun.

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 5

The war is over, but for some the fight has just begun.

HARRY

I suppose I'd thought that once he'd been killed the war would just stop, and the Death Eaters would throw their wands at our feet and run away, and everything would go back to whatever normal was, which all led me to the conclusion that I hadn't thought at all. I'd been so wrapped up with the single event that involved me personally that I hadn't really had time to consider anything else, and then, immediately afterwards, I'd been so exhausted that I hardly had the energy to stay awake.

The tatters of the Death Eaters' army had raised itself as a number of different factions since Voldemort had fallen, each one seeming hell-bent on little more than destruction, and we had to defend ourselves against the new and growing danger of leaderless men.

The Ministry of Magic and the International Wizarding Commission had installed Kingsley Shacklebolt as Minister in the wake of Cornelius Fudge's spectacular fall from grace; he was the first soldier and the youngest man to hold the post in the Ministry's history. It was something I suspected Lucius Malfoy wouldn't approve of, seeing as he had been one of the ones instrumental in Fudge's downfall, having picked the cushy post-war position for himself; I felt I could live with that one.

I crawled into the shelter as Ron took over watch from me; it had been quiet for the few days we'd been here, at least we had some hope that the chaos was beginning to subside.

Sirius was still slumped at the back wall where we'd bent some saplings to keep the worst of the winter chill off him; Snape sat against the opposite rude wall, glaring at him. They had never dropped their aggression, never let off the insults and constant sniping, even after fighting together for so long.

And yet, they had appeared to each know the other so well, know what the other was doing and thinking, how to take up each other's slack, how one would defend whilst the other attacked. Towards the end their power had been so closely linked that it had seemed to stem from one man. Whatever bit of my brain wasn't occupied with the terror of the final conflict they were leading me to, thought that there may have been some hope for them, some hope that once they had set aside the hostilities of the war we fought, they might also set aside the hostilities of their private vendetta. That hadn't happened of course; they'd drawn into their own corners, licked their wounds and had come out sparring ... well, Snape had, Sirius hardly had the strength to spit his own venom; he had tried though.

This last couple of days it was Snape who seemed to be the one who was becoming weaker instead of stronger though. I couldn't fathom out what it was, but I suspected he had some sort of injury he didn't want to tell us about. The very arrogance of the man, it would be just like him to see that as some type of weakness on his part. He suited martyrdom; it matched the rest of his attributes.

I gave them a glance, the two men whom I'd come to rely upon so strongly now looked weak and vulnerable. Instead of the Titans I had assumed them to be, they were flesh and blood. It had been Sirius's strength and tactical brilliance, and Snape's awesome magical power and intelligence that had given me the chance and shown me the way, and now ... now they were all but destroyed. I'd survived the war; I hoped they could survive the peace ... both of them, I finally admitted to myself.

'How is he?' I asked Snape, although I could see the reality for myself.

'He will not be any better until we can get him to Hogwarts,' Snape said in the flat voice he'd begun using, as though he were too tired to dose it with his usual vitriolic inflections.

'He's a bit stronger,' Hermione offered, without glancing at Snape. 'He says he's not so cold, and Severus said he had something to eat.'

I noticed that they had avoided looking at one another; Snape had turned away and Hermione gave me a look, inviting me to follow her out of the shelter.

'What's wrong with Snape?' I asked her as the saplings fell back into place.

'Harry ... can you try to get Hedwig through to Dumbledore?' she asked instead of answering; she looked worried. 'We have to try to get back somehow. We can't wait here forever.' She gave a troubled look to the shelter.

I looked up at the clouds scudding across the sky; the stormy winds had dropped a little, but that wasn't the danger we feared. Over the last year of the war owl post had been suspended, following the Death Eaters' sabotages of the service; not only had messages been intercepted and destroyed or altered, but the owls had had their throats cut, and were then delivered back to the sender by the hawks which the Death Eaters had begun to use.

'What for?' I asked automatically, as though we didn't need to get back anyway; we certainly couldn't stay where we were for much longer. Although there was no shortage of water, either from the brook that ran nearby or falling directly from the sky, as it had taken to doing with what seemed like a vengeance, our food supplies were becoming critically low.

Hermione bit her lip and nodded to the shelter. 'Can't you see what's happening? If we don't get them back to Hogwarts, they'll both die.'

'What? He's getting stronger; you said it yourself.'

'Only because Severus is slowly draining his own power into him.' She gave me a level look. 'I don't know how he's doing it, but I know he is; his own strength is reducing more quickly than Sirius's is increasing,' she said and shook her head in worried confusion. 'I'm not sure what he's doing; it's a little scary.'

'Did you ask him?'

'Yes, he told me he "would not presume to correct anyone who thought they knew everything".' She bit her lip again in her anxiety. 'It's the only decent remark I've heard him deliver today.'

I was tempted, I admit it, tempted to say, "so what?" As long as Sirius was okay I didn't care, but I knew that wasn't really true. 'Why? I mean they hate one another,' I said instead.

'They don't hate one another, Harry. It's just the way they deal with one another. Something happened between them a long time ago, I think, and this is the way they've come to terms with their feelings.'

'The Shrieking Shack?' I gave her a look. That old chestnut had been rolling around for so long it had become boring, or it would have if anyone had ever told us what had really happened.

'Oh, I think there was a bit more to that than ever met the eye. You don't hate someone for as long as they have hated one another; even hate gets tired without fresh fuel.' She gave me a long look, as though I were straying from a point that she had no intentions of letting me drift away from. 'Harry, we need to get away from here, and we need help.'

There was something about Hermione's unease that made me relent, and I called Hedwig to me; she pecked my finger affectionately. 'Can you do it, girl?' I asked softly. 'Can you get to Hogwarts for us?' I looked at the rough shelter. 'For them?'

She blinked her yellow eyes at me, preened proudly and swivelled her head to look at the shelter. I could almost feel her thoughts. "Of course I can do it; I am Harry Potter's Owl."

It was a long message; her quill seemed to scratch on forever, I couldn't think why she was writing so much, but that was Hermione for you. We sent Hedwig off and sat with Ron for a while before going for a walk, not far from the shelter, always keeping it in sight. It must have been an hour later when we went back in. Sirius hadn't moved from the back wall, but Snape had; his cloak was wrapped around Sirius, and he was still wearing it. Snape's long black hair had fallen over his sleeping face, but not enough to hide the exhaustion and anxiety etched on his features. I exchanged a look with Hermione; her eyes were unreadable as she nodded to the crude door, and we went back outside.

SEVERUS

I was grateful when I sensed them walk back out. I hadn't heard them approach, or maybe I had, maybe I'd been too tired to care any longer. I didn't know how long I could keep this up. Perhaps it had been vanity on my part to think that I had the power to stop death ... and he had been dying; I had felt him slipping away. I kept telling myself that we would get help soon, that we'd get back to Hogwarts and that I could stop what was now happening to both of us. I drained my strength into him, and he drained it into the uncaring earth, and now, now I didn't think I even had the power left to stop, not that I would have anyway. Life with Sirius Black somewhere in the background was bad enough; life without him was unthinkable.

He'd woken shortly after they'd gone out, complaining of feeling cold. I hadn't thought when I'd stood and gone over to him; he really was very cold, so cold that I'd considered wrapping my cloak about the bundle of cloaks and blankets already around him, for all the good that would have done. I sat down beside him and pulled him to me instead, before I could think. He'd laughed a little. "Do I have to die to get this close?", he'd asked. I know I nodded; I knew then what I'd always known, that I would let my own life end before I ever let my star go out.

'Are you feeling any warmer?' I asked.

'Yes, I think so.' His voice sounded sleepy. 'Have they gone back out?'

'Yes.'

'Stop doing it, Severus. I know what you're doing.'

'In that case you will know that I cannot stop.'

'Damn, I forgot to read the next chapter.'

'That sounds about right.'

'I don't hate you ... but you know that, don't you?' he said, sounding sleepy.

'Now you tell me,' I said as dryly as I could, as my heart skipped a beat it couldn't afford to skip.

'I will hate you again when I feel better, but right now I don't.'

'You're just frightened to die with all that guilt on your soul,' I replied.

'You always were a bloody mind reader,' he murmured.

'Seems I was staggeringly inept when it mattered.'

He seemed to rally a little and support himself, as he pulled away from me a bit. 'What do you mean?' he asked.

'I mean ...' I stopped myself. The memories still held all the outrage and disbelief of a freshly dug grave; I found I could hardly speak. 'Nothing ... it doesn't matter any more.'

'Tell me.' There was no mockery in his blue eyes, just a vague pain; I couldn't tell if it were physical, but I didn't think it was.

'I only meant that I didn't realise just how much you all hated me. I mean, I knew you didn't like me ... but the hate.' I gave a little half-sigh, half-laugh; I'd never understood how that had run so deeply. He'd closed his eyes, out of shame or guilt or lack of either ... I couldn't tell. 'Anyway, as I said, it doesn't matter. We all learn eventually.'

'If I tell you what happened, will you listen?' he whispered.

'I have little choice; you are lying on my cloak,' I said quietly, not wanting to break the mood. I knew I had slipped almost unaware into uncharted water, in more ways than one. I kept my voice level as I felt my heart lurch in fear. 'As to whether I believe you, I reserve the right to decide after I hear what you have to say.'

'How Snape-ish.' He gave his Gryffindor grin, or the best he could manage. 'It was because of James.'

I was disappointed that he wanted to blame someone else, after all this time, especially now ... that and the fact that he was using James. Somehow he must have sensed it.

'Not what you're thinking,' he said. 'I did it; I sent you to Remus, but it was because of James, because of you and James.'

I know I raised my eyebrow at that; I hadn't known that he'd known about James and me. 'Ah ... you wanted James and found out about us?'

'No. I wanted you, and when I found out I wanted to hurt you ... and him.'

'Hail that as one of your life's few successes then,' I said almost automatically. I was trying to piece together what he'd said, while another part of mind shied away in terror at what I was doing, what I had already done.

'I didn't expect you to understand.' He looked away a little, but he'd pulled back into the heat of my body.

'No, I don't.'

'I loved you. I wanted you so much ... and when I found out about you and James, I didn't want him to have you.'

'So you just thought you'd kill me instead?'

'You weren't going to be killed; at least that wasn't the plan.'

'How comforting. However, as I recall your plans have a remarkable habit of going astray.' I stayed on the familiar ground of banter; I was too frightened now to do anything else.

'Don't they fucking just,' he said with a bitter little twist to his mouth, and closed his eyes again. I suspect he had exhausted himself; he was almost asleep.

When I thought he had dropped off I let some more power slip into him, not even sure if it would still work; I believed it would though, even as I supposed I wouldn't need as much this time, just enough to let him rest properly. I pulled him to me a little and looked down at the top of his head, as I slipped my hand inside his layers. I'd left the pathway clear to the open wound above his heart, the one I had not sealed completely, as though I needed to check how it was healing, and let the blood from my own veins touch it. On some level I knew I hadn't fooled him any more than I'd fooled myself.

'I don't hate you either,' I said quietly and let my lips touch his hair, going through the forbidden incantations under my breath.

'I told you to stop doing that,' he murmured.

SIRIUS

I thought I was getting a little stronger, even as I knew that the strength was pouring from him. I didn't know how he was doing it; it wasn't by any method I'd even heard about, Potions and Dark Magic were all beyond my comprehension. I only knew that whatever it was, I was leeching his life away even as he tried to stop mine fading; by all rights I should have been dead by now. I had to get Harry to try to get us out of here, some way, and back to Hogwarts; Dumbledore would know how to stop him, but I couldn't seem to concentrate on anything but him. I wondered why he was doing it ... well, maybe not, maybe some part of me knew even then, even before he'd given me his warmth as well as his strength that day.

I assumed he would move away when he thought I was asleep, that he wouldn't want to be found holding me the way he was, but he didn't. I was glad of that, even knowing he would put it down to exhaustion or something else later, anything but weakness on his part. I wondered how long he could keep this up, how long before death came to take, not just me, but him too. I knew I would never get him, not really, but I wouldn't want life without him somewhere scowling in the dark corner of my heart. At least while we lived I hoped; at least there was that.

He shifted slightly in his sleep, and it was me who pulled him to my side this time. While he slept I could pretend; maybe I could drink in the nearness of him, inhale his scent, breathe his air. 'Severus? Are you awake?'

'I am, now that you have seen fit to wake me.'

I stifled a smile at that; obviously he'd been awake. He would never use one word if he could add a few more and turn a simple reply into a honed insult, however mild. 'I want to talk to you.' I wasn't sure where I was going with this.

'I can hear you.'

'I know you can; now I want you to listen instead.'

'You should preserve your strength.'

'You mean your strength?'

'Whatever ... just preserve it.'

'You didn't say your gift was conditional,' I countered. We'd got off the track again; I'd have to do better. 'You and James ... was it serious?'

He sighed, and I had a funny feeling it was an act; I thought he wanted to talk about this as much as I did. That made me assume he must have thought we were going to die too.

'Not really, I don't suppose,' he replied eventually, 'but when you are sixteen everything is serious.'

'Did you love Lucius?'

'In a way.' He seemed surer of the answer to that.

'Do you still love him?'

He gave me a look. 'Why?'

'Just wondering.' Merlin alone knows what possessed me to say what I said next. Perhaps I'd just come to realise what my life's focus had been; maybe I just needed to know where my goal was. 'Just wondering if there was room for me ... if we live.'

I saw a darkness cross his eyes that had nothing to do with the first part of my declaration. 'Severus.' I heard my whisper. I knew the answer to what I was going to ask, even as I tried to still the panic, even as I noticed that in my panic my heart hadn't begun to beat more quickly ... my heart wasn't beating at all. 'Severus ... when did I die?'

He didn't answer directly; he pulled me to him and held me like a lover, in a way I'd longed for the last twenty-five years of my life. 'I shall not let you pass over,' he said, and that voice of his washed over me, like a salve on my troubled mind. 'If we can get back to Hogwarts, no one need ever know.'

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 5

Help arrives, but it doesn't come alone.

HERMIONE

I know he suspected that I knew, and that I was covering up for him, and I knew he knew that I'd tell Dumbledore if we could reach him. Over the last couple of years we'd come to that sort of quiet accommodation of one another. I couldn't tell Harry, and I certainly couldn't tell Ron; both of them were likely to freak out. I waited until the two of them had gone out before I turned to him. His attitude when I asked him to sit down with me, the way he cast a fleeting look to Sirius, everything about him told me it was true.

'Is there any way I can help?' I braced myself for his scorn.

'I thought you knew,' he said quietly in resignation instead.

I took one of his cold slim white hands between mine; he didn't resist. I desperately wanted him to know that I was there for him, and even if I didn't understand or approve, I was there. 'When did he die?' I whispered.

'Yesterday ... when you were out.'

I watched him, trying to fathom out the enormity of what he had done. 'I've told Dumbledore,' I said. 'I suspected he was already dead yesterday, looks like I pre-empted it a bit. If Hedwig gets through, he'll know by now.' He just nodded in acceptance, and I went on. 'Does ... does he know?'

'Of course, I know. It's very bad form to speak of the dead when they're listening.' Sirius had opened his eyes.

'In that case the dead should learn not to eavesdrop on private conversations,' Snape said dryly to him. He sounded a little more like himself, and he drew his hand away from mine. 'Let us hope, Miss Granger, that Potter's owl gets to Dumbledore, and that he can get us back to Hogwarts ... very soon.'

'But ... what about you? What if anyone finds out?' I knew whatever he'd done was very Dark Magic and would carry a heavy price tag.

'I suspect I shall be looking for alternative gainful employment, in another continent.' He let his eyebrow rise in the way he used to, just before deducting fifty points from Gryffindor; that gave me a little hope.

'But how do we get him back?'

'I have not worked that out yet.' He gave me as near to a real smile as I'd ever seen from him. 'If that brain of yours comes up with any solution,' he said, 'be assured that I shall look favourably upon the suggestion.'

'You can't leave here can you? Not without him, or both of you will die.'

'Hermione,' Sirius said, in a way that I found very disconcerting, 'one of us is already dead.'

HARRY

'How's he doing?' Ron asked as we swapped over guard duty; it hardly seemed necessary now but I didn't feel like taking any chances.

'Not bad. If anything it's Snape who doesn't look well.'

'You can tell?' He gave me a smirk.

I knew what he meant; Snape's pallor and testiness were so much his trademarks that it was difficult to know whether he was ill or not ... but something was wrong; I knew that. I couldn't remember when I'd seen him even stand for the last few days, that, coupled with the fact that Hermione seemed constantly to cast worried looks at him, made me very uneasy. I began to wish that Hedwig would get back very soon; something I didn't understand was happening. Oh, I know I could have asked, but I wasn't awfully sure I wanted to know what it was.

We'd been in the shelter for almost ten days, and the last three it had rained incessantly. No matter how hard we tried, Ron, Hermione and I found ourselves bringing water in with us, on our cloaks and boots, adding to the drips that managed to find their way through the thick screening of fir we'd used as a roof. Hermione had almost given up on sealing spells; it was as though the rain didn't much care for her dominion over it. The atmosphere was so tense that I knew Ron hadn't even had the heart to point out her magical inadequacy; I suspect he might have filed it away for future reference though.

Hedwig had been away for three days and I was fretting, not only about our situation, but for her safety too. I was only going to give it another day before I took the step I had been forbidden to take until told it was safe, that of Apparating to Hogsmeade; it was either that or walk. When Dumbledore Apparated to us that afternoon I could have fainted with relief. This last couple of days it had become that we were all too scared to even look at one another, in case someone asked a question no one seemed to want an answer to. Only Sirius seemed bright, and yet, there was something about him that didn't feel right. He didn't really look at anyone, anyone except Snape, and sometimes he just sat looking into space. It was a little creepy, as though his mind were somewhere else ... something was scaring the living shit out of me and I couldn't think what it was.

Remus and Bill Weasley followed immediately after Dumbledore. I couldn't understand it; none of them gave much more than a fleeting glance to Sirius, except for Lupin, and he just stared at him for a few long moments without saying anything. I felt the hair on the back of my neck rise as Dumbledore looked gravely at Snape.

'Severus ... what have you done?' he said in what I could only describe as shock. 'This ... this is not permitted.'

Snape held his eyes; he looked frighteningly intense. 'Permitted? After what we have done over the past two years to survive, who is to say what is permitted?' He stood in the middle of the shelter as though he'd placed himself between Sirius and the others, in an unconscious act of defence. It was Bill Weasley who went to him; he put an arm around his shoulders, talking quietly and urgently to him. My brain was watching something unfold, which it couldn't comprehend.

'What's wrong? What's he done? He was only helping Sirius.' I looked to my godfather, as some level of me began to understand the inexplicable. 'Tell them, Sirius; please tell them.' I knew my voice whined as I watched him sitting there looking slightly away from ... from everything. He turned his head slowly to look at Snape as though he hadn't even noticed the newcomers.

'He can't, Harry.' Hermione had begun to cry, I suspect in relief that she could now say it. 'He's been dead for days.'

'What?' Ron jumped back; he looked stricken with the shock I felt. 'We've been talking to a corpse? What do you mean?'

'No ... you've been talking to him, but only through Severus. I'm not sure I completely understand.' She turned away and Lupin hugged her. I wished it had been me; I could have done with a hug about then.

I turned to Dumbledore, I suppose looking for the hope he always inspired in me. 'What's going to happen? I mean he's kept Sirius alive. That's got to be good. We can help him now ... at Hogwarts, can't we?'

'I do not know what will happen, Harry.' He gave a look to where Snape had sat against the back wall with Sirius again. Sirius was talking to him; I heard him laugh and watched him grin, it was the most frightening thing I'd ever seen. Bill and Remus watched on, their faces pitying masks of concern, as I began to realise another thing; Severus Snape wasn't completely sane. Dumbledore dragged his gaze away from them. 'Severus will stand trial if he is deemed fit...'

'Trial? For what?' I exploded in my confusion. 'For keeping someone alive?'

'No, Harry, for not letting them go once they have died. It is a grievous crime against nature and involves deepest Dark Magic.' He nodded slowly and I could see he was struggling to come to terms with things himself. 'As for Sirius ... Sirius has been dead for some time, about three or four days I suspect ... and once Severus moves from his side he will slip away, as is fitting.'

'No ... he can stay with him; that must be what he wants anyway,' I shouted my denial.

'What Severus wants is not the issue. We are not here to deny the wishes of Mother Nature; we are neither the Creator nor the Grim Reaper, we only have a say in the bit in between.' Dumbledore turned to Snape. 'Severus, we must go now, my boy,' he said, gently but firmly, 'back to Hogwarts.'

Snape closed his eyes, and when he opened them he'd brought a cold shutter down on his feelings. 'And what, may I be permitted to ask, is going to happen to Black?'

Dumbledore nodded to Bill Weasley. 'Bill will travel with you both. Remus, you will go with Ron and Harry ... and you, Hermione, you will come with me. I need to speak with you, my dear.'

Snape nodded his acceptance as I stood at the doorway, staggered at the extent of what had happened in front of our eyes ... and we hadn't even noticed, except Hermione, of course.

DUMBLEDORE

I stoked Fawkes as I waited for Kingsley to arrive; all the time my heart begged one thing while my brain pulled rank with another. I had permitted Severus to stay with Sirius's body in the Infirmary last night and maintain whatever status quo he had reached, as long as someone else was with them at all times. Bill and Remus had no hesitation in volunteering. So far so good; it was kept amongst the few of us who had been present in the shelter.

I knew that with the potions and Dark Magic and help from other wizards that he could get here that Severus could indeed keep Sirius alive, and in fact restore him to himself. He had done the hard bit; he had closed death's door. In fact it was more than that; he actually held Sirius's death inside him, a concept even I struggled to understand. I knew he was certainly powerful enough and knowledgeable enough in the Dark Arts to do the rest.

I had been so tempted to just allow it to happen; what was one little dabble in the Dark Arts, after all? My head overruled that; it was the road to ruin, probably every Dark Wizard since time immemorial had said the same thing at one time. And yet, that wasn't really what stopped me. I knew that Severus Snape was no more likely to become another Voldemort than I was; it was his sanity and his future I feared for. I knew he had kept Sirius alive out of some deep love for him, even as I knew that if Sirius were indeed returned that it could well be that he had no such reciprocal feelings for Severus ... where, I wondered, would that leave us?

I was a deeply troubled man as the Minister walked in.

'You're fully up to date with what has happened, Kingsley?'

He nodded, and his earring glinted, giving him a cavalier look. I suspected it would take a while for the more staid members of the Ministry to get used to him, so much the better, in my opinion. He seemed a lot more at ease than I was as he sat in front of my desk in his flamboyant red silks, and helped himself to a cup of my tea.

'There was always something between the two of them, wasn't there?' he said as an opener.

I nodded. 'I suppose so. Of course, I have asked you here to discuss what we do from now.'

'Do?' He seemed surprised. 'Do you have reason to suspect evil intent, Albus?'

'No, indeed not. I have many concerns, but that is not one of them.'

'Well, what's one little dabble in the Dark Arts? He's as likely to become another Voldemort as you are, Albus.'

His brown eyes were laughing at me. I hadn't known that Kingsley Shacklebolt was such a skilled Legilimens.

He let his smile fade, and I realised he had been thinking as deeply as I had, but unlike me he had at least come to a decision. The fact that he had travelled to Hogwarts alone made me at least grateful that he wasn't going to drag Severus off in chains today.

'How many others know?' I asked, searching for an opening of my own.

'Very few,' he said. He steepled his long black fingers and seemed to be arranging his thoughts, as though he had placed them in his mind in a certain order and it would only do if they were explained in that same order. 'I spent all of last night wrestling with, not only my conscience, but also what I suspect would be representative of the conscience of the decent world as a whole.'

I felt better already; whatever decision he had come to, had been made with the compassion and clear-headedness that had made him what would be the finest Minister of Magic we had ever had. 'And have you come to a assessment of the situation?' I asked.

'I need your help, Albus. I need to know I am not romanticising this.' He waited for my nod and went on, sipping at his tea as he did so. 'The Wizengamot is there to ensure that justice is meted out and that laws are adhered to for the greater good of wizardkind. And it is this word, justice, that I have laboured on. The word justice ... righteousness, fair dealing, whatever you want to call it, is the essence of my argument,' he said, and I felt him gauging my reaction. 'What do we gain by trying this man? Do we live in a better world if we put him away in Azkaban? Are our children safer in their beds, or our consciences more at rest? Or have we merely bound ourselves by convention, because our way of doing things was not strong enough, and in so doing leave tomorrow a poorer place by making a hero, two heroes in fact, the scapegoats of our own inadequacies?'

He was romanticising, of course he knew that; he was justifying himself and his own conscience. I had neither the need nor the desire to let him know that I knew that, but I found myself misquoting ancient text to him, for devilment, I suppose. 'Why should it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul?'

Kingsley smiled; he knew we had already avoided an impasse. 'And why should a man lose the whole world just because he has profited a soul?'

We hadn't made him Minister of Magic for fun.

We talked on for a while. Kingsley had arranged for the legal assessors from St Mungo's to come to Hogwarts, those two old men who dispensed their opinions on the delicate balance between evil intent and temporary insanity; I suspected he had already arranged their verdict too. He had come here on the pretext of telling me that Severus would probably not stand trial, and to have me back up his judgement if it ever became necessary, but we both knew he had really come to set my own conscience free to do as it truly saw fit, in the knowledge that he would back me ... if it ever became necessary.

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 5

To go beyond one's limits can lead to a lonely place, where one can't find the way home.

LUPIN

I was terrified; I didn't think I'd even been as scared at any time during the war. I didn't know what to expect, how to prepare for failure or accept any success that we might have. I had always been brought up to believe that Dark Magic was the root of all evil, and here we were in the very bastion of defence against those Dark Arts, practising them ourselves. I could feed myself any amount more of that sanctimonious drivel I cared to, to cover up the fact that I was just plain scared... for Bill, and myself, and for Harry and Sirius, but most of all for Snape; I doubted he would survive failure.

We were in the Infirmary. I wasn't sure where Poppy was, but she'd made herself scarce; we hadn't seen her at all since Dumbledore had had a quick but intense conversation with her when we arrived back from the shelter. There had been a lot of nodding and shaking of heads, Dumbledore nodding while Poppy shook, until she had finally given a quick frightened look along to where Bill and I had laid Sirius on a bed at the far end. I was touched by one thing though, even through my fear, as I saw her lay a hand of comfort on Snape's arm as he passed her; women are so good at that, un-stified as they are by what convention dictates to us men.

'What's that?' I whispered as Bill lifted a stringy looking bit of vegetation from a stone bottle with the aid of metal tongs. The moment it left the bottle it began to give off choking yellow fumes.

Bill shrugged, his eyes watering in the acrid gas. 'I don't know, for fuck sake; I'm only doing what I was told.' He let the thing smoke away on the metal tray on which he'd placed it and looked up the Infirmary to where Severus had his head bent over a book. 'I'd kind of hoped Dumbledore would have overseen this.'

'Hardly,' I replied as Severus straightened and began to walk back down to where both Bill and I were carefully looking at him, or the still smouldering vegetation, or the walls or the floor or one another, or anything indeed that wasn't the dead man on the bed. I shuddered to myself, shying away from so many issues. If Sirius were dead, where was his mind, his awareness, his soul? Had they fled to whatever afterwards there was? Had his body begun to shut down, his organs perish and his flesh putrefy? But I knew none of these things had happened; wasn't that just what Severus had made that forbidden step to stop? Hadn't he placed himself in front of the door marked "death", and held up his hand?

'What have we to do next?' Bill asked him. I was glad it was him, glad he sounded as unsure about all of this as I did. I kept trying to remember that it had been Dumbledore who had called us out of the Infirmary a couple of hours ago, seemingly content to leave Severus alone with Sirius for the first time since we'd come back. When I saw Kingsley leaving through the front doors I understood; some agreement had been reached, someone somewhere had made a decision, and I knew it had been a joint one. My biggest concern now was, what if it were all in vain?

Severus had just given us an odd look when we arrived back, when we'd asked what he wanted us to do. Dumbledore had been very specific that we had not to mention words like permission or consent or approval, and all three of us knew just to start from some vague status quo without questioning how it had been reached.

'Some things are going to happen now,' Snape replied to Bill in the flat voice he'd been using since we'd moved from the shelter. The fiery passion he had shown when he had first confronted Dumbledore had fled, and I doubted he had the strength to call it back. 'I have to know I can trust you,' he said, and for the first time I saw his own fear; the depth of it staggered me.

'We're here, aren't we?' I replied.

He nodded uneasily, and I knew it was more at what was happening, than the fact that we were the ones who were helping him in whatever way he saw fit to allow us. I felt I should say something more, and yet I just didn't know what that should be; perhaps something to acknowledge the fact that at least I understood the courage or passion or whatever it had been that had led him to commit this ultimate act of ... I struggled to even think of what I meant; perhaps sacrifice is the wrong word, but I knew he had made his own life and freedom forfeit to save Sirius, and somewhere I envied him the knowledge that he had done so.

'I have to visit him,' he said doubtfully. 'He has begun to retreat again ... and I cannot afford for him to go any further away.'

He placed one of his pale hands on top of Sirius's, where they lay clasped together on top of the white sheets that totally covered him, except for the forearms and the hands. It was as though they had been allowed to show themselves to remind everyone that this was a man who had not quite finished with the world. 'Do not do anything at all unless I ask you to, you have to trust me,' Severus said. He didn't wait for assent, but he lifted the smouldering slimy leaf from the metal dish with his bare fingers; I could see it eating into his flesh, but he seemed not to notice as he opened his mouth. I almost disobeyed him immediately; I suspect I would have done if Bill hadn't gripped my arm as Severus laid the leaf on his own tongue.

SEVERUS

It was all I could do to go through in my head what needed done, without having to relay it to Weasley and Lupin as well. Of all the men that I knew, I was fortunate at least that it had been these two Dumbledore had brought with him to the shelter; they would not willingly let Sirius down. And I needed them there; I needed them to call me back if I strayed too far, I needed the knowledge they had brought back with them that I was being allowed this chance. I had to make sure that whatever price I was to pay was worth the cost. I felt them watch me, but could find no words to allay their fears.

'When he begins to awaken,' I began, trying to put some feeling into my voice, but I couldn't afford to waste the energy. 'If I do not do so too, put one of these leaves on Black's tongue.' I could see Lupin balk at that, see he doubted if Sirius would allow that; I had no assurance to offer.

'When I begin my incantations it may seem as though we move away from you.' I struggled to say what I meant. 'We will appear to have moved further away, and in a way we will have.'

'You mean onto another plane?' Weasley asked.

I nodded slowly, aware of their concern that my breathing was becoming shallow and rapid. 'Something like that,' I agreed; it was as good a description as I could have given. 'There may be other physical manifestations. Not live ones,' I hastened to add, as Lupin seemed to start. 'The light will become dimmer around us, and it may be hard for you to actually see what is happening.' I gasped and saw Lupin hold out his hand as though to steady me, but I realised that wasn't what it was ... it had begun already. It would have to do; they would have to understand, I needed everything I had now. At last I turned to where he lay waiting somewhere for me, a star shining only in the firmament of my mind, and I reached out my hand.

SIRIUS

I wondered if I'd made a mistake, if my hopes and dreams as well as my life had flashed before me, in that moment between sleep and wakefulness, dark and light, life ... and that other place he'd told me not to think about. I was beginning to think I was alone, that maybe he had forgotten already; I began to turn, to walk away from I could not remember what ... and then I found he'd locked the door and I could not pass.

I think it was the silence that I feared most, not the loss of human voices and day to day sounds, not the wind and the rain and music and the sound of my own blood being pumped through my body; it was the finding of a silence so profound that it seemed to press upon me, seeping into my fading awareness, stealing through my veins instead of my blood.

The shock of hearing him again was almost pain.

'Do you understand what we have to do?' he asked.

I nodded my head, surprised I could still do that, and found I was opening my eyes; I didn't remember closing them. 'Where are we?' I asked.

'At Hogwarts,' he said, and lapsed again into uttering the strange incantations I realised were what I heard when I first heard him return. It didn't look like Hogwarts to me; it looked hazy, as though I were searching through fog or thick glass ... and there was something out there.

'What language is that?' I asked, as the cadences rose and fell and he seemed to become more breathless.

He didn't stop his chant except for a moment, to put his hand on my arm. 'Ancient Macedonian,' he gasped. 'Stay with me now, Black; it is vital that we do this first time. I could not do it again. I shall not be permitted.' He went straight back to his chant without telling me what I had to do.

I felt him fumbling in his pocket where he sat beside me on what I now realised was a bed, and he withdrew a small rusty-looking dagger; I supposed that was ancient Macedonian too, I certainly didn't recognise the runes on the hilt, or the script that seemed to coalesce on the blade as he drew it across his arm in a vicious slice that made his blood spurt. He dipped back to his pocket again, and this time he brought out a small stone flask; I could see he was struggling and wondered if I should help.

'Hold the flask under my blood,' he gasped.

It was slippery in my cold hand, from his blood and something else, as though it were alive and was reluctant to do what it was bidden, but I managed. The contents of the bottle hissed as I caught his blood, and he sealed his wound. I almost dropped it; it writhed in my hand with more of a life of its own than I had. I felt faint as I handed it to him, consciousness swimming away in the way he warned must not happen, as he drew the knife across my own arm and squeezed. There was nothing there, nothing flowing; how could there be? But that seem not to concern him, and I was so far away from the realms of anything I knew about that I didn't even know what questions to ask. And yet something seemed to leave my severed veins, something he needed in that bottle, as much as his own blood; I understood with a start that it was emptiness.

I watched him raise the stone bottle to his lips and drink, and then turn to me; I could almost feel his touch as he tilted my head and poured some of the liquid into my mouth. I couldn't quite taste it, couldn't quite feel the touch of his hand on my throat as he massaged it.

And then I realised he was no longer there; he had disappeared ... and yet he hadn't. He had just moved, and he was now occupying the same space I occupied; he was within me as I was within him. I could see that whoever or whatever was behind that fog had noticed he had gone too. I wanted to warn it not to interfere, that he was here and he had not deserted me.

And then I saw him again beside me, as the fog began to clear, and the silence was replaced with noise, and something happened to my chest which made me gasp, and it was so long since the air had filled my lungs that they wept at the sweetness of it, and I realised my heart had staggered to life, dragging me with it as the dried streambeds of my veins flowed red. His head was hanging to the side, his eyes almost closed, his mouth slightly open and he had stopped his incantations; something screamed at me that he had stopped breathing too.

At first I thought Lupin was trying to strangle me, that he and Bill did not know who I was. He had my head in an arm lock and was prising my jaws apart as Bill held something out towards me; it made my eyes sting and, well ... it was just fortunate I had no strength to resist.

When I woke again I knew I was in Hogwarts. The old Infirmary looked the same, with Poppy Pomfrey standing at the end, talking to herself, as she arranged and rearranged her foul potions on her shelves, straightening her already straight wimple and flattening her already flat starched skirts around her. There were no other patients, unlike the wartime days when the place had overflowed with the broken remains of our people. As Dumbledore pushed open the door and looked along the ward, I began to really realise for the first time that I was alive ... and that had not always been the case. It helped to take my mind off the bigger thoughts, the ones that were too big for me just now; I would look at them a little at a time, as I gathered courage along with my strength.

DUMBLEDORE

I had no regrets, save one, and that was that I had not had the courage to assist. I had only realised that I wanted to when they were too far into whatever they were doing to be able to accept another member. A poor excuse, I know, but nonetheless the only one I have.

I learned two things that day, as I walked the short distance to Sirius's bed, which was not at all bad for an old man who thought he knew everything already. The first and obvious one was that he was alive, and I was quite overwhelmed at my joy. The second one was much more profound and I suspect I shall never admit to it for fear of it being taken out of context.

I realised how dangerously close I had been to committing the very atrocity that marked the Dark Forces apart from us, the taking of a precious life, two precious lives in fact, by failing to allow what had happened here. I had come so near to sacrificing two men, who had given everything of themselves to protect us in our most desperate times, in the name of principle, and so plunging myself into an abyss of self-doubts and recrimination that would have followed me to my grave.

I learnt the fact, so staggering in its simplicity that I almost gasped at how it had escaped me for so long, that magic could not be light or dark, only the person who wields it. It was my own secret and not one I would ever share.

HARRY

I went down to the Infirmary two days after we got back; no one had been allowed the day before except Bill and Lupin. I was quite frankly terrified; I trembled inwardly at the thought of an empty Sirius looking slightly away from me as he spoke whatever Snape made him say. I'd had nightmares about him sitting with me in the Three Broomsticks, while unspeakable things crawled out of his eyes and nose, and his hands turned to claws. Even Dumbledore's assurances that he would not be in an advanced stage of decomposition did little to allay my fears.

He was sitting up in bed and Lupin was with him. He gave me a smile and looked right at me for the first time in almost a week. He looked pale and tired and run down and very much alive.

'Sorry for spooking you all out like that. I bet you haven't brought Ron with you.' He laughed at that.

'Err, no.' I felt myself smile; nothing had crawled out of his nose. 'Are you ... em?'

'Alive? Yes, Harry, I'm alive.' He winced as he turned a little. 'I'm not sure my muscles were glad about that when I woke up, but I am alive. I just haven't started kicking yet.'

'Is that it then?'

'I'm afraid not. Snape's mixing up some awful brew that he'll have Hermione force feed me at hourly intervals, probably for the next ten years.'

'Where is he?' I asked, trying to keep my voice neutral. I hadn't quite worked out how I felt about what had happened; apart from being happy Sirius was alive, of course.

'Playing in his lab, I suppose.' He gave a sidelong grin to Lupin.

That annoyed me a little; I thought he'd have shown a bit more gratitude, even if he did hate Snape. 'Is he going to stand trial? Or aren't you bothered enough to have found out?'

'Harry,' Lupin said warningly.

'Sorry, Remus. It's just that Severus may indeed have to stand trial for keeping him alive, and it would be common decency to show a tiny scrap of concern for him.' A red mist had begun to descend on my brain.

'He's not going to stand trial, Harry; nobody blames him for what he did,' Sirius said in a placating tone, one which really made my temper rise.

'Blame? What the fuck has blame to do with it?' I stood up; I knew what I meant, even if he didn't.

'Harry, come back here.' It was Lupin again. 'And, you, keep that mouth of yours shut for a change,' he snapped, pointing at Sirius as I turned back round.

'It doesn't matter,' I said quietly, my anger had dissipated; it was just the injustice that had rankled me. I tried a smile. 'I'll come back later.'

'Severus Snape is a deeply disturbed man, Harry,' Lupin began in some type of explanation.

'Yeah,' I gave Sirius a long look, 'he must be.'

'What do you want from me, Harry?' Sirius asked, irritated in a way I misread. 'A tearful declaration of love? Maybe suicidal remorse at the twenty-odd years I've hated him?'

'No ... none of that, nothing quite so melodramatic. I was thinking more around the lines of a tiny bit of respect, if you couldn't manage a little concern or gratitude.'

'Harry, there are no words to describe the gratitude I feel for what he did. I think Dumbledore has managed to accept this because he has allowed himself to believe that Severus lent me power to keep me alive, and by the time I died he was too weak to draw back. Don't you know that I know that is fucking bullshit? That he's powerful enough to have drawn away at any time? That he risked his fucking life never mind his freedom, and quite possibly his sanity, because of what he did for me? Do you think I have drawn a breath since I woke up, without thinking about that ... or ever will?' He gave me a disappointed shake of his head. 'Is that what you think of me?'

There wasn't much I could say; up until he'd said it, it was exactly what I'd thought. Then I remembered what Hermione had said about it being the way they dealt with one another. 'No,' I said, with a silly smile of remorse. I crossed to the bed, bent over it and wrapped my arms about his shoulders; he was warm and alive, and I thanked Merlin ... and Severus Snape.

'I'm going out to get some tea. Anyone want some?' Lupin asked tactfully.

'Yes.' I gave him a grateful smile and turned to Sirius. 'What will happen to him? I mean, is he okay?'

'Snape? Yeah, he'll be fine. School is re-opening in a few weeks, after what would have been the Christmas holidays, and he'll have a load of first years to terrify for the

first time in a couple of years; he'll be in his glory.' He gave me a level look. 'And before you shoot me down, I know that's not what you mean, but it's all you're getting.'

I couldn't content myself; I hadn't seen Snape since he'd left the shelter with Sirius and Bill, and I just couldn't rid myself of that image. 'I mean his mind, Sirius.'

'His mind's okay, Harry. At least it was when he called me all of the ungrateful bastards and mangy flea-ridden dogs under the sun, a couple of hours ago. He just needs rest; he brought himself damn near to the brink of draining everything he had, but he'll be okay now.' He gave me the serious look, the one he reserved for the few occasions when he was telling the truth and wanted me to know it. 'I wouldn't lie to you about that.'

'Why did Remus say he was disturbed?'

'He was talking about something which is not any of your business, and I am not going to discuss it with you ... and out of respect for both Severus and myself, I would prefer that you did not pursue this.'

'He's in love with you, isn't he ... and ... while you were dead, he was acting out some kind of weird fantasy, wasn't he?' I was piecing it together; it was scary stuff. 'Putting words in your mouth and pretending to himself that they were yours.'

'Harry, stop this now.' Sirius seemed to think for a moment before he went on. 'A little bit of what you said is true; one very important thing isn't. He never put any words in my mouth; he only directed my train of thoughts at any time. Anything I said to anyone was my own words.'

I looked along the Infirmary as I heard Lupin come back in, only it wasn't him; it was the black-garbed figure of Snape. He looked pale and drawn, and he had bluish shadows under his eyes, but the feverish look of two days ago had gone; it had been replaced by weariness so deep that I wondered how he could stand. Bill was with him, and I was glad of that, glad someone was watching out for him as well; I had a feeling Sirius might forget. I didn't miss Bill's worried frown; I think the same thing troubled him.

Snape gave me a curt nod; there was something strange about the look that accompanied it though, as if he grudged the very fact that I was here, and yet at the same time I knew it wasn't anything personal, not like the way we had been towards one another when I'd still been at school here. I put it away; I was so relieved that I had no room to harbour doubts.

He curled his lip at Sirius as he sat down heavily at the other side of the bed. 'I see that you have not bothered to do as I requested. How typical of you, Black,' he said, seeming more like the Snape I knew. 'Do not think of blaming me if your recovery is incomplete.'

'What?' Sirius asked; he seemed mystified.

'How can you expect to recover if you lie around all day like the lazy cur you clearly are? I told you to exercise, which, even in your case, means removing yourself from bed.'

'I've had visitors,' Sirius flared. 'More than you've had, I bet.' He eyed the flagon of greenish sludge that Snape produced with a flourish from his black robe. 'What's that?' he asked, his voice laced with suspicion.

'Medicine, you'll die without it.'

Bill and I left them to it; they didn't need our help to play this game. I just hoped Sirius would notice that Snape wasn't well; he tended to overlook things like that.

BILL

I'm not easily humbled; I suspect that has something to do with the fact that my very upbringing gave me a running start in the modesty stakes, but I found myself almost staggered at the lengths one human being had gone to, to save another. And it wasn't even that, we had all made sacrifices, done bold deeds in the name of the defence of our people; it was Severus's very refusal to accept the realities of nature, the irrefutable truth that death is the ultimate fact of life.

He had seen the impossible, the door barring the way of lesser men, and had smashed it down with a combination of sheer power and will and, there was no denying the fact, love. But it had taken a terrible toll on him, and I hoped I wasn't the only one who had noticed just how damaged he was. I'd have a word with Dumbledore about it, about the fact that he seemed to be filled with self-doubts that had nothing to do with whether what he had done was right or wrong.

Sirius was out of the Infirmary now; he had been for just over a week. He had always been popular, a combination of good looks and good humour, a bit of a wild streak and money he wasn't afraid to splash around, but now he was like a man who needed to live life to the full, today, in case tomorrow it had run away from him again. I suppose that was hardly surprising; he'd had it snatched away from him once and had rotted twelve years of his prime in Azkaban, and now he'd had it almost snatched away again. He spent time with Harry and the rest of the younger men, and Lupin and me, and it was only after a while that I noticed Severus seemed to draw back when anyone went near Sirius; only it was worse than that, he actually seemed to recoil, as though he had been dealt a blow, like a mental Cruciatius.

He had taken to only speaking when spoken to, apart from when he was with Sirius, as though he would answer queries, but would venture nothing of his own; I had an uncomfortable feeling he felt he had nothing left to give. It worried me a little that it was Sirius who was the object of his obsession; there were more compassionate souls around who might have poured some kind of oil on his troubled waters. Then again, perhaps that was what had drawn him to Sirius, the very fact that he was one of the few men who didn't really care what others thought, the same way as I had mistakenly thought of Severus for all these years.

He refused to come to the Three Broomsticks with us the last night before he all but disappeared, and I had expected Sirius to stay at Hogwarts with him, but he hadn't. I was going to stay myself, but he didn't even meet my eye. To my shame I went to Hogsmeade. I'm a better man than that, I should have stayed, maybe I could have taken some time to get into that mind of his, maybe I could have headed off what he was doing to himself.

My mother always said that we do not know the measure of any man until his limits are tested; I understood that now. I understood that Severus Snape had seen the limits and had walked beyond them; I hoped he could find his way back.

Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 5

It's hard to find the way home when you can't recall where you came from.

SEVERUS

I was losing him, and myself in the process, and I neither knew nor cared how to stop it happening. What had seemed so easy in the days in the shelter, and the first few days back at Hogwarts, had in fact proven to be impossible. For a time we had lessened our hostilities to a show of cutting remarks, but that was really all that had changed, and I was turning away in disappointment, or that was what I told myself; it was easier than admitting the truth, that I was losing my grip on reality.

I had too many barriers and too much competition. He was amongst his adoring throng again; he didn't need me any more, and that cut me more than I could have imagined. I felt outraged, eaten away by an unreasonable resentment any time anyone as much as spoke to him, almost as though he were violating what we had gone through, what I had gone through for him. He should have been mine and mine alone, and now that I had to share him I found I wasn't willing, or able, to do that. I only understand now that it was because he was still part of me and I had left a part of me inside him; perhaps it is a mercy that I did not recognise my own insanity. When I stopped going out of my rooms the jealousy retreated; instead I found myself plagued by guilt that I had put a price tag on the love I thought I had freely given.

I retreated to my own rooms more and more, keeping to my solitude and my books. Every now and again my mind would wander to the Great Hall, thinking about him, wondering whom he was talking to, who was looking at him, but I'd really cut myself off from everything. I suspect people had failed to even notice now that I didn't turn up for meals; maybe I flatter myself, maybe they had never noticed.

I realised with dull acceptance that I hadn't spoken to a living soul for days; I didn't know how many days, maybe five or six, probably more, it didn't matter. There was nobody I wanted to talk to, nobody who wouldn't pry, or try to make me talk about my feelings, or attempt to get into that black hole of my heart; there never had been. I had decisions to make and I had to make them soon; I just needed the energy.

The position of assistant head came up in Durmstrang, and I knew I would be the best qualified for the post; I could walk into it. The Daily Prophet the elves had left, before I told them to stop calling, lay open at the advertisement for a week; somehow I never got around to applying.

Lucius owled me a few times, each letter becoming more demanding than the last one, until he finally begged me to meet him; I stopped reading them after that. I know he even hammered on my door a couple of times; I could feel his presence. I was slowly sinking deeper and deeper into despair so black that I knew I would never find my way out if I succumbed.

I made up my mind to leave Hogwarts; I had done no work at all for the new term, the rising of the new dawn of everything we had fought for, and I knew I could not face it, not now, not the way I was. I had no idea where I was going to go; it didn't seem to matter much anyway, and it had taken all my mental energy to decide to leave. It hadn't been a choice made from any conscious desire, as much as one forced upon me because I was at such a loss as to how I could continue to stay. I had no explanation as to why I let myself drift into the state in which I found myself, why I had retreated into myself, turning everyone away, even turning aside the one man I had lived for. I only knew how badly hurt I felt, and failed to understand why.

I poured a drink; that was becoming a habit too, and lit another cigarette. I found my teeth gritting at another ruddy knock on the door; the sooner I was away from here the better.

SIRIUS

I couldn't understand what had gone wrong; one moment it seemed as though we could make it after all, and the next he had retreated behind his black armour.

I had been given rooms on the second floor, but he'd never called at them; he seemed to be more comfortable in his dungeon, so I went there. It hadn't been a courtship, even I couldn't pretend that to myself, but it had been a lessening of aggression, as though we were two exotic birds gauging one another in some weird ritual before deciding whether to go for the kill or the mating game.

Looking back, I think I see what happened. I was euphoric, unnaturally so; I know that now, and my health was improving so rapidly that I failed to see the equal decline in his. It's a lame excuse, I know, but I haven't got another one. He was drinking too much, smoking too much, and he became argumentative and hostile to the point where I stormed off on more than one occasion, leaving him to stew on his own.

And there was so much else happening at Hogwarts; the war was over, the peace was beginning to come together and I found myself, for the first time since before I went to Azkaban, truly free. And he was holding me back, reluctant to integrate himself into anything much; in fact he hardly spoke to anyone except me, unless he was spoken to.

I remember the night I went to the Three Broomsticks with Bill and Lupin; Harry and Ron and Hermione were already there. Severus had refused to join us, again, and I was damn sure I wasn't going to miss the fun just because he didn't want to join in. I went to his rooms when I came back, the worse for drink, I know, and we had another round of the tired old recriminations we had begun to throw at one another. He didn't come for breakfast the next day and he refused to answer his door, nor did he come for lunch or dinner. To my shame I didn't see the significance that a day had become two, and when he failed to let me in the second day, I stormed away again.

It probably took another day for my anger to turn to concern that I hadn't even seen him; perhaps another two until it turned to something approaching alarm. I knew he was in there; I knew he hadn't left, Padfoot's senses told me that. I began to worry that he was suicidal. I went down to his rooms and stood for a full hour one evening, constantly knocking at his door, threatening to break it down until eventually I got one sentence from him, "Go away, Black, I want to be alone". It wasn't the words that sent me straight to Dumbledore; it was the flat hollow tone. I could picture him sitting at the other side of that door, looking at his table for an hour, dredging up the force to deliver that one line.

HERMIONE

I hadn't seen him for over a week; he'd even stopped haunting the Restricted Section on the few occasions he left his rooms at all. Everyone was worried about him, and nobody knew what to do. Sirius became withdrawn, and Lupin and Bill looked anxious; I knew they were all fretting about Severus in different ways. Even Dumbledore kept looking towards the door during meals. I'd been down a couple of times, but he hadn't answered; this time I'd decided I would just wait until he did.

'Come.' He surprised me on my first knock and only looked up as I froze in the door. 'Oh, it's you,' he said flatly.

He was drunk; he looked as though he hadn't shaved for days, and his rooms were a mess that I could not even begin to associate with him. 'What do think you are doing to yourself?' I asked him when I found my voice.

'Now, a bright girl like you should know the answer to that, Miss Granger. I am in the process of getting rat-arsed drunk.' He lifted the glass in a mocking toast and drank it off.

I went in and closed the door; it really would not do for anyone else to see this, I knew he'd hate that. 'Why?' I asked.

'It seemed like a good idea at the time.'

'Severus, why have you shut yourself away?' I asked as I sat down opposite him. 'Everyone is worried sick about you.' I hoped he didn't see I was at a loss, but I don't think he was registering much of anything, and that frightened me.

'Yes, so I see. I am inundated with requests for my company.'

'You don't answer the door.'

'I know.' He stood up, quite steadily. 'Will you leave me now, Miss Granger? I should like to continue my good work, undisturbed.'

'No, I think I'll just sit and watch ... or go for Dumbledore. I've not decided which yet.'

'I know what you are trying to do ... and I appreciate it.' He sat back down and lit a cigarette. I'd never seen him smoke, but he did it with the familiarity of long and frequent practice. 'Please, Hermione, leave me alone.'

He'd never called or referred to me by my first name, to the best of my knowledge; I think that twisted my heart more than anything. 'He loves you, you know ... but you make it so hard for everyone. He just doesn't know what to do, how to get through to you.' I almost pleaded with him. 'None of us do.'

He put his head in his hands, and it was all I could do not to stand up and touch him, but I knew that would be a mistake; I knew I was lucky I hadn't been thrown out already. It was then that I noticed in the general mess of the room that he had begun to pack some of his books into crates; I had to stop this, and I didn't know how to.

'Severus,' I tried again, 'don't leave, not after all you did to get him. Don't just give up now.'

He looked back up and curled his lip. 'I have fought the good fight ... and lost; he does not need me.' He stood up and opened the door. 'Thank you for your concern.'

I had little choice; I knew I needed to move fast. He'd know I'd go straight to Sirius; he didn't look as though he was going to hang around for long.

SIRIUS

Dumbledore watched me, nodding his head in that way he had. 'No, Sirius, he will not take his own life; have no fear of that.'

'What's wrong with him?' I asked. 'I've tried, Albus, everyone has.'

'I fear that he has drained his will to live. I cannot think anything else. Dark Magic is a dangerous thing, Sirius; it does not ask us if we can pay the price of its use.' He'd given me his blue gaze. 'Severus poured so much of himself into you that when he let go there wasn't enough of a foundation left to rebuild himself. In time he will come out of it, I'm sure ... in time.'

'Lost his will to live? What are you talking about?' I wasn't sure I liked the sound of that; he'd seemed sane enough to me when we'd got back to Hogwarts, it was only a few days later that he'd begun to draw away from everyone. 'I'm the one who died; I've managed to get the fun back into my life.'

'He didn't lose it, Sirius. He gave it to you.'

I hope never again to feel the humiliation I felt at that remark; it cut through me like a hot knife through butter.

Dumbledore looked at me shrewdly, and I had a feeling he was beginning to understand something himself, but it was as though he expected me just to accept that I should leave Severus to his own devices. 'Give him time ... give him time to come to terms with himself,' he said, nodding his head, as though he, at least, understood. 'He has got so far; he will manage the rest.'

'Time? I don't think he's got time.'

He was watching me, as though he wanted me to understand something, something I should realise for myself, something he wasn't able to tell me. Now I had to be a fucking mind reader too.

'You've thought of something haven't you?' I accused.

'For what it is worth, I suspect that Severus's calculations were based on the expectancy of you both returning, for want of a better word, at the same time. He did not account for the fact that Lupin and Bill had to bring him back through you; he could not have allowed for that, although he had prepared for the possibility, it was an unknown.'

I blinked at him. 'And?' I asked.

'I suspect things haven't quite balanced out because of that. You haven't only got his will to live, Sirius.' He paused as though struggling to voice what he was thinking. 'Whatever confidence and self-belief he had ... I think you've got that too.' I must have looked thunderstruck, because he stood up and put his hand on my arm. 'Give him time, Sirius; he has adjustments to make too.'

'What else?' I asked as I watched something like regret cross his ancient features. 'What aren't you telling me?'

He looked away for a moment in a way that was so unlike him, but when he turned that damn blue gaze on me again he had composed himself. 'I should have been there, Sirius,' he said. 'I should have been there to help. Forgive me.'

It hadn't comforted me much; I couldn't stop thinking about him, about what was going through his mind, sitting down there on his own, day after day, night after night. And yet I'd found that whilst I yearned for him when he was not there, I'd fought with him when he was. And he was the one who had pushed me away ... I had gone though; I admit that. It was too much; I couldn't wait for him to just snap out of it, I didn't think he was going to, not on his own anyway.

I stood from the board game I was playing with Remus, Harry and Ron; I couldn't concentrate, and Dumbledore's words had begun to haunt me. He'd made me feel as though I were Severus Snape's personal Dementor; I wasn't sure I could handle the knowledge.

'Where are you going?' Harry asked, giving me another of the hard looks he'd been throwing at me all week; I knew what they accused me of.

'I can't take any more of this; I'm going to hammer on his fucking door until he gets fed up with the racket and lets me in,' I replied. 'And if he doesn't, I'll smash the fucking door down.'

Harry gave me the "about bloody time" look.

I was almost at his door, when it was flung wide open and Hermione walked out with a worried frown, which was swamped with relief when she saw me.

'Don't bother closing it, Severus.' I shoved him back into the room and closed the door, shutting us both in the shambles that had once been his proud domain.

Chapter Five

Chapter 5 of 5

What's one little dabble in the Dark Arts, after all?

SIRIUS

He wouldn't look at me.

I was surprised he had let Hermione in, but I took the time to be glad that at least he wouldn't think that she had sent me down; at least he'd realise I'd come of my own accord. That was if he were capable of thought; I wasn't entirely sure that he was.

'This ends today, Severus,' I said flatly as I began to take books back out of the boxes in which he'd put them, realising with a start that he was packing. I just added them to the general mess in the room; I'd straighten things up myself, I didn't want the elves gossiping about this.

He was still standing in the middle of the floor where I'd pushed him back into the room; his head hung and his hair had dropped over his face, and he looked as forlorn as anyone I have ever seen. He'd lost the way, and somewhere along the line I'd let that happen. Where he had stood with me and refused to let me go, I had let him slip away, unnoticed. He had given me himself, his whole being, all of him, and I had not taken the time to see that he had nothing left. I'd just let him be here, isolated and alone, with only whatever torturous bewilderment he had left himself with for company.

I laid the books down, stood up and led him unresisting to the settee. I sat him down and pulled him to me the way he'd had held me in the shelter, feeling his cold emptiness against me; at least this time two hearts were beating, we had moved forward after all. I could feel his crushing despair; I could feel it run in his very veins, as though it were confused and searching for a way out. We sat there for a long time, maybe hours, saying nothing, as the tension slowly and painfully subsided; I realised he had fallen asleep.

I understood now; I understood part of what had happened, a bit of what I needed to do. Dumbledore couldn't have told me; he didn't know himself. I hadn't had to give him any power or any of my strength, he hadn't needed my heat or my magic; there were no incantations or whatever else he had had to use to give me back my life. I just had to hold him while he found his way back ... and be at the end of the road waiting when he did. That was part of it, but he was asleep just now. Later, I promised myself, once he saw I was there for him and he had something to live for, we would maybe do the other bit, but for now I let him rest; Merlin alone knew how much he needed it.

HARRY

It wasn't Sirius who came back into the Library a little later; it was Hermione. She looked relieved as she flopped down beside me and knocked the board game so that all of the pieces moved out of their places.

'Oi ... watch what you're doing,' Ron flared. 'I was winning.'

'Well, you'll just have to win again, Ronald,' she said and turned to me. 'Sirius is with him.'

I felt the relief she was showing flood through me; it was only then I realised how worried we had all become. I looked across at Remus who'd just stood up to leave; I could see he felt the same way. I'd been down a few times to see if he was okay, as we all had, but he hadn't answered the door. I'd been tempted, very tempted just to break it down, but I hadn't. Cowardice on two counts, I suppose. I hadn't really wanted a dose of his vitriol if he were alive, and hadn't wanted to be the one to find him hanging from the rafters if he weren't; how's that for the guy who'd just slain the Dark Lord?

I'd gone to Dumbledore; I suppose I really was worried about him, and I suspect I hadn't been the first to voice my concerns to him. He'd told me that Snape would not take his own life; he seemed sure of that, I don't know why. He also told me that only Sirius and Severus could sort this out and that they would when the time was right ... whatever Dark Magic Snape had used had bound them to one another. He seemed quietly confident that he would be okay eventually. He said that Sirius had reached a crisis point in the shelter, which had made the conditions right for what Snape had done, but he felt that Severus wasn't there yet. He seemed to think Sirius would know when he was; I wasn't so confident.

I had wondered though why Dumbledore hadn't stepped in when Snape had closeted himself away. The elves had told Hermione that he hadn't had any food sent to him for over a week, and I was sure she would have told Dumbledore that, but from what he said, there was nothing he could have done.

'Did you see Severus?' I asked.

Hermione pulled a face. 'Yes, he looks awful. He was packing, Harry; I think he was leaving Hogwarts. Sirius just arrived as I was going to get him; I don't think he would have even been there if I'd had to go and find him.'

Ron gave her a look. 'How come he let you in when he's not seen anyone else?'

'I suppose I was just the one who turned up when he subconsciously needed someone to stop him. It didn't really matter who I was.'

I pulled the Marauder's Map from my pocket and laid it flat on the board game, knocking Ron's piece further from the winning post as I did so; he resisted commenting and looked skywards instead. Sirius and Severus were both in Snape's rooms. I felt someone behind me; it was Bill. He reached over my shoulder and folded the Map up again; he was right, we didn't need to know any more.

SIRIUS

I eased away from him, pulled his legs up to where I'd been sitting and put a rug over him; he was so exhausted that he didn't even stir. I watched him for a while; perhaps watching over him would be a better description, before turning away to start on the mess.

It must have been quite late by the time I'd straightened the place up. His books had obediently returned to their appointed places with a spell; in fact most things had, there were few mid-air fights with objects, most things here knew where they habitually resided. Even the fire I'd lit earlier had begun to warm the colder corners of his rooms.

I went into his bedroom; the bed was unmade and there were clothes scattered around, it looked as though the elves had stopped calling. I changed the linen, and the dog in me recognised that it had been a good few days since he'd slept here. The bathroom looked as unused as the bedroom; there was no drying water to hint of earlier ablutions. I turned on the taps in his bath, and unstoppered a very expensive looking bottle. As I laced the running water with a hefty dose of whatever it was, I became aware of being watched.

'You can go now; I promise not to drown myself,' he said. Below the dishevelled clothes, the tangled hair, and what looked like five days of beard, he looked a bit more like himself.

'Not right now.' I nodded to the bath. 'Do you think the plumbing will cope, or should I hose you down first?'

He gave me a look, a Snape look, and let his lip curl; I confess to having felt a lump in my throat at seeing it. 'I'll just leave you to it, then,' I added hastily before he could hex me. 'I'll just be out there.'

SEVERUS

When I awoke I felt startled and unsure; for one awful moment I thought he'd left me again. Then I heard him messing about in my bedroom, doing Black things, probably opening drawers and poking about where he'd no business poking about. I wasn't prepared for how swamped I felt by relief that he was still here; he must have been here for hours. And he'd come himself; Hermione hadn't gone for him as I knew she was going to do, probably that was why I'd allowed him to stay. I know it was why I was still there when he came. I knew I felt better, through the slamming headache and the dull realisation of the state I was in, I knew I felt better, and I knew it was because he was near. And I knew it was more than that; I knew he had come to me... not out of obligation or sense of duty, or because he felt he owed me any debt, or even because he had nothing else to do ... he had come to me because he wanted to.

I let him muddle about for a while as I scanned the room; he seemed to have put things back to how they should be. I let myself be impressed by his magical cleaning skills for the moment, assuming the whole lot would fall about my ears when I stood up, but for now I was impressed. He'd finished whatever he was doing in my bedroom and had moved into the bathroom. I stood up, preparing myself for the dizziness I expected, surprised when it didn't materialise. I ran a long glass of water and drank it off, feeling its coldness creep about my body, as though it were banishing whatever residue of madness might have hidden within me.

I heard water running as I walked towards the bathroom; that reminded me of the pressure that had built up in my bladder, and I hadn't yet sunk to the depths of having a slash in the sink in my study, at least I hoped I hadn't. I knew he felt me watching him.

I stifled a smirk at his remark; I knew it was another sign that I was feeling better, that I welcomed his impertinences the way I suppose I always had.

'Remember what you said about not drowning.' He backed away theatrically.

I closed the door with relief; I only had the strength to break so much ice at one time. I'm afraid I had to virtually peel my clothes off, and I winced at what Granger must have thought of me, as I tossed them into the laundry basket. I took my time shaving the four or five days growth, pleased that my hand wasn't shaking, whilst avoiding really looking at myself. I sank down into the bathwater, noticing he'd been very free with Lucius's bath preparations; I reminded myself to top it up with water before he came again ... then again, maybe he wouldn't be coming back. I lay for a long while before reluctantly pulling the plug; every now and again I'd searched for his presence and found its comforting closeness. I'd have known if he'd left; I would have felt the void.

I dressed in fresh clothes and braced myself.

He was sitting at my table with his long boot-clad legs slung up on it, smoking and drinking a mug of something hot. He must have known I was on my way out, another steaming mug sat at my place. My heart was in my throat; I really did not know what to say to him. How do you say thank you to someone who has plucked you from the abyss into which you've thrown yourself by mistake? I know his casual air had been rehearsed for hours, but at least he'd come up with something, which was more than I'd managed.

'I've sent for food. I don't know about you, but all that cleaning makes me hungry.' He flashed the grin.

'Is that your usual excuse for the pitiful state in which you normally present yourself?' I knew that was a bit rich coming from me that day, but it would have to do.

'Eggs, scrambled eggs and toast.' He watched me.

'I don't like eggs.'

'I knew you'd say that,' he replied. 'You've got black tea and dry toast, you can magic anything you want onto it.' He gave me a "try and come back on that" smirk.

We could have gone on like that for hours, I suppose, sitting thinking up smart retorts to hurl back and forth at one another; it suddenly seemed like an awful waste of time. I stood up. 'I don't want food, Black,' I said, before I could stop myself, before my inborn reserve overtook the surge of recklessness. 'I want to try ...' I trailed off; he knew what I meant.

I could see he had something on his mind, some mad thing he wanted to get off his chest. I confess I was stunned at what he said, more with the perfection of it than any sense of foreboding about how we would have to go about it. I wondered if I smelt Dumbledore somewhere in the background, pulling his strings like the grand puppet master he was.

'Can we do it alone?' he asked. 'I'm sure Bill and Remus would help, if you think we need them.'

I didn't know; I felt the very un-sureness creep over me and tried to push it away. I must have shaken my head, and I know he sensed I was at a loss.

'Not tonight anyway,' he said. 'Tonight you're going to get some proper rest and eat a proper meal. I meant to mention it before; you're far too thin.'

SIRIUS

I wasn't at all sure if this were the right thing to do; my resolution leaked out of me about the same time as he opened the stone bottle and the fumes leaked out of it. He looked better this evening, at least he looked rested, and I know he'd slept most of the night before; I saw that from where I lay awake beside him. I had waited until he was asleep again, before climbing on top of the bedclothes beside where he lay beneath them; I hadn't wanted him to think I was pressuring him into any kind of sexual activity if he woke, nothing was further from my mind at that point.

I hadn't left his side at all through the day; I got both breakfast and lunch sent down, and although he ate little, at least he made an attempt. It didn't escape my notice, or his I suppose, that no one had seen fit to come down to hammer on his door. I ignored the way he tried to pick a fight over nothing, and when he became surly when I wouldn't join in, and even ignored when he grabbed me and tried to throw me out; he wasn't a physical match for me anyway, and he wouldn't be like this for much longer, that much I promised myself. He gave up on trying to rile me into leaving and lapsed into a sullen silence instead, seemingly content to dose me with accusation from his black eyes alone.

I waited until he seemed to snap out of it again, and berated myself for not seeing it through all the times I'd taken the lure and swum off.

'Now, Severus, let's do it now,' I said, eyeing the stone flask with trepidation I hoped I didn't show.

He nodded, just once, and I saw him fumble in his robe; I knew he was checking the dagger was where he wanted it.

I watched him begin his incantations; they sounded more weird and frightening than they had the last time, somehow alien and threatening. He must have felt my unease, because he looked up from the little stone flask.

'If you have doubts, Black, stop me now.'

No, I had no doubts; I had fears, and reservations, but I had no doubts, not about him anyway. 'Hurry up, before I chicken out,' I said, trying not to notice how the slimy smoking leaf was eating his flesh. Merlin knows where I found the courage, but I opened my mouth, and he placed a bit on my tongue and then a bit on his own. There was no pain, and that surprised me; I had assumed that I had been so confused when Bill had put the thing on my tongue in the Infirmary that I just hadn't noticed. I felt something though, but it defies me to describe what it was; the best I can do is that I was drawing away from that room to another place.

He took the little dagger from his pocket, and his chant became quieter and quieter until I could barely hear him muttering. I realised that the room had dimmed somewhat, and I had to strain to even see him; it was the same fog that had surrounded the bed in the Infirmary. I held out my arm as he held out his hand; I wished it weren't shaking, but it was steady enough for him to draw the dagger once across my flesh and catch the blood in the flask; he sealed my wound so quickly that it seemed it had not happened. He handed the dagger to me, and I slashed into his arm before my nerve failed me, collecting the blood once more. It came in gasping spurts, quite unlike the steady splash of my own, and I knew why that was.

We sat facing one another, and he held the flask in front of him, chanting again, as the contents seemed to puff something into the air, something that wasn't there... five little gasps of nothing. He handed me the flask; this time I drank unaided and he drank too, and we watched one another, and I swore this time I would not leave him behind or take of anything of his, nor would I leave my emptiness inside him to take its place. This time we would put everything back where it belonged.

I don't know who slumped in unconsciousness first, but when I awoke he was still sprawled across the table; at least this time he was breathing.

DUMBLEDORE

I was disappointed in Sirius. I'm not sure what I had expected, perhaps for him to grasp what I'd said and run to Severus's rooms with a Gryffindor banner flying behind him. Then again, I had not really spelled it out; how could I, weak old man that I am. I had considered going to see Severus, but I didn't, and looking back I understand why. I was ashamed again, that I had not stepped in when I should and had interfered where I should not, the failings of the aged.

I was about to douse the final two torches and seek my bed for the night, when I felt it, the wave of menace that creeps through a place when Dark Magic is performed, that certain unease that makes men stand from what they are doing to look out of windows to see if there is an intruder lurking, or check the door is properly locked against some unknown peril, or makes a dog bark at nothing more than the night. I felt it creep through Hogwarts, and knew that no one else did.

I wondered if I should go down, but what would I find? Better this way, better just to have pointed vaguely and left the traveller to find his own way. At last the two sconces I still had lit at that late hour dipped for a moment, and Fawkes let out a shrill cry; I knew it was over.

I only hoped it had balanced the scales; somehow I thought it had. And after all, what was one little dabble in the Dark Arts?

SEVERUS and SIRIUS

He had changed; I know he had, I know it wasn't just me looking for something that wasn't there. He had never exactly been a happy-go-lucky kind of guy, and I know he would hex me into next week for using that kind of label in the same sentence as his name, but something had shifted. If he had smiled I would have run straight for Dumbledore, but the way he twisted his lip at me in some type of disdain, as I passed him my cigarettes across the table when he dragged his head back up, made my heart sing.

I watched him take his own cigarette box from the pocket of the black layers he wore and slip one from it; he let it dangle from his thin lips and squinted through the smoke. 'What do you feel?' he asked.

'I don't know,' I replied, and he caught me in the lie, as I should have known he would.

'When you feel like telling the truth, you can let me know,' he said in that way he had of brushing people off. He stood up and lifted a book from one of his shelves and began to read ... a goddamned book, after what we had just done.

He was lying of course. It's a Gryffindor trait I suspect; they're all expected to be noble and forthright, and when they find that they're human they just lie instead. James had been the same, I mused, realising that I hadn't felt the little tug of regret I usually felt when I thought of him. I'd moved on, into uncharted waters in some way, in that I was taking control of my life by letting another control it for me. I was following the star I'd always thought was out of reach, and now I found it was almost in my grasp. It was a heady experience, almost as heady as the other experience that was trying to manifest itself.

I knew how he felt; I just wanted it to come from him, it was easier for me that way, and I'm a coward when it comes to my own feelings. I wondered how long he was going to stare at the top of my head, not too long; he was a Gryffindor, another of their traits was impatience, they saw their quarry and went in for the kill, no messing about except to raise their ruddy banner and shout "charge". I had to catch myself before I did the unthinkable, but I stifled the smile; that wouldn't have done at all, I still had some reputation to maintain.

I knew he was waiting for me to say something, but I was going to let him stew. I glanced at the book, hoping it was upside down and I could catch him out, but they're clever, wily too, the damn Slytherins. I knew what he was doing; I knew his damn superiority attitude was waiting for me to go to him, just as I knew the stirrings I was feeling were real, and that he was feeling them too. I let the tension rise another notch and found myself almost squirming in adolescent anticipation; it had been a long time, longer for me than it had been for him, I suspect. Damn Slytherins, everything on their plates and still wanting more.

'Good book?' I ventured, and wished my voice had sounded a little less husky.

'Not particularly,' he replied without lifting his damned head.

I tried in vain to think up a punch line. It was becoming warm in the room; I knew it had nothing to do with the dying embers of the fire. 'Why are you reading, Severus?' I asked.

He looked up in feigned surprise. 'I usually read when I have nothing better to do,' he said and dropped his head again. 'What do you want, Black? You're ruining my concentration.'

He was determined to make a meal out of it, just as I was determined to let him. I'd caught him out though, transparent tart that he was, sitting there with his mouth half-open in invitation.

'I suppose coming to bed with me is out of the question?' he asked, and I confess I almost dropped my ruddy cigarette; it had only been a prop anyway, holding me up in some obscure way, a bit like the book ... I didn't even know which one it was.

I could have knocked him back I suppose, if I had wanted to, if I hadn't been the one who had led him thus far. The responses ran through my mind; there weren't that

many. I wondered if I should look up in shock, but that wouldn't do; I'd only end up looking foolish and I didn't think I'd like that. I really had to reply in some way, but I was finding it hard to find my voice.

'Not necessarily,' I said eventually, without realising that I had looked up after all and found what I needed to find, his own vulnerabilities, his own doubts, and in retrospect I have to say that whilst it was not the subtlest reply I have ever delivered it was the most effective.

'I fed you that line, Severus. Don't run away with the thought that you're getting all the credit.' He gave me a slow smile; it was one I hadn't seen before.
