

Left Holding the Baby

by scaranda

The conflagration at Godric's Hollow dies down, and the wizarding world comes to terms with two facts: the Potters are slain, and the Dark Lord has fled. Severus embarks on his own trail of revenge and ends up with quite a lot more than he bargained for.

(Rated for a later chapter.)

NOW COMPLETE.

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 17

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Sirius turned on the grass when he heard the swoosh of Apparition again, as Lupin and Minerva arrived together, more witnesses to the atrocity, more tears to shed over the fact that there was no such thing as being just too late; you were either on time or you weren't. He felt McGonagall relieve him of the small white bundle he was barely aware he was holding, the last remnant of the line of the Potters, bloodied but somehow unbowed, still wondering how this had come about.

Barely half an hour before he'd been sitting in the Three Broomsticks with Regulus and Lucius to see if there were any way of getting Regulus out of the Death Eaters' clutches. He had been surprised that Lucius had taken on the role of devil's advocate until it became clear to him that things were becoming unacceptable to even Malfoy. Sirius knew well that despite what Malfoy had recently claimed, he hadn't been forced by any magical means to join the Dark Lord; the coercion had been much more subtle, the lure of power and the glitter of fame, all for a mutual price of course. Voldemort needed the unplumbed depths of the Malfoy millions, and Lucius needed to bask in the glory of being the darling of the Death Eaters, the Dark Lord's right hand man.

Sirius could see he was frightened now; things had escalated out of control, and Lucius's name was mud, his life forfeit if he made any attempt to leave, as his wife's had been only two weeks before, for failing to conceive the Dark Lord's child just three bare months after the birth of her first son. Voldemort was nothing if not fair; he dealt his retribution to his friends and enemies with evenhandedness. Sirius stifled the compassion he felt for Malfoy; he was only reaping what he had sown for so long, it served the bigoted fat tart right. It was a pity about Narcissa though, he supposed grudgingly, cold bitch that she had been; she didn't deserve to die just as her son began his life. He watched Lucius start, looking across at the door as it opened, relaxing as he recognised Sturgis Podmore stride across the bar, pausing only to nod to Sirius as he passed them by.

'I think you should get the Potters out of the country for a while,' Malfoy said as he tossed over his Firewhisky. 'There's too much talk about them. I should not care to be the one to break the news to Severus if you let anything untoward befall them.'

Sirius frowned inwardly in puzzlement at the reference to Snape, but he didn't care to quiz Lucius; he shook his head instead. 'The Potters are safe; no one can find them.'

'You fool, Black,' Lucius hissed, and his Charms hovered dangerously close to disappearing and revealing his true identity to the entire bar. 'Don't you think the Dark Lord will find a way to get the truth from you? He has the means at his disposal.'

'Oh yes,' Sirius replied, 'he won't have thrown Severus's recipe book away just because he left the Death Eaters. Unless our Snape is still doing a little freelance work?'

Lucius shook his head in disgust. 'You don't change, do you?' He glared across at Sirius and then nodded to where Regulus sat quietly on his own, two tables away. Apart from a couple of brief words of greeting, Sirius's brother had maintained a moody aloofness, not even glancing at them. 'Anyway,' Malfoy went on, 'I want you to take Regulus to your family home. I have a suspicion that the Dark Lord will not take kindly to him changing the object of his affections.'

Sirius watched Lucius look down for a moment in some emotion he didn't recognise; pain, shame, neither, it didn't really matter. The rats were deserting the Dark Lord's ship and Dumbledore had made it clear that they were to be given protection wherever possible; the only priority over them was the safety of their own people. 'He hardly needs my permission to go to the family home, if you could call it that,' he said flatly.

'Perhaps not, Black,' Lucius replied and lifted the silver-blond eyebrow only Regulus and Sirius could see through his complex Charms, 'but he does need your good grace.'

Sirius nodded; he needed Regulus's good grace too. Whatever he was, or as seemed now, had been, he was his brother, and blood calls to its own, especially wizard blood. 'I know,' he whispered, suddenly choked with emotion and strain and Merlin knew what else. He found himself reaching his hand across the table to the man opposite him. 'Watch out for yourself, Lucius. He will become even more dangerous than he is now when he finds he's being thwarted from within.'

'I need to go,' Lucius said, drawing his manicured fingertips away from the touch, as he stood up and took a last nervous look around the Three Broomsticks. 'Remember, Black, the Dark Lord will know you are James Potter's Secret Keeper; he'll know you know where he is.' He began to turn away.

'Actually I'm not,' Sirius declared.

'Lupin?' Malfoy spun to him again. 'He's not strong enough. What possessed you to take such a risk?'

Sirius grinned. 'Not Remus either,' he said in some small degree of triumph. 'Someone your Lord will never think of.'

'No...'. Even under his Charms, Malfoy paled. 'Not Pettigrew. Please, Black, tell me it's not Pettigrew.'

'Why?' Sirius had stood up in alarm; he grabbed Malfoy's cloak. 'Why not?' he asked, as Regulus turned to see what was going on, his interest sparked at last.

Malfoy had seen Regulus turn; he pulled Sirius to him quickly, as though embracing him in farewell. 'Peter Pettigrew is a Death Eater,' he hissed into his ear.

And he'd been too late; even as he got to the door of the Three Broomsticks to Apparate to Godric's Hollow, he knew he was too late. As he saw James's Patronus materialise from nowhere to beg him for help, he knew he was too late; when he saw the bright white light, created by the man who had sent the mighty stag, already faltering at the edges, like weak flames being tossed in the wind, Sirius knew James was already dying.

And now he stood there on the lawn trembling in shock, watching the last of the conflagration die down as Dumbledore quenched the blaze that had consumed Lily and James's home to little more than a smoking ruin, and Hagrid stood on the front step blubbering his heart out as his boarhound howled in anguish.

They began arriving in twos and threes, the Order Members, those just sympathetic to their cause, and those too frightened to show their support before now, coming out of the woodwork as the news spread that, not only were the Potters slain, but somehow their infant son had turned the Dark Lord's own Curse against him. Even through the shock of what had happened here at Godric's Hollow, Sirius could feel the undercurrent of jubilation in the crowd, the release of tension as men who had ceased to nod abstract acquaintance with one another once again found themselves gossiping with virtual strangers ... and the word began to spread; the Dark Lord had fled.

Sirius sat nursing a glass of whisky as Lupin watched him. It would be so easy just to drink himself into oblivion, that way it wouldn't be so painful ... that way he could pretend he wasn't responsible for the death of his best friend.

'You can go now,' he said, pushing his glass away. 'I've more important things to do than drink myself to death in remorse.'

'You didn't do this, Sirius.'

'No? Perhaps you can tell me just who made Pettigrew James's Secret Keeper?' Sirius said. 'I'll be really glad if it weren't me, Moony, because right now I feel like shit.'

Lupin sighed.

'Are you going to help me or not?' Sirius asked.

'I have an option?' Lupin scratched his head, the way he did when he was nervous or at a loss. 'I think you're forgetting he was my friend too. And maybe if I hadn't been a werewolf you might have made me his Secret Keeper.'

'Yeah, and if my grandmother hadn't died, I wouldn't have had to bury her.'

'My point precisely,' Lupin replied. 'You didn't do this.'

Something crossed Sirius's mind again as he filtered through the awful images of the day: sitting with Malfoy and his reference to Snape, Snape standing pale and silent under the chestnut tree at Godric's Hollow after Hagrid had almost pole-axed him to prevent him going into the flames before Dumbledore put them out. He wondered what it was. 'Was Lily having an affair?' he asked.

'Lily? I doubt it,' Lupin responded. 'The boy's only a couple of months old. What made you ask that?'

Sirius shook his head. 'It doesn't matter. I didn't think so either.'

'What made you say that?' Lupin pressed.

'Snape ... not that she'd ever look at a greasy git like him. But maybe he fancied her,' Sirius said. 'Just something Lucius Malfoy said and ... I don't know ... he seemed pretty upset about things ...' He trailed off, giving the werewolf a suspicious look. 'What don't I know, Remus? Are you telling me Lily was having an affair with Snape?'

'I don't suppose it matters now.' It was Lupin's turn to shake his head; he turned away for only a moment before facing Sirius again. 'Lily wasn't having an affair with anyone that I know of ... but James was.'

'James? Severus and James?' Sirius blinked in disbelief. 'Don't be ridiculous; he would have told me. Snape's not good enough for James, not by a million miles.'

'That's not what James thought.'

'I don't believe you. He would have told me,' Sirius repeated. 'I would have known.'

'Not that it matters anymore,' Lupin said quietly, 'but it was true.'

'Why didn't he tell me?' Sirius said. 'I don't believe you. Not Snape, not him of all people.'

'Perhaps that's why he didn't tell you. Maybe he knew just what your reaction would be.'

Sirius mouthed soundlessly for a moment. 'I wouldn't have minded,' he lied. 'It was his business.'

'How noble of you,' Lupin said dryly as Sirius gave him a hard look. 'Anyway, it doesn't matter now; none of it matters now.'

'How long had it been going on for?'

'A long time.'

'How long, Moony?'

Lupin gave him a long look, as though he were gauging whether he should be any more indiscreet. 'Since just after they left school.'

'Why didn't you tell me?' Sirius asked, finding a focus for his confusion in the werewolf. 'You could have told me.'

'Now you're being ridiculous. It wasn't any of my business either. Let it drop, Sirius,' Lupin replied. 'I wish I'd never told you.'

'I don't believe you,' Sirius repeated, but he did now. Even after the events of the day he felt a little twist of envy; he'd always fancied a slice of dark Slytherin for himself as a change from the blond one that had presented itself to him at every tortuous family gathering, and then slithered back out of his reach before he could catch him ... but he'd never known how to go about it. He looked over at the door as Regulus came in, nodding grudgingly to Lupin and moving to the sink to fill the kettle.

All three of them frowned as someone began to hammer on the front door, sending Mrs Black's portrait into raptures of abuse at whomsoever had disturbed her slumber. Sirius kept meaning to mention to her that she was dead and didn't really need to sleep, but he hadn't quite plucked up the courage yet.

'Shall I get that?' Regulus asked moodily, as he slammed the inoffensive kettle onto the hob.

Sirius didn't think Regulus really wanted to be there, a feeling that was becoming mutual; whatever rush of brotherly affection had afflicted him in the Three Broomsticks had fled with the realisation that Regulus was still the same spoilt prejudiced brat he'd been when he left home. Sirius didn't like the cool look he'd given Lupin, as though he were some kind of subspecies come to despoil the Ancient and Most Bigoted House of Black. 'Obviously Kreacher beat you to it,' he replied as the front door slammed behind whoever had come in.

'Where is Pettigrew?' Snape snarled as he shoved Kreacher out of way and barged into the kitchen, ignoring Regulus and Lupin and focussing his intensity on Sirius. 'I know you know where he is, and if I find out you're harbouring him I shall kill you too.'

'If I knew where he was I'd have beaten you to it,' Sirius snapped as he stood up. 'Why didn't you tell the Order he was a Death Eater?'

'I didn't know until Lucius told me ten minutes ago. Why didn't you know? He was your friend.' Snape gave Regulus a hard look at last. 'Talking of Death Eaters, you don't seem to mind hanging about with them; makes me wonder just who is on what side nowadays.'

'What's that supposed to mean?' Sirius asked.

'Calm down, Sirius,' Lupin said mildly. 'You too, Snape. There is no point in losing your temper. Sirius and I are going to track him down.'

'Not before I do.' Snape snorted his derision. 'If I have to search every sewer in this country I shall find the little rat ... and believe me when I do he will wish he had never been born.'

Sirius thought there was something dangerous about Snape, something not quite sane in its fury. He noticed Regulus had taken the opportunity to slip out of the kitchen and didn't think to wonder why, until he heard the renewed clamour as Mrs Black's portrait serenaded yet another visitor. His acute hearing picked up the conversation in the hall, the anxious unctuous wheezing voice Sirius despised. The rat had come to offer his condolences, covering his tracks with his lies; Sirius felt the hate rise in an attempt to choke him.

'I know. Terrible business, he's really upset, Peter,' Regulus's voice issued from the hall, loudly enough to alert the others if they weren't already aware of the identity of the visitor, as the three men still in the kitchen shared a murderous look with one another. 'Go through and see him yourself.'

Sirius watched Snape slip to stand at the wall behind the door. He gave the dark Slytherin one brief nod of approval; he let him have him, he didn't grudge anyone a couple of hexes if Pettigrew was the target, even Severus. Snape had the same power of arrest as the rest of the members of the Order of the Phoenix; it didn't really matter who took Wormtail in, as long as one of them did. He took the time to notice something he mistook for gratitude cross the harsh features.

Dumbledore shook his head in a mixture of confusion and sorrow. 'Couldn't you tell what he was going to do?'

Sirius shrugged. 'I don't know; maybe he just did what I wanted to do anyway,' he replied. 'What does it matter? Pettigrew would have gone to trial and spent the last of his days in Azkaban before he was executed. If we look at it that way, it was a kindness.'

'Setting fire to someone is not a kindness, Sirius,' Dumbledore replied. 'And now it could well be Severus who spends the last of his days in Azkaban instead.'

'It was self-defence, wasn't it, Remus?' Sirius remarked blandly and nodded to Lupin for confirmation. 'The worm had his wand raised against an unarmed man. He should have chosen a softer target though; Snape doesn't need a wand for much.'

Lupin nodded. 'It's true, Albus,' he lied every bit as smoothly as Sirius. 'He was about to Curse Snape ... and as he'd already been instrumental in James's and Lily's deaths, Severus would have had good reason to suspect he was next.'

'If you think that story will fool a jury any more than it has fooled me, think again,' Dumbledore replied. 'You'll have to do a lot better than that.'

'There are extenuating circumstances, Dumbledore,' Sirius said. 'You know that. You can't have him tried for murder ... and he didn't use an Unforgivable Curse.'

'No ... that's true,' the Headmaster replied dryly. 'He set him on fire instead. It was just as effective.'

'But not unforgivable?' Sirius reasoned, daring a half measure of his grin. He wasn't quite sure why he was defending Snape, and he was having a devil of a job getting rid of the stench of scorched flesh from the kitchen. It seemed like the right thing to do though, especially as his little shit of a brother had been the one to shop him in the first place; Sirius hadn't quite worked that one out either.

'That is a moot point.' The steely blue gaze didn't waver. 'Find him, Sirius, before the search is official; if it becomes so there will be very little I can do.'

'Where?' Sirius objected. 'How am I supposed to know where he is?'

Dumbledore gave him a long look.

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 17

Sirius looks to the one man he knows will lead him to Severus.

Chapter Two

'I can bring him to you,' Malfoy remarked to Sirius as the wine waiter hovered at his shoulder. He turned slightly, addressing the man without bothering to look at him. 'The St Emilion 1974.'

'The Grand Cru, Mr Malfoy?' the waiter enquired solicitously.

Lucius looked at him this time, his eyebrow raised only slightly. 'Is there another one?'

Sirius waited until he had had his little show of lapping the gravy from the platter of the Muggle world he pretended to despise. 'I sense there is a rider,' he said as the waiter walked away, snapping his fingers at a minion, letting the world see that he too was at the top of his own particular pecking order.

'If I do,' Lucius replied, 'we both know that the search for me will be next. The Aurors are beginning to trawl for minnows, Black; the big fish have either all been fried or have fled to safer waters.' He sipped at his neat vodka and let his pale grey eyes meet Sirius's.

'I'm sure you've got a point somewhere in that manifesto,' Sirius said as his hors d'oeuvres were laid in front of him.

'I want immunity from prosecution.'

'I'm sure you do,' Sirius replied. He spread a little bit of foie gras on the warm brown toast, topping it with a small piece of pickled pear; he wasn't sure whether his taste buds or Malfoy's obvious doubts gave him more pleasure.

'And?' Lucius enquired. 'Do I get a quid for my pro quo?'

'And I'll see what I can do,' Sirius replied, as though he needed to think about it. 'Did you know about Snape and James?' he asked, hoping to catch Malfoy off guard.

Lucius said nothing for a moment, and Sirius had a feeling the affair had been a bone of contention between him and Snape. 'Yes, of course I knew,' he said at last, lifting an oyster shell to his mouth in an attempt to hide the fact that his lips had twisted, in distaste or bitterness; Sirius wasn't quite sure which. 'It was all over though,' he said, once he'd allowed the oyster to slide down his throat. 'It had been for a while.'

'Are you sure about that? Lupin doesn't think so.'

'I know for a fact, Black,' Malfoy replied. 'He had been staying at the manor for weeks, Severus I mean, and I know he ignored Potter's owls. He wasn't going back to him this time ... not since the boy was born.'

Sirius digested that; for some reason he had assumed that James would have been the pursued, perhaps that wasn't the case. 'Why did they split up? It's not as though it weren't a well kept secret,' he pressed, sensing he would get a lot more out of Malfoy than he would out of Lupin.

'I don't think this is any of our business, Black,' Lucius replied, disappointing him, as he laid down his last oyster shell. 'It was over; I know that much.'

Sirius smiled. 'Severus knocked you back, didn't he?' he said in sudden insight that Malfoy's bitterness stemmed from the fact that he had been passed over, perhaps not for the first time.

'My personal business is just that. It has no place in this conversation,' Lucius snapped, his temper rising. 'Now do we have a deal?'

Sirius nodded. Malfoy had already begun to distance himself from Voldemort; ever one to pick the winning side, he had taken the opportunity of Narcissa's death to make overtures to Dumbledore. He was low on the priority list; Sirius knew he could swing this with Dumbledore to get Snape in before there was a warrant issued for him. He sat back as the waiter cleared the plates and whisked away the imaginary crumbs from the pristine white linen. He could see Malfoy was ill at ease; he wondered just what else he had on his mind, perhaps it was a clandestine fuck in the back of his Mercedes.

As the waiter approached the table again another thought occurred to Sirius. 'Are you hiding Regulus?'

Malfoy looked genuinely surprised; Sirius suspected it was his first unrehearsed emotion of the evening. 'I thought he was staying with you.'

'He was,' Sirius replied, 'but by the time Remus and I put the fire out and checked Peter had been properly burnt, both he and Snape had taken their leave.'

'That was careless of you.'

'Well, we had to make sure that we didn't need to light the fire again,' Sirius said, letting a grim grin of satisfaction cross his face, 'but he'd made a good job of it.'

'Yes, he would have,' Lucius replied.

'I was wondering if you knew why Regulus would have taken the time to shop Severus to the Ministry before he dropped out of sight.'

'I haven't got the vaguest idea.' Malfoy frowned, but Sirius could see his mind was elsewhere; he thought he needed to know what was troubling Lucius so deeply. He let the waiter go about the fussy business of laying the main course in front of them. He certainly couldn't fault the choice of restaurant; he knew his Muggle stuff, did Lucius, none of the Leaky Cauldron's dodgy pea soup for the Master of Malfoy Manor.

'What's wrong, Lucius?' he asked at last, as he watched Malfoy toying with his steak tartare, moving it about the plate as though he'd made some attempt to eat it.

Malfoy pushed his plate away, and for just a moment Sirius thought he was going to stand up and walk out. 'Voldemort,' he whispered instead.

Sirius saw the fear he'd seen in the Three Broomsticks on the day James and Lily died. 'He's fled the country, hasn't he?' he asked.

Malfoy nodded. 'He may have fled, Black, but that hasn't stopped him trying to call his faithful around him again.'

'How strong is he?'

'He's very weak,' Malfoy replied, shocking Sirius by unbuttoning the gold snakehead buttons on his cream silk shirt cuff, and pulling the sleeve back to reveal the Dark Mark scorched into the taut creamy skin of his left arm. It was faint, but for all that Sirius could see the abomination of the snake creeping under Malfoy's skin as it undulated through the eyes of the skull. 'But if he succeeds in gathering those true to him, who are still at liberty, he will not remain so for too many years.'

'And you think Regulus is one of them?' Sirius asked. 'I thought he wanted out?'

'He didn't want out, Black,' Malfoy snapped. 'We wanted him taken out.'

'We? Who are we?' Sirius asked.

'Me for one. Since Narcissa was killed it has only been a matter of time before he continued culling those whom he considers less than able to carry out his most, shall we say, extreme commands.'

'And Regulus was one of them?' Sirius asked quietly. 'What was the extreme command he had to carry out?'

'He had to kill you,' Lucius replied. His grey eyes were concerned, uncomfortable, not emotions that sat easily on his sculpted features.

Sirius felt the knot in his throat as he swallowed. 'And he didn't fancy that idea?'

'Oh, I'm afraid he may have fancied it, as you put it, but we pulled him before he was put to the test.'

Sirius looked down. 'We? That's twice you've said "we". Who else was my mystery defender?'

'I think you know the answer to that, Black, though why he ever bothered with any of you I really do not know.'

'We know Voldemort's not gone forever,' Sirius said, turning the conversation again to more comfortable ground. For a moment he forgot he was speaking to a man he should consider to be a mortal enemy, but being faced with Lucius's urbane looks and polished manners always caught him slightly off guard. 'Can you resist that?' he asked, nodding to where Lucius was rebuttoning his cuff.

'Just now, yes. But later, in the years to come ...' He trailed off and let his pale grey eyes rest on Sirius again. 'I need Severus's help for that, Black. I need to know I can keep Voldemort away from my son, and Severus is the only one strong enough to really resist him. Look at the years of practice he's had.'

'Not that long,' Sirius replied before he really thought about it. 'He only turned spy a few months ago.'

'Severus Snape had never changed sides,' Malfoy said with a flash of anger. 'How could you think him so shallow?'

'What do you mean? He's still a Death Eater?' Sirius flared in renewed shock and stood, pushing his chair back angrily, without noticing that one or two of the diners at closer tables had turned to watch him. 'I'll kill him with my bare hands if he had anything to do with James's death.'

'He was never a Death Eater, Black,' Malfoy hissed, and it was his turn to don the familiar cloak of superiority again. 'Sit down; you're making a spectacle of yourself.' He shook his head in what looked to Sirius like disgust. 'How little you know him; none of you ever knew him, not even Potter. You didn't deserve what he did for you, you shower of ungrateful bastards.'

Sirius found himself mouthing in confusion as he slumped back in the seat. 'I don't know what you mean.'

'And to think he once harboured a fancy for you,' Lucius said with another shake of his head. 'Before Potter that was. He was only a boy at the time ... and you all treated him like shit. God, if you knew how I hated you all for that.'

'I don't know what you mean,' Sirius repeated.

Kingsley Shacklebolt interrupted Sirius's meeting with Dumbledore as he slipped in the door of the Headmaster's office in Hogwarts. Before he closed it Sirius could see another two men standing in the small anteroom at the top of the stairs. One of them was Sturgis Podmore; he had a man chained to his right hand, it was Severus Snape.

Sirius hadn't wanted to go to arrest him; he didn't think he could face him since his last meeting with Malfoy, not since Dumbledore had confirmed what Lucius had told him. The old man had been remarkably unmoved by Sirius's accusations of keeping him, and indeed the rest of the Order, in the dark, explaining the necessity of doing so. The more reasonable his arguments and explanations had become and the more Sirius understood them, the angrier he had become. He vented his own fury at everyone around him until Lupin walked out of Grimmauld Place without taking the time to borrow anything, and Kreacher fled under the floorboards, leaving him no option but to allow the anger to come home to roost.

'You found him, I take it?' Dumbledore asked, and heaved a sigh that Sirius knew was no small measure of regret.

'He wasn't hiding,' Shacklebolt replied. 'He answered the door of his family home.'

'Has he said anything?'

'Nope,' Kingsley said and frowned. 'We did exactly what you said. We asked him nothing, and he obliged by saying nothing in return. What will we do with him?'

'Take him to the Red Tower,' Dumbledore replied. 'I shall see him there shortly.' He watched Shacklebolt close the door.

'You will get him off, won't you?' Sirius challenged. 'You promised.'

'That is rather up to him, Sirius,' Dumbledore replied and gave him an annoyingly knowing look.

Barty Crouch swaggered to the middle of the floor, waiting until the chatter of the assembled scribes from the "Daily Prophet" and the foreign wizarding press died down. It was the last case of the morning, and he supposed that lunch was more on people's minds than the eventual fate of the man who had only done what the rest of the respectable wizarding world wanted to do anyway; he felt sure the verdict would slip through almost unnoticed. He suspected that what had been arranged with Dumbledore and the rest of the Wizengamot would satisfy even the brimstone-breathing hardliners. They should surely have sated their bloodlust already this week, what with sending some fifteen Death Eaters to Azkaban and hinting darkly that the same fate awaited the rest of them, as the Aurors continued to round them up like so many

cattle.

Crouch placed his hand on his hip and let his black robe fall dramatically behind him, rewarded by the renewed pop of flashbulbs. 'Bring in the prisoner,' he said for the fifth time that morning. He was mildly surprised at the babble of excitement; it seemed that Severus Snape's destiny was of more interest to the assembly than he had assumed.

He watched as Snape walked into the courtroom between Kingsley Shacklebolt and Sirius Black. He was chained between them, his head high, looking steadfastly ahead as the flashbulbs popped again, this time, preserving the image of the Death Eater turned spy, and Order Member turned murderer, for posterity.

'Severus Snape,' Crouch began, 'you have been brought before this court to answer the charge of murder of one Peter Pettigrew, by the means of setting the deceased on fire.' He paused for theatrical effect. 'How do you plead?'

'Guilty,' Snape said tonelessly, raising his eyebrow slightly in what looked to Crouch like veiled amusement.

Damn, Crouch thought to himself; Dumbledore had warned him of this. He lifted the sheaf of parchments from the table at his side, and waved them at Snape. 'The testimonies of the witnesses to this act state that you acted in self-defence. Is this true?'

'No,' Snape replied, and the murmur of excitement grew as the courtroom sensed more fresh blood. 'I killed Peter Pettigrew because he was a gutless spineless piece of shit, who betrayed the people who had seen fit to befriend him throughout his worthless existence.'

Barty Crouch banged his gavel to silence the renewed ripple of anticipation that flowed round the courtroom; lunch, it seemed, had been postponed. 'The court has been led to believe he had turned his wand on you, Snape.' He tried gamely to feed Severus his lines. 'I have testimony to support the fact that he was about to kill you.'

'Kill me?' Snape replied incredulously. 'That slimy little rat couldn't kill me. How dare you insult me thus.'

Crouch had to bang his gavel several times on the block on his table to restore order this time. He was becoming just a little put out with Severus Snape; it wasn't his place to steal the limelight.

'That's enough, Snape,' Sirius growled from his side. 'Enough of the martyr shit.' He'd already threatened Snape with everything he could think of from a one-way trip to Azkaban, to death by slow poisoning; he knew one had had as little impact as the other. He knew Severus Snape had already decided he was dead anyway; he didn't seem to care what took up the time between now and his body ceasing to function. For some reason Sirius hadn't fathomed out, he wasn't going to let him do that.

'Are you now trying to tell the court that Peter Pettigrew was unarmed, Snape?' Crouch asked as he leaned forward, squinting in suspicion. Sirius could tell he was becoming a little pissed off with Snape; he could hardly blame him, he was a bit pissed off himself, he was one intractable bastard when he wanted to be.

'I said no such thing,' Snape replied.

'Ahhh,' Crouch said in a hurry, as though more to stop Snape digging himself a deeper hole than necessary, than any real satisfaction. 'So it was self-defence as we already know.'

There was a murmur of protest from the bench. Sirius hoped Crouch would get on with it. He knew a few of the hardliners had only been coerced into letting Snape walk by Dumbledore's assurance that he had been acting as an extension of his own orders, and that Pettigrew's death was a political assassination. Sirius suspected that one was wearing a bit thin; every Auror with an itchy wand hand had pleaded the same at one time or another over the past two weeks since the Dark Lord had fled, himself included. The peace was taking almost as long to mop up as the war had; it was providing nearly as many casualties too.

Sirius could see that Snape had decided to keep his own peace; he hadn't defended himself, but at least he didn't seem intent on hanging himself now either. Sirius just wished it weren't because he couldn't care less what happened to him.

He winced as Aurelius Marchbank stood from the bench; to Sirius's mind he was one of those bleeding-hearts who turned executioner when he felt the occasion merited, and was all the more ruthless for it. He had already spoken out about his belief that Snape should not be spared.

'Are we to understand that the testimony of the witnesses has to be accepted?' Marchbank asked with a meaningful look at Sirius and one at Lupin, who sat in the public gallery with Arthur Weasley. 'And that the testimony of the accused has to be disregarded?'

'The accused is clearly confused,' Crouch responded.

'Aren't we all?' Marchbank asked, and he too strode forward for his own piece of limelight, as the press murmured to one another and the public gallery tittered in amusement. 'In that case, I have a witness of my own to call in this matter, Crouch,' he delivered in what looked ominously to Sirius like triumph.

'No further witness are required,' Crouch said and banged his gavel again in a vain stab at regaining some authority over the proceedings, as the flashbulbs gobbled up the spectacle of the prisoner standing with a cool smirk on his face, and the Wizengamot Vice President and the Clerk of the Court argued his fate amongst themselves, seeming to have forgotten they were on the same side.

'I demand to call Regulus Black as an eyewitness to what actually happened at the House of Black on the day in question.' Marchbank's strident voice overrode the general chaos of sound that had broken out.

'Order in this courtroom,' Crouch yelled, his eyes bulging and the veins in his forehead popping dangerously. 'Or the prisoner will be taken from here so that this matter can be deliberated in private. Order, I say,' he screamed, as he banged his gavel, missing his block and hammering a large chunk of wooden trim from his table instead. He was quite clearly as mad as a hatter. He turned to Marchbank once the noise settled to a level he felt he would be heard over. 'Regulus Black? Would that be Regulus Black, the Death Eater, who seems to have mysteriously disappeared since we had word that Voldemort fled abroad? Would it be that Regulus Black?' Crouch asked Marchbank, as though he were slipping his last ace from his sleeve.

Marchbank was clearly disappointed. 'I was led to believe you had him at the Ministry,' he said. 'He was at the Ministry when I questioned him.'

'Yes, well, he's not there now,' Crouch snapped. 'He had come in to volunteer information; he wasn't in custody. However, if you have any idea as to his current whereabouts, I suggest that you inform the Wizengamot immediately or you may find yourself in contempt of this court.'

Marchbank backtracked in confusion, as Sirius winced again. The world's press were now watching this display become a childish bickering match; they were going to want a result. He caught Dumbledore's eye and saw he felt the same.

'Gentlemen,' Dumbledore said as he hefted himself to his feet in a rustle of dusty silk robes. 'Gentlemen, we all have an enormous strain on our shoulders, what with trying men we thought we knew and forgiving strangers we did not. Let us return to the matter in hand.'

'Quite right, Dumbledore.' Marchbank seized on the lifeline as a more respectful hush descended on the court. 'This has been a trying week for us all.' He gave a sly look at Crouch. 'None less than Barty. But,' he said, 'I cannot find it within me to allow the prisoner to go free when such a big question remains unanswered and such a key witness is missing.' He nodded over to where Snape stood between Sirius and Kingsley, with the air of man who is watching a little tableau being acted out for his personal amusement.

'What is your suggestion?' Crouch asked, seeming to feel he was on slightly safer ground as the press bench leaned forward in anticipation, and the scribes scratched

furiously on their parchments, recording every detail for the annals of the court.

'Custody until Regulus Black can be brought before this court,' Marchbank replied.

'I cannot send an untried man to Azkaban,' Crouch objected.

Dumbledore had remained on his feet, nodding in his sage and placating way at both men. 'I agree,' he said, 'with both of you. There is an option which should be acceptable to the court in a case like this.'

Marchbank looked somewhat mollified. Crouch looked relieved; he didn't seem to have noticed that Dumbledore had taken over.

'Let the prisoner be placed under house arrest until such times as Regulus Black can be found and questioned by this court,' Dumbledore said. 'However, as the chairman of the Wizengamot, I am putting a timescale on this matter. If Regulus Black is not found within two weeks, the previous testimony will be brought to bear.' He nodded to Crouch, who obligingly banged his gavel.

'House arrest,' Crouch repeated like a parrot now. He looked around the court; his feverishly glittering eyes alighting on several candidates, all of whom looked quickly away. 'I need a volunteer for house arrest.'

Sirius Black released the magical chains binding him to the prisoner, and stepped forward from Snape's side.

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 17

Severus makes a feeble attempt at coming to terms with his alternative imprisonment.

Chapter Three

Snape closed his eyes for a moment longer than a blink, as he saw Black walk towards where Crouch and Dumbledore had bent over a parchment. Black took a quill from Crouch and signed his name at the bottom of the document, presumably some sort of transfer of ownership form; as though he were a dangerous licensed piece of livestock, like a dragon or a hippogriff, he thought sourly to himself. Of all of the options for the incarceration he hadn't much cared about, this one hadn't even occurred to him as a possibility.

When Dumbledore had told him he had prepared the way for as fair a hearing as he could hope for, he had assumed he would be placed in Hogwarts under the benignly annoying gaze of the Headmaster, to waste his life away in whatever useless way Dumbledore saw fit, either that or a relatively quick year or two in Azkaban; neither choice was more appealing than the other. The short truth of it was that Severus Snape didn't care anymore.

For eight years he had endured the contempt and even the hatred of the people he had worked to protect; he hadn't even been able to tell the man he loved just what his true role in life was. It was too dangerous; one whiff of what he was up to would have brought the whole lot tumbling about his ears, and the Dark Lord's retribution along with it. And it hadn't mattered anyway; none of it had. He had failed; in the only true meaning of the word he had failed, in that he had not succeeded in keeping alive the one person he cared about.

And now Black had stepped into his life, such as it was, uninvited, just when he knew his defences were at their lowest; just when he thought he could finally let the shield fall from his hand because it didn't matter any longer, he would have to raise it again. He kept trying to remind himself that he had finished with James anyway, that there had been nothing left between them but bitterness and accusation, and a lost love and a cold space where his heart had once lived. He wondered how it had all gone so wrong.

Severus watched Black turn and nod to Kingsley Shacklebolt, and felt the release of the tension of the chains that bound him to the black Auror; he hadn't even noticed Sirius releasing his own, presumably when he'd moved towards Crouch. He wondered what this was about, what sort of torment he had in mind for him. Sirius Black's prisoner, just when he thought he'd reached the bottom floor of hell, some ungracious bastard opened a trap door.

Even before he'd caught the black eyes in the courtroom after he'd taken the Unbreakable Wizengamot Order, Sirius had known this was going to be difficult; he was only glad Regulus was still missing, he didn't need the extra complication. Difficult or not, he found it hard to stifle the little knot of excitement as he opened the door of number twelve, Grimmauld Place and Snape followed him into the hallway. For the time being at least, Severus Snape was his; he wondered if he would have him here for long enough to carry out the mad plan that had begun to form in his head.

He nodded Snape into the kitchen, carefully resisting the temptation to look at the scorched flagstone that marked the spot where Peter Pettigrew had burned.

'We can do this two ways,' he said. 'I suggest you sit down and we'll discuss them.'

The dark eyes gave nothing away as Snape sat opposite him. He looked across at the blackened flagstone that Sirius had avoided, with what looked like mild curiosity, before looking back at Black. 'Am I permitted to speak?' he asked, breaking his silence for the first time as he raised his eyebrow in that insufferably superior way he had. Damn Slytherins, they all did that.

'You can do anything you want,' Sirius flared. 'Except leave here, until Dumbledore says otherwise.'

'I see,' Snape replied. 'Just what were you going to tell me?'

Sirius had a feeling he was laughing at him, but he swallowed his temper. 'As I said, we can do this two ways. We can either be civilised, and ignore the fact that you're not here of your own free will, or you can be difficult and the time here is going to drag out like a prison term.'

'It is a prison term. I shall be difficult, but thank you for the choice,' Snape replied and stood up. 'I take it that option does not involve conversation?'

'Have it your own way,' Sirius snapped, and dragged Kreacher from under the sink. 'Go and make a guest bedroom half-decent, if you know what that means,' he snarled at the elf and then gave Snape a hard look. 'Unless you'd prefer me to call it a cell?'

'Don't be petty, Black,' Snape replied. 'It's very childish.'

'How's it going?' Lupin smiled his self-effacing smile across the kitchen table a week later.

Sirius gritted his teeth. 'My mother, may Merlin finally convince her to lie down now that she's dead, is still going berserk about half-blood infestation; Kreacher has continued to weep such a flood of tears in sympathy with her that I've now given him a bucket to catch them in, and well...' He trailed off and sighed for dramatic effect he knew would be lost on Lupin. 'I'm not sure that Snape prefers Grimmauld Place to Azkaban. He's certainly made it clear the food couldn't be any worse. Apart from that, it's going fine.'

Lupin looked around the kitchen with its peeling paint where the plaster was splitting, and its flagstone floor, still complete with the scorch mark, and the table which hadn't been scrubbed for a month too long. He wondered why Sirius put up with the mess, and if he should tell him that the place was so untidy and grubby that there was a good chance he was still inhaling bits of Peter Pettigrew every time he breathed in.

'You can see his point, Paddy. It's not exactly homely,' he said mildly.

'Don't you start.' Sirius pointed an accusing finger at the werewolf. 'I've had just about enough of him complaining. It's not as though he's a paying customer.'

'He's a prisoner, Sirius. What did you expect? Gratitude?'

'I could have let them bang him up in Azkaban for the rest of his natural,' Sirius snapped. 'They would have, if we hadn't turned our tongues black lying for him.'

'I don't know why you brought him here anyway,' Lupin went on in his placid way, as though he really didn't know why Sirius had brought Snape there. 'Dumbledore would have taken him to Hogwarts; that was his original plan. He was quite put out with you for volunteering. I bet Lucius isn't too pleased either,' he said meaningfully.

'Yeah, well,' Sirius grunted, trying to change Lupin's line of fire. 'It wasn't really fair, was it? I mean, he did it for James, and James was my mate.'

Lupin nodded and Sirius had a suspicion he was trying to keep a straight face with some difficulty. 'Oh well, if that's the song you want to sing,' the werewolf said and smiled knowingly.

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Oh, nothing. I was really asking if you'd thawed him out at all?'

'No,' Sirius snapped. 'Are you happy now; or was there anything else you wanted to know?'

Lupin shrugged as he stood up. 'Not really,' he said. 'We've got a meeting here tomorrow afternoon, remember. Try and tidy up a bit. It's embarrassing calling you a friend when you live in this tip.'

'But not too embarrassing to kip here when you've been turfed out of your lodgings for not paying your rent?' Sirius said, letting his customary grin slip onto his face.

'A man's got to prioritise,' Lupin replied, as he pocketed Sirius's cigarettes by mistake, and both men pretended they hadn't noticed.

Severus waited until he heard the door close on the werewolf before standing from the bed. He'd wanted to go downstairs for a while now, but he was finding it difficult to gauge Black or his motives. He had considered just asking him if he had taken him in out of some kind of spite for having dared to have an affair with James, or even retribution upon him for existing.

He tried not to think of James, of what they had shared: the young love, the bitter recriminations as Severus was passed over for Lily, the torrid encounters after the two had married, the frequent break ups and fights until Severus had called a halt to what he was doing to himself, just before the birth of James's son. He hadn't cared to slip any further down the pecking order, or that was how he had justified it to himself. He'd had no future with James; he'd been clinging onto nothing, and he had no future without him, and now he'd spent the last week avoiding Black and steeping himself in a nauseating mixture of self-doubts, self-recrimination and self-pity.

As he slid bit by wretched bit into despondency it seemed to him that everything he had ever done had been laced with bitterness; his whole life had been tainted in some way, as though some grand scheme were afoot, twisting everything in his path. Everything about him was second, from the second-hand clothes he'd worn as a boy to the second-hand love he'd found slipping away from him, as James put his own family first. It was too late to change now; he was what he was, a lonely resentful man, angry and disillusioned, the result of his own folly, labelled in his own mind as a failure before he was thirty. Perhaps he should just have succumbed to the constant pressure from Lucius, he thought sourly; at least he could have suffered in some degree of comfort.

He looked around the horrible bedroom properly for the first time since he'd arrived last week. Here and there the gold leaf, which someone had painted on in what they had mistaken for sophistication, was peeling off the ugly baroque cornicing, baring cherubs' bottoms and angels' breasts alike; the blood-red curtains looked as though the only thing that stopped them collapsing to the floor in a heap of moth-eaten dust were the very moths themselves, at least he hoped that was the source of the occasional twitch they made of their own accord. The bed, with its sagging mattress and doubtful pillows, had given him the backache it promised the first night he slept on it, and he had forsaken it for the floor, only replacing the bedclothes through the day so he didn't trip over them. He kept reminding himself it was better than Azkaban; at least he had the privacy of his own bathroom. Sometimes the water even managed to gurgle that far up the ancient plumbing system.

He crossed the room, giving one last disgusted look around, wondering why wizards seemed to consider dust, cobwebs and bad taste were the first necessities of interior decorating, and opened the door, without realising he was answering a knock.

'Are you coming downstairs for something to eat? Because I'm not bringing it upstairs for you,' Black said. 'Or maybe you thought you'd just have another slice of self-pity pie? You seem to enjoy it.'

Severus wondered if there were something deliberately challenging about the way the damned Gryffindor stood propped against the door frame. 'What have you made?' he asked, ignoring the well-earned jibe, but making some belated attempt at social interaction.

'Nothing yet,' Black replied and gave him his cheap grin. 'What do you fancy?'

'Nothing. I'm not hungry. I'll just stick to the pie, thank you.' He began to close the door and found it sticking on Black's foot, noticing that for some reason it was bare. That left him with two choices; he could have broken his foot, but he took the more unacceptable option and opened it again. 'What do you want from me, Black?'

'Try a bit harder, Severus,' Sirius replied. 'I live here too. Let's just make the best of it. It shouldn't be for too much longer now.'

For a man in the heart of his own territory Severus thought that Black suddenly looked ridiculously vulnerable. He felt himself nod and hoped Sirius wouldn't mistake it for contrition. 'I know, I'm sorry,' he lied. 'I'm just finding things a bit difficult just now.' He stifled the flutter in the pit of his stomach as he let himself hold the confusion in the pale blue eyes. 'What do you want from me, Black?' he repeated, unsurprised that his voice was barely a whisper.

'I suppose a fuck's out of the question?'

Sirius hadn't a clue how it had happened. One moment he was in the middle of another uncomfortable standoff, and although he didn't admit it himself, being made to feel inadequate and unwanted, and the next he found himself slammed against the wall and forced to his knees.

'Is this what you're angling for, you cheap tart?' Snape snarled at him, and grabbed his shoulder in a vice-like grip, dragging him upright again before thrusting him onto the bed. 'I'll make you wish you'd flaunted yourself at someone else, you whore.'

'Think you're man enough?' Sirius barked a harsh laugh from where his head had landed on the pillow and his hair fanned out on the faded old cream linen. 'Fuck,' he gasped as Snape slapped him cleanly across the face, leaving a stinging echo where his hand had landed.

'Speak when you're spoken to,' Snape growled above him, forcing his legs wide with his knee.

Sirius gasped again as Severus pulled his trousers open, sending the buttons flying to land forgotten on the floor. Snape ripped Sirius's shirt apart next, lifting him bodily from the bed and tugging it free to toss it over his shoulder. He hoisted Sirius's arse up and pulled the trousers off along with his pants, flinging them across the room, shoving the pillow his head was on below the small of his back instead.

Sirius stifled a groan. He felt vulnerable, exposed, and more alive than he'd felt for a long, long time. He watched as Snape took off his own black shirt, seemingly content now to take his time; his quarry wasn't going anywhere. He stood up, kicking off his shoes and removing his black socks, and slowly unbuttoned his own trousers, letting them fall to ground, before hooking his thumbs into his underpants and pulling them down, stepping out of both garments like a cat.

For some reason Sirius had expected him to be thin, perhaps white and slackly-muscled, not the toned body that loomed over him, the taut marble-white skin covered from head to foot in a mat of silky black hair. There was something fittingly animal about him; no wonder James had kept him under wraps. He stifled his gasp this time as Snape knocked his hand away from where he had begun to give his cock the urgent attention it demanded.

'I shall let you know if you can play with yourself, you shameless slut,' he said in a low menacing voice.

Sirius found Snape had knelt between his knees, shoving them apart as though his rite of passage was not used to being denied. He felt the long-fingered, white hand drift across his chest and arched his back to prolong the silky touch, the teasing way in which Severus let his fingertips drift over his nipples, as Sirius felt his breath begin to rasp and his sweat begin to run. Still the black eyes told him nothing, impenetrable pits that faded to just a glitter as Snape darkened the room. Sirius sensed him throw back his head and knew he'd stifled his own gasp as he felt the fingers begin to explore his body, leaving his skin tingling in their wake as every muscle in his body longed for release.

At last he felt Snape drop his head to him and find his mouth, and Sirius lashed his tongue between his teeth in response. He wasn't sure when Snape lost control, or if he ever did, as he felt his own urgency mount until he begged him with every fibre of his being except the voice he had been forbidden to use, to take him and use him as he saw fit. He only knew the endgame was coming when he felt Snape slip a couple of slim fingers inside him, stretching him, making ready for the invader he longed to welcome. He knew he had slicked some kind of gel into him as he felt himself tighten then relax to take him. He clenched again, hearing Severus gasp as he did so, and then surrendered himself so completely that he was barely conscious of who he was, only what he was.

Severus took him to a place he'd never been, a place of white-hot pain so intermingled with desire and the need to please him that he never wanted to leave, as his flying endorphins led the way to the outer edge of his fantasies. He knew he was tearing him apart and could think of nothing but wanting more until at last he felt Severus change to a pace even more urgent. Sirius's only regret was that this might end, until he could regret no more as he sensed the hot flood inside him as his own vision starred and he almost blacked out, spilling his seed over his flashing fist.

Snape woke with a start, for a moment unsure of where he was; he had almost thought he was lying with James and they had overslept until his life slipped into perspective again. The only relief in where he found himself was that the bed was empty of anyone else; Black had left. He wondered what time it was as he lit the room. Quite late, he suspected; he had slept deeply. He almost laughed as he realised he was hungry. For the first time since James had died he was ravenously hungry; he wasn't quite sure what he wanted to do about that though.

Severus hauled himself out of the bed, manfully ignoring the twinge in his back, and stifled the smirk he felt try to lift the corner of his thin mouth as he thought about Black. He was surprised that he couldn't find it within himself to regret what had happened. He had needed it, as though it were a physical purging of his emotions; Black obviously had too. They were over the age of consent, and after all a fuck was only a fuck, he told himself.

He made his way into the bathroom. It had been tastelessly tiled in dark green and he had a suspicion that the decision had been made on the colour with the sole purpose of hiding the grime. He turned the tap and got his second pleasant surprise; the water was hot enough to have a long shower, and he let the warm spray wash away a bit more of the tension along with the combination of his own and the other man's sweat.

Snape dried himself quickly on the threadbare towel, roughly rubbed his long dark hair into a submission of damp already-tangled ropes, and dressed in his customary fashion of faded black. He was going to have to move out of the room eventually, he reasoned to himself; he might as well do it now. He was halfway down the stairs when he heard voices issuing from the kitchen along with the smell of something unpalatable being burnt; at least it wasn't Peter Pettigrew this time.

He frowned as he recognised the second voice; he wondered what had brought Lucius here and how he had found the house. Severus knew it was unplotable; that meant Black must have invited him. It began to confirm a suspicion that had nagged at him on and off for a long time, centering around Black and Lucius, but he couldn't make anything from the few fragments of conversation that drifted from the almost closed door, except that something seemed to be wrong.

Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 17

Nothing seems to be quite what it seems to be.

Chapter Four

Severus watched Lucius turn, as he pushed the kitchen door open. He was surprised to see that not only was Malfoy unconcerned by his sudden appearance, but he wasn't the only visitor; Dumbledore and Lupin also sat at the table with Sirius. His earlier notion of Sirius and Malfoy having some sort of clandestine relationship fled, as it was replaced by the realisation that all four men looked serious, most of all Black. Severus suspected they had a warrant with them to take him to Azkaban. Damn it, he

cursed inwardly; just when he'd decided he'd prefer to stay here, decided that he might have a look to see if there were anything in life worth living, instead of marking time until he died... fucking typical.

'What's wrong?' he asked sourly. 'As though I haven't guessed.'

Lucius frowned at him. 'Guessed what?'

'That my trial has offered me a one-way ticket to Azkaban, all expenses paid, of course.'

'No, actually,' Lucius replied, and gave Sirius an uncomfortable look. 'It seems that Regulus Black is dead.'

Snape blinked in surprise, and shot as near to an apologetic look to Sirius as he could manage. 'When? What happened?' he asked as he took the conveniently empty seat between Lupin and Sirius, ignoring the four equally empty seats at the other side of the table.

'They don't know yet,' Black replied. 'Lucius just heard and got in touch with Dumbledore.' He nodded to where Malfoy sat, with Kreacher gazing up at him as though he were an object to be revered, perhaps even worshipped.

'Voldemort?' Snape asked as he tried to catch up. 'He's surely not powerful enough to kill a fly just now.'

'I don't know, Severus,' Lucius replied this time. 'I think the word came from abroad. I didn't know the owl, and the message was anonymous, and written as though English weren't the writer's first language. I can only assume it was genuine.'

'What kind of owl?'

Severus watched Lucius shrug in the way he knew made his silver-blond hair ripple on the shoulders of his dark green velvet doublet. 'A great grey, I think,' he replied with what he must have assumed was a fetching little smile.

'What do you mean, you think?' Severus snapped, pretending he hadn't noticed Malfoy's attempt at flirting; surely if he'd learnt anything in his thirty-odd years on earth, it was that Snape was immune to his dubious attentions. 'They have a ruddy five-foot wingspan; even you couldn't mistake that.' He watched Malfoy flare his nostrils in response and give him a cool look, which he chose to ignore. He could tell that Lucius had more than the mystery of the message on his mind; he seemed to be trying to work out the more urgent mystery of why Severus, and Sirius to a lesser degree, had wet hair ... he didn't seem to fancy the answers he was coming up with. Snape shook his head slowly, aware that the rest of them were watching him too. 'That doesn't make sense,' he said. 'Karkaroff uses great greys, but they're not good for long-distance flying.'

'What are you saying, Snape?' Lupin asked from his side.

'I don't think the message came from outside these islands at all, unless it was relayed, of course.' Severus wondered just what Lucius actually knew about the origin of the letter, but the blond Slytherin just glared back as though he had only disagreed for the sake of it.

'Do we have a list of who uses what types of owls?' Sirius asked Dumbledore.

The Headmaster shook his head. 'I'm afraid not, Sirius. In fact we even have a couple of great greys at Hogwarts. I think Severus may have touched on something though; I suspect the message has not come directly from whosoever sent it.'

'Let me see it,' Snape said to Lucius.

Malfoy gave him a blank look of enquiry. 'See what?'

'The message, of course. You have brought it with you, I take it?'

'No, I never thought.'

'That much is patently obvious,' Snape sneered. 'I suppose we could expect no more from you.'

Lucius let his nostrils flare in anger again, and Snape ignored him again.

'What do we do now?' Lupin asked, from where he sat casting anxious looks of misplaced sympathy along the table to Sirius.

'There's nothing we can do,' Black replied, standing up and stretching. He seemed to change his mind and sat back down at Snape's side, giving Lupin a long look. 'Don't get sentimental, Old Wolf, I lost my brother many years ago,' he said. He favoured Kreacher with an absentminded slap on the head as the elf finished placing mugs of lukewarm grey tea in front of the three pure-blooded men at the table, studiously ignoring Lupin and Snape.

'Let us see what unfolds over the next few days,' Severus suggested when it became clear that no one really had much more to offer than the damned elf. He gave Kreacher a long look without realising why, and then found his mind distracted, wandering to something that had assaulted him on the way down the stairs. 'What is that disgusting smell, Black?' he asked, looking to where the elf had lifted the lid of a pot that simmered ominously on the hob at the fire; he seemed very pleased with his efforts. 'Please tell me it is not dinner.'

Sirius looked crestfallen, as Lucius gave Snape another long look, his damp hair in particular, openly lacing it this time with accusation, before letting his grey eyes flit to Black again and then back to Snape.

They were moving on. It seemed a pity to Severus that none of them, except Lupin, had really seen fit to offer Sirius any sort of condolences on the loss of something as precious as a brother. There was no pause for thought the way men usually paused when a man they knew passed from the world; no turning, however briefly, for each to examine his own experiences of him. The war had made them hard, uncaring, of their own feelings at any rate; they had become used to the notion that death was just the ultimate fact of life. Snape frowned at the elf again; of all of them he would have thought Kreacher would have had a tear to shed for Regulus Black. Perhaps he'd used them all up lamenting his own presence in the house.

'Anyway, I have some good news for one of you at least,' Dumbledore said brightly, breaking the awkward, somewhat guilty silence. 'The case against you has been dropped, Severus. I heard just before Lucius arrived to see me. It seems that whoever sent the message to him also informed Crouch of Regulus's death. You are a free man.'

Snape felt himself sag in relief; he hadn't expected this so soon. He felt Black stiffen at his side as Lupin smiled and slapped his shoulder with a familiarity that made him grit his teeth.

Lucius looked around the awful kitchen of Grimmauld Place in unconcealed triumph. 'I wager you can't get out of here quickly enough,' he said with his expensive smile. 'I'll have the elves prepare you something edible when we get back to the manor.' He gave the pot on the hob a meaningful look, and began to haul his impressive, immaculately-tailored bulk to his feet.

'Not so quickly, Lucius,' Dumbledore said. 'I shall have to release the Wizengamot Order first. Severus would still be unable to step over the door.'

'How long?' Malfoy asked with a bit too much hope for Snape's taste.

'Only a day or two, and then he will be free to come and go ... as he pleases.'

A day or two: Snape thought that would let him think things out; he hadn't meant to look at Black, just as he suspected Black hadn't meant to look at him.

Sirius ladled the contents of the pot onto three plates. He hoped it tasted better than it looked; he wasn't usually keen on grey food. Lupin had stayed for dinner as he had suspected he would, and Snape hadn't seemed put out about that; in fact Sirius thought Severus was as glad of Lupin's company as he was. He was like a buffer between them, ironing out any awkward creases.

Dumbledore had tactfully invited Lucius to Hogwarts when he looked like lingering. It would have been difficult for Malfoy to refuse, especially when he needed the Headmaster's good grace; he wasn't out of the fire just yet. His own war crimes still had to be considered by the Wizengamot, although Sirius knew he would get off lightly. He'd been on the committee who had discussed just what should be done with Malfoy, and it had been as much Sirius's pledge as Dumbledore's that Malfoy would be watched and would prove a valuable asset to them in any continuing trouble with the ex-Death Eaters that would save him. Even though it suited Sirius, there was something annoyingly knowing about Dumbledore, as though he knew Lupin wouldn't outstay his welcome, where Lucius would almost certainly have done so.

'This is horrible, Black,' Snape said in disgust as he laid his fork aside. 'How long did it take you to make this muck?'

'It is awful, Sirius,' Lupin agreed, poking the food about his plate. 'Even I couldn't eat it.'

'Well, I can't help it. Kreacher let it get a bit burnt halfway through, and by the time I rescued it, it was too late,' Sirius grumbled. 'I'm not a cook. I usually just jump out and buy something ready-made. It's not been easy for me not being able to leave the house. I've been as much a prisoner as you have, you know,' he complained.

'Are there any eggs?' Snape asked, ignoring the accusation.

Sirius nodded glumly. 'I'm not awfully good with them either; I don't think they like me.'

Snape twisted his lip in disgust as he stood up and went to rummage around on the shelves in the pantry next to the kitchen. 'Do not expect me to make a habit of this, Black; I'm not a ruddy housemaid,' he said as he returned to the kitchen and lit a small ring of fire on the iron plate on top of the ancient furnace-like stove. He stopped short for a second as he realised what he'd said. 'You can either train the elf or learn yourself ... or I shall look for alternative lodgings. Lucius seems quite keen for me to move back to the manor,' he went on blandly; glad his back was turned to both men.

For a moment Sirius had thought it was a slip of the tongue; he had just caught the werewolf's knowing smile when Snape confirmed what he had hoped he'd said. He was going to get a chance; that was all he'd wanted, just a chance. He was glad Dumbledore had postponed tomorrow's meeting until the next day; he wished Lupin would go away now.

It looked as though it was going to be a short meeting, a lot shorter than the list of absentees. Arthur Weasley couldn't get away from the Ministry; he'd already re-jigged his timetable to suit the abandoned meeting of the day before and hadn't managed to jig it back again. Molly couldn't get anyone to watch her alarming brood of redheads, and as the only option had been bringing them with her, Dumbledore had hastily agreed to update them by owl.

The rest of the call offs were weaker excuses and even weaker reasons; Dumbledore knew it was a reaction to the fact that Voldemort had fled. The terrible details of the Potters' deaths had been thrashed out to the point of boredom, and nobody had a real sense of urgency any more, nobody except the four men and two women who looked at him across the table. As it turned out it was just as well that the only people around the table were the few who were there, seeing as the Headmaster had an unexpected addition again.

'Did you know about this?' Snape asked quietly and held up his hand to forestall any answer. 'Please think carefully before you answer, Lucius. Because if you answer in the negative and I ever find out otherwise ... I shall have to kill you.'

Malfoy looked away for a moment, and Dumbledore could feel his fear; he felt Lucius was embarking upon almost as dangerous a game as Severus had played for so many years.

'I swear to you,' Lucius said, as he looked quickly to where his sister-in-law sat with Minerva, and then back at Snape. 'I swear on Draco's life, that the authenticity of the thing didn't occur to me, not in that way. I only wondered if what it said were true.'

Snape seemed to take his time in considering whether he believed Malfoy or not, but Dumbledore could tell that was for the benefit of the others. He let the silence hang until Sirius broke it.

'I believe him, Severus,' he said. 'I know I would have done the same. The initial reaction first and then looking more deeply.' He frowned and turned to Malfoy. 'When did you realise Regulus had written it himself?' he asked. 'And how?'

'It was just chance,' Lucius admitted. 'I was going through some correspondence, and there was a scroll from years back ...' He gave a short sharp laugh of scorn as he trailed off. 'Not that we ever committed much to writing in the Death Eaters; not many of them can write. But it was from Regulus, something innocuous about a rally Rabastan Lestrange was arranging ... and I noticed that he had spelt the word believe wrongly; he had transposed the 'i' and the 'e' and ... well, it rang an alarm bell, and as I still had the scroll which arrived with the news of his death, with the same word spelt the same way ... it wasn't very difficult after that for us to match the handwriting.' He gave Andromeda another quick look before turning again to Snape. 'Of course, I realise now that the real reason it caught my eye was that the handwriting registered as familiar. We took it straight to Dumbledore; as it turns out he was on his way here.'

Dumbledore waited; he could tell Snape was counting the costs of the two days they had let Regulus's trail become colder. He noticed that not only was Lucius watching Severus, but Sirius was too; he had a feeling there was something going on between these two. He wasn't unhappy about that; it would provide a more solid foundation for what he suspected he would have to agree to do quite soon. It would be as oddly apt as it was unlikely if Black and Snape lived under the one roof. At last the Headmaster looked to Andromeda. He had not wanted her to back Lucius up in any way until he heard his story the second time around; lies tended to get more convoluted with the telling, where truths became plainer.

'It's true, Severus,' Andromeda said. 'I had gone in to see Draco, and Lucius was just clearing old papers out of his desk. I suspect in an effort to make sure that nothing too damning had been committed to writing; one never knows just what the Ministry would come across if they ever searched the manor.' She gave Malfoy a wily look before giving Severus the benefit of her quite breathtaking smile. 'I could see he was puzzling over something, and went over to see what it was. The rest is just as Lucius said.'

'This is very serious,' Snape said at last. 'The ramifications of ...' He trailed off, looking at Lucius. 'You know my cover is blown apart? I don't even know if I can retrieve it if I have to... or how much damage has been done.'

'You can't be thinking of going to him,' Malfoy said and stood up in alarm. 'Don't be ridiculous, Severus. Even you couldn't concoct a story Voldemort would believe, whatever state he's in.'

'Sit down, Lucius. We can't expect you keep up with us all the time; but if you could get in touch with common sense occasionally, it would be a great help,' Snape replied testily.

Even Lucius couldn't mistake the derision; he glared at Snape, paled slightly, and tossed his long silver-blond hair over his shoulders. 'If you would be so kind as to enlighten us as to your intentions, instead of spewing your cryptic bullshit, that might help.'

'Suffice it to say I have no intentions of traipsing around the world, trying to find one petty dictator who has probably been reduced to some sort of amoebic wreck by the reversal of his own Death Curse, if he is indeed still alive. Damn it,' Severus cursed savagely, 'I should have realised this when the damned elf looked so unconcerned the

other day. He would have been the first one, along with his mistress, to lament Regulus's passing, if he'd gone anywhere not of his own accord.' He stopped, as something seemed to occur to him. 'Where is the Potter boy? At Hogwarts?'

'He is safe,' Dumbledore said evasively, taking care to avoid the quick look Sirius had given him. He wasn't terribly happy about the arrangements that had been made to let James and Lily's son stay with Muggle relations, even allowing for the strength of the blood ties. 'Let us keep looking at the bigger picture.'

'Like the fact that Regulus Black conveniently disappeared straight after I killed Pettigrew, armed with the knowledge that I am a Member of the Order of Phoenix, stopping only at the Ministry in an attempt to get me locked up in Azkaban? That he knows that the Potters' son is still alive, and somehow turned the Dark Lord's Death Curse back on him? That the same Regulus Black saw fit to inform the wizarding world that he is dead whilst he is still alive? And let us not forget,' Snape added as an afterthought, 'that he is the only person outside the Order to be able to find this Ancient and Most Ridiculous House of Black.'

'Well,' Sirius asked them all, once he was sure Snape had finished. 'How's that for the bigger fucking picture?'

'How does he know you're an Order Member?' Lucius asked suspiciously. 'I didn't tell him.'

'I did,' Sirius admitted quietly as he watched Snape move across the kitchen to stand at the sink. 'Not in so many words; but when Severus came here looking for Peter, I asked him why he hadn't told the Order that Pettigrew was a Death Eater.'

'I think you should move away from here, both of you. You can come to the manor if you want; there's plenty of room,' Lucius said, without managing to hide the fact that he was as hopeful as he was anxious, as he looked around the kitchen in disgust he didn't even attempt to veil.

'That will not be necessary,' Dumbledore replied and nodded to where Minerva and Andromeda sat with Lupin. 'There are enough of us here to put a Nominatum Perpetuum Charm on the house.'

'A what?' Sirius asked. 'I've never heard of it.'

'I would be surprised if you had,' Dumbledore murmured. 'It is a type of Fidelius Charm, but more specific, and it has the peculiarity of being one of few spells that can only be cast by a woman.' He nodded again to Minerva and Andromeda. 'And I happen to know that both of the ladies here are familiar with it.'

Minerva shared a long look with Andromeda before turning to Dumbledore. 'But, Albus,' she said, twisting her thin lips in what looked like anxiety, 'that would mean that no one else could gain admittance to the house, unless accompanied by one of us here tonight... ever again. Is that not a little drastic?'

'It would indeed,' Dumbledore agreed. 'A small price to pay to ensure that Sirius's visitors are only invited guests.'

'What happens when we all die?' Sirius asked, just a little put out that he hadn't been consulted on the matter. 'Or what happens if you all die, and I'm left here alone, and no one can ever come to see me again?'

'I shouldn't worry too much about that, Black,' Snape replied dryly. 'It would finally put an end to unwelcome visitors disturbing your venerable mother's rest. She could howl out her miserable non-existence to nobody ... forever.'

'See, it's not all bad, after all.' Sirius grinned at last, and Lucius looked disappointed; it hadn't been his day.

Malfoy departed for the manor before he had the indignity of being excluded from the Nominatum Perpetuum Charm thrust upon him, pleading the necessity of seeing his son and heir before the boy was put to his nightly sleep.

'Can't you just trust him?' Sirius asked as he watched Andromeda follow Lucius into the hall; he was beginning to worry about Lucius.

'No ... but he is not the fool you seem to take him for, Black,' Snape replied. 'Lucius knows that if the necessity arose he would protect himself and his son, and I cannot fault him there. Right now, I suspect he believes in his own loyalty, but he also knows his own weaknesses. It takes an astute man to understand himself the way Lucius does.'

'What do we do about him?' Sirius asked, pasting as blank a look on his face as he could dredge up to hide his concern. 'We can't just exclude him if he's sticking his neck out for us.'

'We must protect him, and make sure that he does not get into a position where he is unable to defend himself without betraying us.'

'Severus is right,' Dumbledore agreed, nodding towards the hall to where they heard the last few murmurs of conversation as Andromeda closed the front door. 'Lucius is a valuable link between us and what remains of the Death Eaters, or whatever they become now. Just because Voldemort is out of action for the time being, let us not take it for granted that there is no one in the shadows waiting to assume the Dark Lord's mantle.'

'You mean Regulus?' Andromeda asked as she took her seat again.

'It is early to make that assumption, but I fear it may well turn out to be the case.'

Sirius closed the door at last. It had taken much longer than he had expected for Andromeda and Minerva to cast the complex Charm. Firstly, they had to identify every living thing within twelve, Grimmauld Place to ensure they were not sealing in the very danger they wanted to exclude. Even he had been disgusted at the amount of creeping crawling subspecies occupying corners and hiding under floorboards, but once the women got used to doxies and boggarts and one or two other things he thought best left forgotten, it went a little more quickly. They even went as far as to do some sort of specific search for Regulus, using Sirius's hair, and to his surprise and discomfiture a few drops of his urine; he resisted asking if they were taking the piss out of him. Maybe they just thought Regulus was a secret Animagus hiding in the curtains.

At last they were satisfied, and Sirius had to admit he felt a lot more secure. He was pleased that the women had not encountered anything alive about his mother's portrait; he decided to keep that one to tell her on a day when she was being particularly obnoxious. As he closed the front door he found himself thinking about Lucius again, wondering whether it would be wise to bring Malfoy and his son to the protection of Grimmauld Place, but that would ruin any chance they had of using the careful cloak of neutrality Lucius had begun to don. Anyway, Sirius grinned to himself, Lucius could be difficult; in fact he could make Snape look like a rank amateur when he tried.

And now they were alone again, just him and Snape, without even the benefit of Lupin's company to break the ice he was sure would have formed by the time he got back into the kitchen. He knew it would be a good idea to have a frank talk with Severus; there had always been a lot of bad blood between them, more than a couple of nights of mutual passion would wash away, and the thought of that was daunting, just in case he was reading too much into his remarks. Severus wouldn't even be free to leave Grimmauld Place until tomorrow; for all Sirius knew he might head straight to Malfoy Manor.

Snape was standing at the fire warming his hands when he went back into the kitchen, and he took Sirius completely by surprise.

'Are you expecting me to move to the manor tomorrow?' he asked, lifting the kettle from the iron hob at the fireside and pouring water into two mugs.

'Yes,' Sirius replied, and was rewarded with a flash of disappointment in the black eyes, 'but I would prefer if you didn't.' He smiled to himself. For some reason he would have thought that Severus would have been the tongue-tied one, and that his usual reserve would extend to the delicacy of the matter in hand. Sirius wished he'd been able

to play at filling two mugs.

'In that case I would prefer to stay here for the time being.' Snape laid the tea on the table and sat down. 'Do take a seat; you are making me feel uncomfortable, and it is not a feeling I care for.' Snape waited until Sirius slumped untidily into the chair opposite him, going through the motions of lighting a cigarette to cover his awkwardness, before surprising him again. 'I'm sorry about your brother, Black. It must have been difficult for you to accept the lie of his death and then the more difficult truth.'

Sirius blinked, squinting through the smoke. He wished Snape would speak in plainer terms sometimes. He was a Gryffindor, after all; he shouldn't have to wait until the end of a long sentence to work out what it meant. 'Regulus doesn't mean anything to me. It seemed as though he was a horrible little shite who had got his just desserts, and now it seems he's still a horrible little shite who hasn't.' He frowned inwardly as he watched Snape's reaction. It was something different to surprise, something just off the mark of disappointment, as though he didn't expect anything better from a world so sickened by war that it couldn't remember the common decency of peace.

'I want to ask you about James,' Sirius said bravely, when it looked as though they were going to lapse into another of the uncomfortable silences he'd endured when Snape had just arrived. There was no point in avoiding it; he wanted to know he wasn't a quick fix to be disposed of when the ache had receded enough to let Severus face the world again. Sirius had his own pain to consider.

Snape looked down at his tea for a moment, as though seeking inspiration; when he looked back Sirius could see the anger and the hurt and the confusion of loss. 'James and I were finished, Black. He just knew a lot earlier than I did.'

'You were in love with him though, weren't you?'

'Of course I was. And true love never dies,' Severus replied candidly, letting his lip twitch for a second in his version of a smile. 'But sometimes it fades away.'

Sirius nodded his acceptance; there wasn't much he could say to that. He watched Severus slip a small ebony box from his pocket and take a slim black cigarette from it, rubbing his thumb over the case in a seemingly subconscious gesture. It looked old and precious, and he wondered if it had been a gift from James, or maybe even Lucius. With his strange blend of reticent eloquence, and polished acid wit, and his inborn urbanity, it was so easy to forget that Severus was every bit as poor as Lupin, but he seemed to wear his faded clothes as an afterthought, where Lupin wore them as a badge. Sirius found himself feeling mean and small, rashly swearing to himself that neither of them would have to need for anything while he was alive, even as he knew he would forget, and Lupin would arrive on his doorstep one day with his battered bag in his hand, looking for a bed for the night, and Sirius could begin his guilt trip all over again.

'Now,' Snape went on through his own cloud of aromatic blue smoke, when he realised Sirius didn't intend to reply. 'I would like to ask you about Lucius.'

'Lucius?' Sirius almost dropped the mug of tea. 'What about him?'

'I just wondered if you were in love with him?'

Sirius mouthed like a fish on a riverbank. 'Lucius? Lucius Malfoy?' he asked as Snape's eyebrow rose steadily into his back hair. 'No ... well, not really.' He was making a real mess of this, and he didn't know how to stop it. He had been totally unprepared for the question he didn't even know there was an answer to. Lucius was just there. Sirius tried to think; he worried about Lucius, and he didn't want anything bad to happen to him, but he didn't spend his life thinking about him. He was the enemy, or had been for so long that Sirius could hardly remember another time. That hadn't stopped him though; it hadn't stopped him having a fuck with Lucius whenever the occasion presented itself, which was possibly more frequently than necessary. 'Anyway, it's you he fancies,' he said defensively; it wasn't a lot of help.

'Let me assure you that I shall not stand in your way,' Snape said, but Sirius could see he was playing with him. He'd just poked him with a stick to see what would happen, and Sirius had obliged.

'Can I start again?' he said and tried his Gryffindor grin.

'Not from the beginning surely?'

'The Lucius bit?'

Snape nodded in concurrence. 'You really couldn't do any worse the second time around.'

'I'm not in love with Lucius. He's just there, and he's a great fuck, and that's all,' Sirius said, and he made a better job of it. Snape was right; the lie came easier the second time around.'

Chapter Five

Chapter 5 of 17

Severus finds that the more the waters clear, the muddier they become.

Chapter Five

'How's it going?' Lupin asked as he opened Sirius's cigarettes and stuck one in his mouth and one behind his ear.

'Fine,' Sirius replied. 'How's it going with you?'

'Fine,' Lupin replied.

'That's fine then.'

'Is he still here?' Lupin asked.

'Nope,' Sirius replied.

'Oh.' Lupin seemed disappointed. 'I thought ... well never mind what I thought.'

'He's gone to Diagon Alley.'

'You're an arse, Sirius, you know that?' Lupin replied. 'Do I take it that he's staying on here?'

'Yup, for now at any rate.'

'What did Lucius say to that?'

'We didn't ask his opinion or his permission,' Sirius replied, and made a face. 'In fact I'm not sure he quite knows yet.'

'Funny,' Lupin said. 'I always thought you'd end up with Lucius, not Snape.'

'Lucius?' Sirius frowned. 'What made you think that?'

'Come on, Sirius. You've always carried a little candle for Malfoy; everyone knows that.'

Sirius gave him a pained look. 'Yeah, everyone except me,' he replied, omitting to add Lucius to the equation. He turned to the door as his mother announced Snape's return in less than complimentary terms.

Lupin watched him come in. He really couldn't see what Sirius, or Lucius for that matter, saw in the dark Slytherin; not that he could understand what any man saw in another man, but Severus Snape just seemed to him to be the epitome of where not to go. He was harshly-featured, with high cheekbones and a long nose and a thin mouth, which tended to be either twisted in cynicism or scorn. The irises of his eyes were almost totally black, and from what Lupin could tell, were devoid of anything but contempt. Instead of it all making him rugged and manly, to Lupin's way of thinking it just made him ugly. He was slim, but not athletic looking in any way, as though his physique weren't the result of any desire, but more of self-denial. He was sullen and bad-tempered and spiteful and pedantic, and he had a vicious tongue, Lupin thought, as he summed up Severus's good points. In fact as far as he could see, apart from being probably almost as clever as Dumbledore, and if what he were led to believe was true, very nearly as powerful, Snape didn't have one redeeming feature. He wondered why he seemed to have a queue at his door. And then Lupin remembered why he liked Severus, as the words that really mattered came to mind, like trust and loyalty and honour; words that put petty descriptions like ugly and sullen to shame.

'What's wrong?' he asked as Severus dropped his Charms and scowled at the two of them, slamming the kitchen door before Mrs Black could begin verse two.

'I just saw someone I didn't expect to see in Knockturn Alley,' Snape said uneasily as he sat down. 'Igor Karkaroff. He was with a witch who was heavily charmed. She was very tall for a woman.'

'Regulus?' Lupin whispered.

'I don't know,' Snape admitted. 'I didn't want to get too near. They were on their own, and the alley was quiet; it would have looked suspicious. They were going into a shop that I happen to know specialises in some very dark artefacts, much darker than anything Borgin and Burke's would dare keep in stock. It's just a pity I didn't have Lucius with me; it would have been a perfect excuse to go in after them and browse.'

'Why didn't you just go to the manor and get him?' Sirius asked, as though he were resisting the urge to ask just what Snape was doing so far into Knockturn Alley. 'You could have Apparated there and back in minutes.'

'Have you ever seen Lucius do anything in minutes, Black? By the time he'd brushed his hair it would have been tomorrow,' Snape replied. 'Anyway, I hung about for a while, and they came out after about fifteen minutes. They had a large package with them. I don't know what it was, but it was heavy, and they were sharing the load between them until they charmed its weight away.'

'How large?'

Snape shrugged. 'About half the size of man.'

'What's wrong, Severus? What do you think it was?' Lupin asked, watching him carefully; he thought there was something very troubled about him. 'That's a funny way to describe something, even for you. Why couldn't you say about three feet long?'

'This is going to sound absurd,' Snape replied, 'but I think it was alive. I wish you or Black had been there; you might have been able to tell.'

'I can't send him out on his own at all,' Sirius said, grinning at Lupin and shaking his head. 'First he needs Lucius before he's away for half an hour, and then he needs us.' He looked at Snape at last. 'Did you remember the cigarettes at least?'

'You may go back and get them; the fresh air will do you good,' Snape replied. 'Tell me, Black, does a person smell the same if they have cast Charms to disguise themselves?'

'You want me to put on my doggy suit and sniff around for Regulus?'

'Not the way I would have put it, but you have grasped the idea.'

Lupin wondered why they were looking for trouble; he would have thought they had had quite enough of that to last them a few years. He hauled himself to his feet. He might as well go along for the ride; that way he could keep Sirius's cigarettes company.

It was the run up to the start of September, the start of the Hogwarts new school session, and all the tables inside had been taken by pre-school shoppers, an alarming and noisy medley of grandmas, and mothers, and small children who seemed intent on setting fire to table covers with newly procured wands.

Quite a few of the women had several children, probably orphaned cousins or even strangers. The war had decimated the adult population whilst the children hid like so many little mice, under floorboards and in drawers and cupboards, protected by hasty Concealment Charms that could only be broken by a blood relative. And yet life went on, even when it had been forced back to almost the brink; it waited until it was safe, and crept back out into the light with renewed vigour, looking for whatever crumbs had been left behind. One only had to look at the baby boom of the post-Grindelwald years; the Hogwarts classes of Sirius's generation were almost double the generation before, until Voldemort had culled them again.

Lupin and Snape sat at the outside table at Florian Fortescue's, the werewolf tucking into a large chocolate sundae, seemingly oblivious to the inclement weather, as Snape sipped a glass of clear brown bitter tea and bravely ignored the fact that the rain that was diluting it almost as quickly as he could drink it; the alternative of trying to get a table amongst a hoard of screaming children wasn't one he intended to consider. He had cast his Charms about him. He still felt it wise to maintain some sort of mystery as to his affiliations for as long as he could. He didn't know what sort of backtracking he was going to have to do in the future; it was best to keep any damage to a minimum.

They had walked once past the shop in Knockturn Alley and left Sirius at the corner to change to Padfoot, before walking slowly back to where they had agreed to meet up with him; they had longer to wait than they had expected.

'It was him,' Sirius said flatly as he sat at the table. 'No mistake about it; it was definitely him. Even with the rain, it's still as fresh as a daisy.'

'What kept you so long then?' Snape asked.

'I don't know,' Sirius said with a shudder that surprised him. 'It wasn't just him ... and I don't mean he was with someone; I recognised Karkaroff anyway. It was as though the scent were overlaid with something else. The other scent was only at each footfall, as though whoever had left it had followed exactly in their footsteps ... like they had been marked out.'

'Or were in the same shoes at the same time?' Snape murmured as much to himself as the other two.

'Yeah, something like that.' Sirius nodded uneasily. 'What do we do now?'

'I am going to pay Lucius a visit,' Snape replied.

Lucius pulled back the sleeve of his silk shirt. The Dark Mark was only slightly less faded than Sirius remembered from the last time he'd seen it in the restaurant. 'I've shown you mine,' he said archly as he gave Snape a look, 'now show me yours.'

It suddenly struck Sirius that it hadn't even occurred to him to look for the Dark Mark on Severus's arm, but then he'd been more interested in other things. He watched Snape pull back his own sleeve with some reluctance; the Mark was harder to see on his arm, masked as it was by black hair, but for all that it seemed to burn more clearly.

'It only means he is not dead. We suspected that already.' Snape pulled his black sleeve down quickly, as though Voldemort's Mark were an affront to his dignity. 'We need to move forward, Lucius. I need your help to know how safe we are at this point in time.'

'You seem to be quite safe,' Lucius replied coolly, failing to hide the fact that he was very nervous about something. 'I am sure you'll pardon my self-centeredness, but my anxiety right now is my own and my son's safety. No one seems much concerned about that.'

'That's not true,' Sirius replied defensively. He could see Malfoy's apprehension stemmed from more than the fact that he had been excluded from the protection of Grimmauld Place. He wished he could get him alone, but there was no reasonable excuse for asking Lupin and Snape to leave the room. He knew Lucius had his own losses to come to terms with, and he'd be feeling cast adrift from everything, neither the Order's meat nor the Death Eaters' poison.

Sirius felt a stab of guilt that he hadn't even asked Lucius how he was coping with Narcissa's death, even though he knew as well as anyone that it had been a marriage of convenience, that Abraxas had picked his cousin years ago, when she was little more than a baby, from an array of hopefuls, to be the Mistress of Malfoy Manor. It was a title that expected her to produce an heir to the Malfoy name and then behave with such dignity for the rest of her life so as not to bring disgrace to the family name; Lucius had managed that bit all by himself.

He was surprised and just a little put out when Snape announced that he wasn't going back to Grimmauld Place that night; he was also disappointed and just a little concerned when Snape made it clear that he expected Sirius and Lupin to make themselves scarce. He decided not to resist; perhaps Severus wanted to see if Malfoy had information he had not wanted to admit to in front of anyone else. The nature of the war had made the peace very complicated, for quite a few people, Lucius Malfoy in particular.

Severus stroked the long blond hair thoughtfully; Lucius was asleep now. He closed his eyes for a moment as he let his hand rest on the pale shoulder, rebuking himself for having been so wrapped up in his own concerns that he hadn't noticed what was happening to Lucius. How easy it would have been for Malfoy's indecisions and vulnerabilities to take comfort in the lies Regulus Black and his followers would have fed him; they would offer him the glory Lucius needed like a drug, and gloss over the price of the addiction.

It had shocked Snape when Lucius had told him that Regulus had been to the manor that very morning, while Severus and Sirius and Lupin had been at Diagon Alley looking for his trail. He had debated with himself as to whether he should send for Sirius to see if he could recognise the same scents he had found in Knockturn Alley, but he wanted the time to think about things.

He tried to sort out the jumble of information Lucius had bombarded him with, hardly waiting until the door had closed on Black and Lupin. Regulus had come alone to the manor to issue what sounded like a list of ultimatum, and when Snape had questioned Lucius as to why he had not simply shown him the door, he seemed at a loss to explain himself. Severus didn't feel like pushing him on that; he would think about it once he heard Malfoy out. He listened with mounting concern, barely interrupting, as Lucius told him that Regulus seemed to expect him to become the stepping-stone between him and the rest of the wizarding world, becoming a bastion of impenetrable respectability over the coming years, harbouring a nest of vipers that would one day make Voldemort look like a fairy godmother... and Regulus seemed to have no doubts that Malfoy would drink from this poisoned chalice.

His first task was to court Dumbledore, buying his way into a position of power by becoming a governor of the school. Regulus suggested that next year, or perhaps even the year after, Lucius should provide an endowment, in the name of Salazar Slytherin of course, for a number of handpicked mature foreign students wishing to study at Hogwarts. He stressed that nothing had to be done with unseemly haste. It showed the depth of his forward planning that Regulus Black appeared to have his eyes on much more than Voldemort ever had. He wanted the wizarding world, and he didn't just mean the part of it that dwelt in Britain.

Regulus had intimated to Lucius to use whatever means he had at his disposal to gain entry to the Wizengamot, and the upper echelons of power in the Ministry, and the board of directors of Gringotts. Everything he demanded was fuel for Lucius's own vanity. The only thing Lucius had to do was manoeuvre himself into positions of influence, most of which could be done using the one tool Malfoy always had to hand, the one he was never likely to run out of, the Malfoy millions.

To a degree his plans suited Severus. At least Lucius would not have the pressure of meetings with Dumbledore coming to Regulus's ears; in fact he could pass off connections with any of the Order without suspicion, at least they had time on their side for now. The openness with which Lucius had told him all of this tended to make Severus accept that Malfoy had not originally known that Regulus himself had written to inform of the lie of his death; he only admitted to himself then that he had suspected some sort of collusion between them.

Regulus Black was a young man, and the dazzling career he had set out for himself had been somewhat kick-started by the unexpected bonus of the only man who had ever really been in his way having been stripped so ignominiously of his power by a baby. His plans were for the long term. He would not rush; he had planted his seeds and did not seem to intend to pluck his harvest until it had ripened properly. Severus had to admire him in that. Regulus had covered everything in his initial plans; there was nothing contentious that could be traced to anyone but Lucius, and even then Malfoy's legendary thirst for power would allay any suspicions. In fact he had made only one tiny mistake when he had gauged Lucius. He had been right about Malfoy's craving for fame and glory and the trappings of power; it was just a pity for Regulus Black that he didn't understand that not everything was black or white, and that there were shades of grey too. He could not conceive of the fact that just because a man had money and greed and weaknesses and vanities, that he did not also have a conscience. Severus found himself pulling Malfoy closer, as though in some sort of protection.

Severus had his own ambitions too, his own hidden agenda. He knew now that Regulus Black was the one man who could get him where he needed to be. He would play the waiting game too. The more he mulled it all over, the more he realised that something was missing. Regulus was only twenty-five, not much more than a boy; for him to have ambitions was one thing, for him to have such long-term plans didn't add up to what should have been the reckless impatience of youth, once freed from the shackles of a tyrannical master. Snape went back to wondering just what it had been that Sirius had scented. His first temptation had been to think that Regulus had been under the influence of some Concealment Charm or potion, perhaps even just a simple variant of Polyjuice; but that would still only have given a visual appearance of another. This was something deeper. He admitted to himself that he wasn't very keen on the possibilities he was coming up with.

Sirius waited three days before he came to terms with the fact that Snape wasn't coming back. He pulled his leather jacket from the peg next to his mother's portrait, he only ever bothered to hang it up there as a Muggle affront to her dubious sensibilities, and Apparated from the front doorstep.

'He is not here, Black,' Lucius said with a frown. 'Have you fought with him?'

'Yes, all the time. Why?'

'He went to Godric's Hollow when he left here,' Lucius said.

'Why?'

'Oh, not on some morbid pilgrimage,' Lucius replied, then seemed to hesitate. 'Why did you take him in, Black?' he asked. 'I confess, of the three of us, I did not expect to be the one who was alone.'

Sirius felt a stab of guilt. 'You didn't want me, Lucius. I can't wait forever, you know.'

Malfoy nodded slowly with what could have been regret, but he didn't say anything; he didn't need to.

'And he doesn't want either of us as it turns out,' Sirius said. 'Anyway, why did he go to Godric's Hollow?'

Lucius looked away, and Sirius saw it again: the fear, the holding back on what he knew would expose him and his vulnerabilities. He moved behind the chaise and let his hands rest on Malfoy's shoulders, feeling the tension begin to relax as he rubbed his thumbs on the knotted muscles. 'What's wrong, Lucius?' he asked, dropping his head to the white-blond hair he always loved waking up next to. 'What's happening? You can trust me. Surely you know that much.'

'That's where Regulus took what was left of Voldemort.'

Sirius felt himself stand up straight in shock. 'He what?'

'You heard me correctly. Pettigrew must have lifted the Fidelius Charm, Black. Surely you haven't forgotten already that he was the Secret Keeper. He either left it open when he allowed Voldemort to get to the Potters, or went back and lifted it again after Lily and James's bodies were taken away. Whatever it was, Severus didn't light the fire quickly enough.'

'That has to be the sickest thing I've heard yet.'

'Suffice it to say, Severus didn't care much for it either,' Malfoy said uneasily. 'I just hope he didn't do anything stupid when he was there.'

'You let him go alone?' Sirius gave him a look of disgust. 'Sometimes I wonder what kind of man you are.'

'I had no option,' Malfoy replied with some heat. 'He took Polyjuice and went disguised as me. Even I think one Lucius Malfoy is quite enough.'

Sirius tried to find something wrong with that, but he didn't manage. 'I want you to stay here, and do not move from here, Lucius,' he said. 'In fact I'm going to get Lupin to come and stay with you.'

Lucius surprised him by not putting up an objection to the werewolf's presence in the hallowed halls of the seat of the Malfoys; maybe he just didn't want to be alone. 'Where are you going?' he asked instead, failing to mask the flash of anxiety.

'I'm going to don the doggy suit and find Snape.'

'I doubt he's there any more,' Malfoy replied. 'He only had about four hours' worth of Polyjuice. It's not something I keep a great quantity of.'

Sirius resisted asking why he kept any at all; there were some things he didn't want to know. 'Lucius, how did you know all this?' he asked instead.

'He was going back to you,' Lucius said with something that sounded like mild accusation, drifting away from the question in a way that only emphasized his vulnerability.

'I need to know,' Sirius persisted. 'How did you know about Godric's Hollow?'

Malfoy stood up and crossed the drawing room to his desk. 'This was delivered just as Severus was about to leave for Grimmauld Place three days ago.' He lifted a piece of parchment; it looked as though it were written once again in Regulus's hand. 'Unlike you, Black, I still get invited to the best parties in town.'

Chapter Six

Chapter 6 of 17

Sirius is surprised to find that Snape isn't intending to return to Malfoy Manor.

Chapter Six

Severus looked awful when Sirius tracked him down to Spinner's End. He looked as though he had neither washed nor shaved nor changed his clothes for days; added to the fact that he had obviously been drinking heavily, it was a daunting prospect. Sirius knew how he'd feel too, resentful, hostile; he knew from experience that the last thing a drunken mess wants is a well-meaning visitor. He could remember the times he'd thrown Lupin out for assuming his sympathy did anything but join the general nausea of a carefully cultivated hangover.

He didn't wait for the invitation that wasn't going to be forthcoming, barging past Snape instead and leaving him the option of vacating the premises or joining him in the shabby living room that made Grimmauld Place look like a palace. As it happened Snape found a third choice and opted for it, striding past Sirius without a word and opening a door onto what looked like an inner hallway.

Sirius could hear him tramping up the stairs as he tried not to take stock of the miserable surroundings. He wondered if it had been here that Snape had been brought back to when he left Hogwarts every summer, this mean place that seemed to host a million bad memories. As Sirius sat trying to work out what to do next he felt something jog his memory like a sickening flash, something Lucius had said to him a long time ago, when they had been but boys, under the covers in Lucius's bed in Malfoy Manor. It all seemed so clear now to Sirius; he could even remember the occasion. Lucius had been eighteen, Sirius fifteen, and the Blacks and the Malfoys were having one of their awful parties for Voldemort downstairs, and he and Lucius had sneaked away for a party of their own, somewhere that Narcissa wouldn't hotly pursue the reluctant fuel of

her fancies.

'It might be awful here, Black,' Lucius had said in the plummy accent he'd affected that would stay with him for the rest of his life, 'but at least I don't get beaten.'

'Neither do I,' Sirius had replied defensively, 'not unless I really deserve it.'

'Severus does,' Lucius said seriously, and even the callow youth that Sirius had been could sense his concern for something he didn't really understand. 'I wanted him to come here for the summer, but he wasn't allowed, his father wanted him back up north. I think he wanted to see his brother anyway.'

'I didn't know he had a brother,' Sirius remembered remarking with disinterest.

But Malfoy had looked away, as though he were upset or frightened of something. 'I wish he hadn't gone, Black. I've a not very good feeling about Severus's father.'

Sirius understood what he meant now, what he hadn't much cared about then; Snape had hardly been a friend when they were at school, after all. He could feel the unspeakable secrets these walls had beheld, the atrocities visited on a young boy; he knew what kind of atrocities they would be too. They would have nothing to do with a smart slap on the face, or even a father's belt on a quickly bared bottom: hasty anger, tears of forgiveness, all finished in a few minutes, no scars on either side. Something quite different had taken place in this house; Sirius could feel it. He was frightened to wonder what had become of that other boy, the boy he had not known about; he wondered if Lucius knew.

Sirius felt something like helpless rage rise up in an attempt to choke him. He didn't want Severus in this place, remembering things that had happened here, thinking about James, drinking himself into some sort of oblivion. He felt himself shudder, as the house seemed to close around his senses in rebuke for witnessing its poverty, its ability to give shelter from only the elements of weather, as though it had lacked the compassion to care for the souls in its charge.

He found himself remembering visiting Lupin's old family home in the northwest of England a couple of times as a boy. It had been every bit as poor as this place; but like the Burrow, it had been kind and welcoming, as though it said, "This is all we have, but come in and share it with us". Spinner's End had a different message. This hostile house had no warmth to share; it sat alone in silent witness. Sirius knew the difference had nothing to do with relative degrees of poverty of anything but the soul.

He lit a fire in the blackened grate, one that took hold grudgingly, making him suspect Snape hadn't lit it in the three days he'd been here. He wondered if Kingsley had come inside this house when he came to arrest him, but he suspected not; for some obscure reason he couldn't explain even to himself, he hoped not too. He supposed Snape had been waiting inside the front door for him; he doubted this house ever welcomed visitors.

It had all happened too quickly for Severus; Sirius understood that now. Even his decision to stay on at Grimmauld Place had been made before he was ready to make it; he hadn't had time to grieve for James, and Sirius knew that whatever claims Snape made that they had been finished meant nothing. He didn't want to push Severus, but he had to make him understand that he should go back; under whatever terms he cared to make, but he had to leave here. Even if he went to stay with Lucius for a while, Sirius wouldn't even mind that, but he could not bear to think of him sitting alone in this dreary Muggle town, in this dreary little house. He was so deep in thought that he hadn't noticed Snape had come back downstairs.

'I don't know what you think to achieve by coming here, Black, but I do not want to listen to any well-intentioned speech you may have prepared,' he said in a flat tone. 'I would rather you left now.'

'I want you either to come back to Grimmauld Place or go to stay with Lucius for a while.'

'No thank you.' Snape began to turn away.

'There aren't any strings to the offer, you know. You don't have to sleep with anyone ... or have a relationship with them ... or ... Damn it, Snape, at least have the decency to hear me out.'

'I have things to do, Black, and I have to do them on my own.'

'What things?'

'I have to kill your brother, something I can surely avoid a prison sentence for as he has already informed the Ministry of his death whilst I was under arrest ... I have to track down what is left of Voldemort and destroy it ... and I ...' He looked away as though his thoughts were too big to put into mere words. When he turned back Sirius almost gasped; he had never seen a more tortured soul in his life. 'I'd forgotten,' he whispered. 'I still have to avenge him, Black ... I'd forgotten about that.'

Sirius stifled his sigh as he nodded his understanding. 'I know you do,' he said quietly. 'I have to too. So let's just get a few things straight.'

'I know what you're trying to do ... and I appreciate your kindness ... but I want to do this alone.'

'Well, damn it, Snape, but life's a bitch, and she's given you passengers.' Sirius gave him a tight grin. 'I've had to send Lupin to stay with Lucius just now; he's very vulnerable. I want you to go and stay there; make that your base if you want.'

'Does Spinner's End offend your sensibilities, Black? Considering the dump you come from, I should have thought that unlikely. Of course, perhaps you miss the dirt.'

Sirius thought that sounded better, a bit more like the Snape he knew. He let his eyes tour the room again. Snape was right. Whatever was wrong with Spinner's End it was immaculately clean; every old book and worn rug and shabby chair was spotless. It only made the place feel even more hostile. 'No, it doesn't offend me. What offends me is what you're doing to yourself.'

'That, I believe, is my prerogative. I am a free man again. Now go away, Black ... and make sure Lucius does not call in your wake.'

'You selfish bastard,' Sirius snapped at him.

'I beg your pardon?' Snape flared his first real reaction.

'You have duties ... you have bloody obligations,' Sirius went on, warming to his anger. 'Or maybe you're too wrapped up in your own self-pity to recognise them.'

'Good try, Black,' Snape replied, 'but not good enough. I have no obligations but to myself.'

'Oh, yes you do. You have an obligation to Lucius. You had better make sure he doesn't end up like James. Because if he does it won't be Pettigrew you come up against, or the aftermath of the Wizengamot, or any wrinkled old Dark Lord, or upstart of a snotty-nosed Death Eater. It will be me ... and believe me, Snape, you'll wish you'd got your ticket to Azkaban when the going was good.' He reckoned that should be almost enough. Snape was standing with his mouth half-open; at least he was registering something. 'You have another obligation you haven't even bothered to find out about,' Sirius sneered. 'You think you loved James? I doubt it. You were in love with the pathetic triangle you were caught up in without the guts to let go.'

'That's quite enough,' Snape gasped at him.

'Is it? I'll tell that to his son when you've squandered the only chance he has of growing up the way James fought for all his life. Because you were too selfish...' He stopped short; it was enough, too much. Snape had turned away. He stood with his head hanging, and Sirius walked past him to the front door. 'I'll be at Malfoy Manor. Make sure you're there by tomorrow evening, or I'll be coming for you. You might be able to hide from yourself, Severus Snape, but you can't hide from me.' He slammed the door behind him.

He almost turned back, almost didn't have the bottle to leave the door of that miserable little house whilst the sound of the rattling lintel still echoed in his head; he almost didn't have the bottle to give Snape whatever privacy Grimmauld Place had denied him. He could see that now; see what was wrong. 'I'm sorry, Severus,' he whispered to himself as he made his way down the row of houses to the end of the street. 'I'm so, so sorry.'

'Did you see him?'

Sirius nodded. 'He's not in a very good place, Lucius.'

'Spinner's End?'

'Yes, but that wasn't what I meant.' Sirius rubbed his hand across his own unshaven chin. 'Can I stay here tonight?'

Malfoy's nod was carefully non-committal. 'What if he goes back to Grimmauld Place?' he asked.

'I told him I was coming here.' Sirius didn't want to go back to Grimmauld Place, to the house empty of everything but ghosts of his own past. He knew he would just sit and get drunk in the horrible kitchen, trying to get rid of the images of the man he had left up north. Anyway, Lupin wouldn't be at the manor until the next morning, and Sirius didn't want to leave Malfoy alone; he was beginning to worry for his safety.

He felt Lucius come closer. He needed Malfoy tonight, the peculiar brand of comfort of his generously yielding body. He was so different from Severus, but Sirius knew Snape would never be a taker, not in the way Lucius was. He wondered if he could ever love anyone the way he loved Lucius Malfoy, wondered why he'd lied to Snape ... and himself; maybe because Lucius was every bit as lost to him as James was to Severus. But for tonight he'd pretend, the same way he pretended whenever he was with him.

Severus had almost called him back, almost. He felt an obscure sense of loss as the front door closed and he listened to Black's footsteps clipping down the weedy slabbed pathway of the tiny front garden, the creak of the gate and the reluctant swing back as the echoes disappeared up the street. Only once he knew he was really gone did he finally allow himself the luxury of thought. It hadn't been Black's fault; that lay with him alone. Severus had virtually invited him into his bed, knowing where Black's affections lay; knowing that what Sirius had done for him had been done for James. And Black was right, he did have obligations; to Lucius and James's boy, and all of the others whom he'd fought for, for so long.

Snape knew he wouldn't catch up with Voldemort now, not now that Regulus had spirited him away with Karkaroff, out of his own way. Voldemort, or whatever was left of him, had indeed occupied the ruined house at Godric's Hollow; but he was barely alive from what Snape could tell. By the time he had answered Regulus's invitation, disguised as Lucius, Karkaroff had already gone on ahead to prepare some sort of safe house in Eastern Europe, and taken Voldemort with him; from what he could gather it would be a long time before that particular Dark Lord was any kind of force again. Something troubled Severus about that, something he couldn't quite put his finger on; it was as though whatever had accompanied Karkaroff had scarcely mattered any more.

Even now Severus could see the remnants of the Death Eaters were dividing into factions; those who wanted to take less extreme avenues back into mainstream politics were looking for him to lead them, at least they were looking for Lucius to lead them. And then there were the others, Regulus's band, who seemed to think that, young as he was, his shoulders were wide enough to assume the mantle of Dark Power, using Lucius in quite a different way. Severus knew Malfoy would only be a throwaway figurehead to them, to be disposed of when it became convenient.

He could tell there was something else, before he was told. At first he had suspected Regulus had kept what remained of Voldemort alive and safe for a reason of his own; it was a frightening enough prospect. And then the final twisted irony of it all had been when Regulus had asked him, still assuming him to be Malfoy, if he could persuade Severus Snape to join him. He thought Severus could help him metamorphose along with the rest of Voldemort's power to a new and even greater leader than they had ever had, not a tainted crossbred poor relation like Riddle had been, but a fitting thoroughbred successor to Salazar Slytherin, with impeccable bloodlines like Salazar's own had been before the Muggle trash had sullied it.

It was only then that Severus allowed himself to acknowledge what he had begun to suspect: the presence Sirius had sensed, Lucius's apparent inability to do anything but hear Regulus out; it fitted uncomfortably now. Somehow Regulus had already undertaken some sort of transmutation with part of Voldemort; perhaps what he had sent away with Karkaroff was either a red herring or an empty husk. Severus wondered just why he needed his help. He had been left with little option but to shrug Lucius's shoulders and take his leave, promising to stay in touch with him and begin to carry out his instructions he had given him at Malfoy Manor the day before.

Why the two meetings? Severus had asked himself, unless Regulus was checking that he was able to flex his muscles from a distance, that Malfoy would come to him when bidden. Whatever it was, it suited Severus; he had master plan of his own.

He had found himself, not back at Malfoy Manor, but at Spinner's End, and almost had to question himself as to why he had come here when warmer welcomes beckoned. It was only when he felt the coldness of the wretched little house, permeating his bones to meet the chill inside him, that he understood the crushing blow his senses had been dealt that James's home had been desecrated in the way it had. That the rooms in which they had occasionally made clandestine love, on the few occasions when James was alone in the house, even though they were burnt beyond recognition, had been defiled by the presence of such evil, was something Severus couldn't come to terms with. He could find no outlet for his rage in this place; Spinner's End's own rooms were despoiled with equal but different atrocities.

But now he knew what he would do; he'd bide his time and use Lucius to keep tabs on things, and make sure that he was protected as best he could. Black was right; he had obligations, and he had to make sure he was equal to them. He supposed he should stay here tonight, in this home of the nightmares of his youth. He let a smirk cross his lips; it would be best not to catch Lucius and Black ... that would serve nothing.

He stood from the uncomfortable chair, not even remembering when he'd sat down, and tried to warm his hands at the fire Black had made, as he felt the ghosts of the past attempt to creep upon him. He straightened his shoulders and climbed the stairs slowly. He would meet them now; he would meet them face on and put them away forever ... he had no room for passengers any more.

He paused outside the door of the tiny back room as though to prepare himself, trying to tell himself he was immune to this; it couldn't hurt him any more. He had not been in this room since the morning after Alexis had died, since the day he had turned an Unforgivable Curse on his own father, and Tobias Snape pulled back in a fear of his eldest son that he never quite got over. Too late, Severus had been too late; had he had any idea of his own power earlier, his brother would still be alive ... he would never come to terms with that guilt.

He found he'd opened the door as gut-wrenching bursts of memories he hardly recognised crowded in on him; recollections of a heavysset man looming over a small dark boy whilst he lay face down on his bed and wept into the pillow. Flashes of the rage he'd felt, overriding the pain and humiliation, as he tried to blot out the sounds of his brother's weakening cries, as his own body was defiled too, by another man, a stranger who had paid for the privilege. He had turned his head to his brother only once, at the sound of a different, more sickening thud, the sort of sound a small boy's head would make if it were slammed against a wall. He had been just in time to see his father collapse on top of Alexis, seemingly spent at last, just in time to see the now silent tears from the boy's eyes joined by a small steady stream of blood from his nose.

He sat on the bed. It still had the faded pale blue coverlet, and the lumpy pillow Alexis had cried into. Severus closed his eyes and remembered, summoning the memories from where they tried to hide from him in the corners of his mind. He could almost feel Alexis as he had held him until his sobs became muffled against his chest, until the younger boy slipped into a deep sleep, so peaceful that he never woke from it; it was a better place than the one he'd left behind.

He remembered the morning when he woke with the motionless cold form of the boy still pressed to his own breast, the hushed nervous tones of his parents followed by a

buzz of frantic activity. He remembered as though it were yesterday, his own grim satisfaction, and the shocked fear and incredible pain on his father's face, as Severus's Cruciatus Curse knocked him down the stairs when he tried to take Alexis's body from him. He remembered the furtive glances for months on end, and the startled guilty looks if anyone knocked on the door, as Spinner's End retreated even further within itself, to sweep up its dark secrets and pretend they had never happened, as Severus sank deeper and deeper into a black pit of hate of everything around him, and the world began to forget he had ever had a brother.

It was finished, like so many other things in his life. He stood up and took a long steadying breath, and found he was looking out of the window to the spot where he had buried his young brother. Every time Severus had planted a tree on the unmarked grave, Tobias Snape had cut it down, until the day he finally drank himself to death. He felt his lip twist in a sad smile as he looked at the weeping cherry; how big it had grown. In all of Spinner's End it was the only pure unspoiled thing. Severus nodded slowly to himself, and finally let the curtain fall back into place.

He would leave here now, and he would take Alexis's remains with him; he could not leave him here alone in the cold uncaring ground with nothing but a tree to love him, because Severus was never coming back. He was ready now; he would face the world again, and if he had it within his power he would make sure that it was a better place when he left it, to leave some decent thing in memory of James and Lily and all the fallen ... and a small dark boy nobody else remembered.

As he turned to leave he was stopped in his tracks by a tiny tap on the window, and found he had to stifle a gasp. He had almost forgotten about them; in the midst of the memories of the black despair of the days that followed Alexis's death, he had almost forgotten. He flung the window open and the fairy flew in. She nodded to the weeping cherry, to where the branches moved in what looked like a breeze that affected the tree alone.

'If you take him, you must take us also, Severus Snape. He is our charge for all time.'

Chapter Seven

Chapter 7 of 17

As things go quiet, Dumbledore decides the time is right to take a step in his preferred direction.

Chapter Seven

Sirius watched Snape walk back into the room; he wondered what he'd been doing. He'd arrived an hour or so ago, just as Sirius came downstairs; he had a long intense conversation with Lucius and then disappeared again. He was clean and sober and seemed to have sorted himself out though; Sirius supposed that was a step forward. He had asked Malfoy where Snape was a while back, but Lucius had just shrugged and raised his eyebrow, told him to ask Snape if he thought it was any of his business, and continued with his breakfast.

Sirius was going to ask Severus, but something stopped him. 'Do you feel safe enough here?' he asked Lucius instead.

Lucius looked from Snape to Sirius and then to where Lupin was buttering another slice of toast. He'd arrived just after Snape, and had already made himself comfortable. His battered leather travelling bag still sat beside the oak door, as oddly at home in the faded grandeur of Malfoy Manor's dining room, as it was out of place. Malfoy nodded; strangely, he seemed at ease with Lupin.

'Yes, but keep in touch. I don't want to have to deal with anything myself,' he said, and Sirius wondered again at what was really worrying him.

'Why don't you stay here too, Black?' Snape suggested. 'And I shall go to Grimmauld Place.'

Sirius shook his head. 'I've got things I want to do.'

'So have I,' Snape replied testily. 'I want to get the ruddy rooms I am to live in cleaned.'

Sirius knew what the remark meant. He needed to set his mind at rest that he wasn't expecting a renewal of intimacy, unless Snape wanted it, and he didn't think he did. He wanted him to know it wasn't part and parcel of the deal of living in Grimmauld Place.

'Do what you like with your own rooms,' he snapped, 'as long as you leave mine alone.'

'He could get Kreacher to clean up the kitchen though, Sirius,' Lupin suggested hopefully, breaking the tension, as he shook his napkin and let his toast crumbs fall to the floor.

'Do you know how many llamas died to make that rug?' Lucius asked as he watched the crumbs land on the carpet.

'None probably,' Lupin replied. 'They shear them for the wool; they don't skin them.'

'That's not the point,' Malfoy snapped, without much in the way of his usual hostility.

'What is the point then?' Lupin enquired mildly as he turned the corner of the rug up to check it was indeed woven and not a skin.

Sirius smiled to himself. Lupin could look after himself with Malfoy, and if Lucius made the mistake of chancing his arm he'd get a shock, probably a broken nose as well. Lupin was a ladies' man; he didn't take kindly to having his arse felt.

Sirius slumped into the chair and watched Snape fill the kettle and put it on the hob. He knew Snape felt awkward, and he wasn't sure what to do about it; perhaps nothing was best. When he turned, Sirius realised that what he'd mistaken for discomfiture was concern.

'We have some very serious problems, Black,' he said as an opener and sat down heavily, pulling his ebony cigarette box from his pocket. He opened it and found it was empty.

Sirius dragged himself to his feet and pulled open a drawer in the kitchen table; it obligingly came out in a hurry, sending him staggering back across the room to bang his back on the edge of the cooking furnace, spilling its contents across the floor for good measure.

'For the love of Merlin, Black, can't you sit at peace for two minutes.'

Sirius rubbed his back. He winced and bent down to pick up one of the packets of Snape's cigarettes that he'd bought in Diagon Alley on the way back from Spinner's End, slapped them on the table and sat down, ignoring the rest of the mess; to be fair it was hardly noticeable.

'At least one of us remembered the cigarettes,' he said with a grin.

Snape took the cigarettes, toyed with the box and eventually opened them.

'Look, Severus,' Sirius said, 'I'm not going to pussyfoot about you, and I don't expect you to tread on eggshells around me. Let's just get that straight. You're here of your own accord, under whatever terms you care to make. If they're not acceptable to me I'll let you know quickly enough.'

'Have you finished venting you spleen?' Snape asked dryly and nodded to the floor. 'And get the elf to clear up that mess before I break my neck on something. I have standards to maintain and they are not met by the state of this...' he snapped, as he looked around the kitchen as though at a loss for words, '... this dump.'

Sirius kept his grin to himself; that was better. 'Get on with it,' he said. 'What happened at Godric's Hollow?'

He listened with slowly mounting alarm as Severus told him everything that Lucius had told him about Regulus's visit to Malfoy Manor, and his own trip disguised as Lucius to where the Death Eaters had set up a temporary meeting place at James and Lily's old home, and how he had come to the uncomfortable conclusion that Regulus had already begun to meld Voldemort's power with his own.

'How can you think that?'

'I remember your brother, Black. After all, it is only a few short months since I saw him last,' Snape pointed out. 'I had few dealings with him in the Death Eaters, but I remember enough of him to know that he was not the skilled Legilimens he seems to have suddenly become. That apart, he has acquired an aura, for want of a better word, about him that belies his years. That a mere slip of a boy has managed to gather the remains of the Death Eaters and have them do his bidding is evidence enough that something more powerful backs him up,' Snape said, taking no cognisance of the fact that Regulus wasn't that much younger than he and Sirius were.

'Nice and slowly, Severus,' Sirius responded. 'Just what are you saying?'

'I think what Karkaroff took to Europe is only the useless remains of the Dark Lord. I think he left the magic here,' Snape replied. 'And I think that somehow Voldemort has infused his power into Regulus. He would have been a willing vessel after all.'

'Why didn't you just kill him?'

'With twenty other Death Eaters around?' Snape gave him a pained look. 'Anyway, when I kill Voldemort, Black, I intend to kill all of him, not just a bit. Regulus seems to think he needs me for something, and I need to know what it is. In order to get into his confidence I have to play a very reluctant game. If part of Voldemort has indeed taken up residence in your brother, I need to know where the other part is. There is no point in cutting off a serpent's tail just to have its head turn around and bite you.'

Sirius had been right about one thing: Malfoy had confided in Severus in a way he would confide in no one else; he tried to stifle the envy he felt at that. 'We've got problems, Snape,' he said at last, echoing the sympathy. 'What are you going to do about it?'

Severus wondered if Black had expected him to go along to his bedroom, wondered if the fractional hesitation at the top of the stairs had been an invitation, or the opposite. They came to his own door first. The ball was firmly in his court, and for now he wanted to keep it there; he wasn't ready to make another mistake. He listened carefully until he heard the door of Sirius's room close softly a moment or two later; he couldn't work out how he felt about that.

He took his wand from the slim pocket on his left thigh and started with the bed. He didn't know why he hadn't bothered when he'd been here last, probably some subconscious atonement. The pillows went next; he transformed the mouldy old hen's feathers to goose down, following on with dyeing the faded cream linen to a more aesthetically pleasing black. That would do for tonight. He didn't need to look at the walls anyway, but he did need to sleep; he had a lot to think about tomorrow.

The thoughts of attending every meeting with Regulus or any other Death Eater in place of Lucius had hardened from a decision to a necessity. He'd talked it through with Black, mildly impressed with his input, and he found himself for the first time in quite a while looking forward to the future with some sense of purpose. He just had to make sure that Lucius didn't make any little side trips on his own to double cross him, but he didn't think he would. He didn't need to wonder now why Malfoy had been afraid, why he hadn't just thrown Regulus out of Malfoy Manor for presuming to issue orders to him. Lucius had sensed something else, whether he realised that fact or not.

Malfoy seemed content with the thought of Lupin staying with him; that hadn't surprised Severus as much as it had surprised Sirius. Lucius had once fancied Lupin; long ago, before he knew he was a werewolf and a ladies' man to boot ... Severus wasn't sure which was the greater sin in Malfoy's eyes. Lucius needed company, and there was only so often that Andromeda could call to the manor; she had her own family to consider. Lupin was mild-mannered and genteel, with a good solid core of steel; he wouldn't let Lucius ride roughshod over him, and although he tended to be a little light-fingered with other people's cigarettes and such small trifles, he would be unlikely to abuse any privileges living at the manor afforded him. He would almost be a gentleman's companion; one who knew just what to look out for. Severus nodded to himself in satisfaction; it had been a smart move on Black's part.

He let his mind flit to Sirius's cousin. Sometimes Severus wished he had married. If he could have found a woman like Andromeda, he possibly would have, but women like her were not for men like him. He had nothing to offer such a one as she ... and yet, he thought as sleep began to claim him at last, she had not married for wealth.

Severus would have liked a wife as a means to an end; he was conscious enough of his own taste to know the notion was purely selfish. He would have liked to be part of a real family just to know what it felt like, perhaps even having a son of his own, to raise in a world liberated from the shadow of Voldemort, free of the fears and heartbreak he had had to endure, maybe to balance the scales a little ... perhaps he would have called him Alexus.

Sirius wondered if Severus were asleep. He hadn't been sure if he had hesitated at the top of the stairs or not, if he had been waiting for an invitation; he just hadn't wanted to push him. Apart from that, he wasn't quite clear in his own mind how he felt about Snape. He wanted him here; he knew that much. Of all of the options of who would stay where, between him and Severus and Lupin and the manor, this had been Sirius's preferred option. Apart from one of course, but he knew although Snape had suggested he stay there for a time, that he wasn't ever going to be invited to live with Lucius under the conditions he wanted. Perhaps that was for the best; perhaps all he really needed from Malfoy was a quick fix every now and again. He suspected if they had ever got together it wouldn't have lasted long, and this way, he reasoned to himself, it could last forever. It was cold comfort.

He found his thoughts wandering again to Severus; he was a man of strange contradictions. He could be cold and aloof, and yet when something troubled him or offended his sensibilities there was something oddly vulnerable about him, something like wounded passion. Like his reaction to what Sirius had said about Regulus when he'd just found out he wasn't dead after all; Severus had seemed affronted by his lack of brotherly compassion. He reminded himself to ask Lucius about Snape's mystery brother; he didn't think it would do to ask Severus. Sirius knew that no such boy had gone to Hogwarts, not in the seven years he had been there; perhaps he was even younger, but something told him that wasn't the case ... he knew something bad had happened.

As he felt himself at last begin to wind down, he thought of James and Lily and what they would have wanted for Harry if they had seen what the future held; he somehow doubted it would be the option that Dumbledore had been forced into for the time being. He resolved to try to see the boy, try to keep in touch with his development in some way. He knew James and Lily had intended to make him Harry's godfather; he should at least take on those responsibilities if nothing more.

He found sleep coming to take him as the idea he had had when he first brought Snape here from the Wizengamot began to crystallise. He would speak to Dumbledore

about it again sometime ... if he could get Snape to settle properly.

It was just over a month later that Lupin walked down the tailored kitchen gardens to the outhouses with Malfoy at his side. He suspected Lucius was as surprised at how well they got on as he was. He hadn't expected Lucius to welcome his idea of a school of wizard music, but when he had, he had embraced it with the enthusiasm of a man who has too much time and money on his hands and has just found a new way to dispose of both.

'It will do very well,' Lucius said as Lupin whispered his Charm to open the door of the end building. 'I confess to being impressed. Tell me one thing, Lupin, before you embarrass yourself and the name of the House of Malfoy at the same time; do you actually know anything about music?'

'I know what it sounds like, if that's what you mean.'

'Well,' Lucius replied airily, 'if they're all young I suppose that will do. Dumbledore's coming this afternoon to talk over the meeting he's had with the governors,' he said, making a face. 'We can let him see this, and perhaps he can help you with the marketing.'

Lupin turned to him. 'Lucius, just because Regulus told you to court Dumbledore, it doesn't mean that you can't use whatever position you gain for your own purposes. We're not submitting to his demands, we're only pretending to go along with them.'

'Quite,' Malfoy returned flatly. 'But I would have preferred to have gained any future position on merit for a change, not as part of someone else's far flung military operation.'

'Oh, I think you have done that. I mean who would accept that Sirius could have been short listed to join the Board of Governors of Hogwarts, or me for that matter.'

He watched Lucius mull it over and seem to satisfy himself. Lupin knew just how to flatter him; it wasn't terribly taxing work.

It had been almost a week since Dumbledore had visited Lucius and Lupin at Malfoy Manor, and he hadn't spent the time since then idly, although to any observer he looked as though he'd been fast asleep. He always found himself uninterrupted when he sat back in his seat, snoring his head off; it was the only way he ever got any peace. The Headmaster had delegated the setting up of the committee for the placing of the war orphans to Minerva, and now he pretended to rouse himself to look over his desk as she went through the long list of recent adoptions; he even went as far as to nod in approval at some of the names she had linked with others. He didn't know why he ever bothered to attempt to fool himself that he had fooled Minerva; he'd even tried drooling once, but she had been unimpressed.

At length he asked the question that was never far from his mind. 'Have you been to see Harry yet?'

McGonagall made a face. 'Five minutes I was allowed again,' she said stiffly. 'As though I were some kind of evil being come to spirit away the boy they clearly don't want anyway. It is not a fitting way for him to be brought up, Albus,' she said as she always did.

Dumbledore nodded his agreement. 'Perhaps not, Minerva, but it is a safe way for the time being.'

She frowned in concern. 'Have you told Severus of your thinking?'

'No, not yet.' He shook his head. 'If he is not looking for it, it will be safer for now, I suspect. It is one of the reasons why I have stayed away from the boy myself, as you well know. Let us not awaken anything best left asleep.' He turned his mind to other things. 'Perhaps you would show Lucius in now; you know how fretful he becomes if he is kept waiting.'

'You're going to tell Lucius, aren't you?' she asked, giving him the imperious look she reserved for when she defied someone to contradict what she had already decided was true.

Dumbledore nodded slowly and doubtfully. 'Perhaps, Minerva, perhaps once I read his reactions to some other things, I very well may.'

'Do you think that is wise?' she asked, drawing her green velvet cloak tightly against her bony chest with one fist, managing to portray that she, for one, certainly didn't.

'Severus seems to feel he should be trusted, to a degree.'

'Is this the same Severus to whom you have not entrusted the information?' she asked archly.

'The very same.' Dumbledore smiled at last. 'Now, I am sure we have kept Lucius cooling his heels for long enough ... unless this was a ploy of yours to wait until he stormed off home in a fit of pique.' He watched her thin smile as she rose from her chair, satisfied that her objections had been mild enough to let him continue down the path he had set for himself today. He used Minerva as a barometer, measuring her degrees of disapproval of his proposed actions with the precision of a Knockturn Alley drug dealer; it had always worked quite well for him.

Malfoy sat in the chair across from Dumbledore. He always felt as though he were still at school when he sat in that particular seat, under the steady blue gaze that so discomfited him, the benignity laced with steel that marked Dumbledore apart from lesser men. 'We have heard nothing,' he said in answer to the Headmaster. 'Not a single word in almost three months.'

'So I have been informed by Severus, Lucius. In fact it was only yesterday that I had to remind Sirius and Severus that I had forbidden them to seek out trouble that we did not want to court,' Dumbledore replied, stroking the head of the mackerel-striped tabby, who jumped onto his desk and hissed back at him for the impertinence. 'But that is not really why I have brought you here.'

Lucius frowned. He had been surprised that he had been the only one here; he would hardly have expected Dumbledore to accept his word alone that Regulus, and indeed all contact with the Death Eaters, had gone quiet since Snape had visited Godric's Hollow. He had told him as much a week ago. And yet Regulus had issued his first set of commands; Lucius supposed it was only reasonable to expect that he was now sitting back, probably abroad, waiting and watching. There wasn't really much for him to do; his seemed to be a waiting game.

'Why am I here?' Lucius asked at length.

'Firstly, I have recommended your election onto the Board of Governors,' Dumbledore said, and held up his hand as Lucius made to speak, 'for next session. That should give the dust a chance to settle ... and perhaps if you could see your way to one or two more philanthropic acts between now and then ...' He trailed off suggestively.

Lucius winced; if he became much more philanthropic he would need some charity himself. 'Isn't Lupin's music school enough?'

'Perhaps.' Dumbledore nodded, and Lucius realised he was just trying to wring another pound of flesh from him. 'We shall use that to cover your reason for being here today, Lucius. I shall inform Severus so that he knows too; I know he is logging the dates of any meetings in case he should ever have to justify them to Regulus.'

'You think you have a spy here?' Lucius asked in alarm. He had brought Lupin with him, left him playing chess with a couple of Gryffindor prefects; he would have a job explaining that if he ever had to. He forced himself to relax, reminding himself that he wasn't going to have to do any explaining. Severus would handle that, and the little music school Lupin had opened in the grounds of the manor could take up a bit of slack. It had been a good idea; it seemed to keep Lupin happy too.

'Oh, quite probably,' Dumbledore replied lightly. 'We still have a Slytherin House after all.'

Lucius ignored the jibe. He knew Dumbledore would get down to it eventually.

The Headmaster made a show of shuffling some parchments on his desk, and Lucius had a feeling he was looking for a starting point. 'How much do you know about Severus?' he asked at last.

The question surprised Malfoy, and he found himself hotly defending Snape's loyalty until he realised that wasn't what Dumbledore was asking.

The Headmaster was looking at an old list of names and was running his finger down one and then another. 'I have here the list of magical children born in nineteen sixty-two, three years after Severus.' He pushed the list across the desk.

Lucius pretended to be puzzled. Two names jumped out at him. One was Regulus Black; his eyes sought the name he knew Dumbledore was asking about, it sat near the bottom of the alphabetical list, last but not one. 'What are you asking me?' he said.

Dumbledore said nothing, but thrust a list of Hogwarts' first years from eleven years later.

'What are you asking?' Lucius repeated. This was unknown ground, uncharted water. He didn't want to be talking about this; it wasn't his place.

'What happened to him, Lucius?'

'I don't know, Dumbledore. I don't know what became of him,' he said quietly, as the uncomfortable questions tugged at his memory, 'but I know it wasn't good.' He paused for a moment, marshalling his thoughts. 'I only ever met him once, many years ago. He was a pale little boy, a bit withdrawn, a bit like Severus when he was very young.'

He knew the Headmaster had read the truth from him; he had no need to elaborate, but he did ... perhaps to stop Dumbledore asking Snape and disturbing whatever old wounds were there. 'I do know one thing though,' he said and found he had to stifle the emotion he was feeling. 'When Severus left Spinner's End, when Black went for him, he brought Alexis's body with him because he wasn't going back there. He asked me to let him bury him in the walled garden at the manor, so he...' For a moment he couldn't speak; in fact he had to draw a deep shaky breath to even go on, looking down when he felt the cat rub against his leg. There was something oddly comforting about her. He was going to mention the fairies, but he changed his mind; perhaps because he was used only to giving information on a need to know basis, then again perhaps not. 'Why have you waited all these years?' he asked instead. 'Why didn't you enquire before?'

'I have a reason for wanting to know, Lucius,' Dumbledore said softly, with a genuine sympathy that Lucius couldn't fault; it was quite unlike the deliberate emotions he sometimes paraded across his ancient features. 'Not out of any morbid interest in raking up pain in either you or Severus. I need to know if Severus is suitable for a quite different task to the one he has just now, one that he can carry out along with the other things he does, but I do not want to cause him anguish by asking him. I know him as a soldier and the most dedicated Member of the Order. You, and perhaps Sirius to a lesser degree, are the only men who know the real Severus Snape.'

Lucius listened as Dumbledore told him of his fears and his suspicions, and then how he planned to allay them, and although he had flattered him and given him his place as the only type of confidante Snape had ever had, Lucius felt strangely humbled that someone other than Dumbledore had thought so deeply, someone he would not have thought could be so generous of heart. He found himself smiling a little ruefully as the Headmaster wound up.

'How convenient,' he murmured, quite himself again. 'Black and Severus, who would have thought it?'

'You think he will rally to the cause, so to speak?' Dumbledore enquired mildly.

'He will throw a fit; he will storm out, argue, be as difficult and sullen as he could possibly be.' Lucius laughed; it felt quite unfamiliar, he hadn't felt like laughing for a while. 'Of course he will rally,' he said, and then frowned for a moment. 'Why did you want to know about Alexis? What has he to do with this?'

'I think Severus will see what he has to do as some type of reparation. I have always sensed an undercurrent of guilt about him ... oh, not that he did anything to the boy, I do not suspect that for a second, and would not believe it if it were presented to me as an irrefutable fact ... but perhaps he feels he should have prevented whatever Alexis's fate was,' Dumbledore replied. 'Then, of course, there was always the James Potter issue; he will look at that too.'

'How convenient,' Lucius repeated, only regretting he had not thought of such a thing himself.

Dumbledore watched the door close behind Malfoy and turned to where Minerva had resumed her natural form. She nodded her reluctant approval and let her thin smile twist her lips; there was a touch of devilment in it.

'Have you mentioned any of this to Black yet, Albus?' she enquired.

'And spoil the surprise, Minerva?' he asked with a chuckle. 'It is, after all, what Sirius has been knocking our doors down these past three months for in the first place.'

'And Snape?' she asked, her eyebrow arched in amusement.

'Come, come now, Minerva. You heard Lucius; he will rally to the cause.'

Chapter Eight

Chapter 8 of 17

There's an unexpected visitor at Grimmauld Place.

Chapter Eight

Regulus looked at the fat wheezing man opposite him with distaste he didn't bother to veil. He despised fat men; fat Muggles were at the very top of his list.

'I just thought you should know,' Vernon Dursley said as his piggy eyes darted from Regulus to the thin man who stood at the door of his lounge, with Petunia hovering behind him with a duster in her hand and a worried look on her thin face.

She hadn't wanted him to get in touch with Black; in fact she'd seemed to think that some awful retribution would befall them if he did. But Vernon knew right from wrong; he knew a real threat from a vague one. He knew he would prefer his wife to succumb to some mystery horror, which she would be invited to keep to herself, thank you very much, than have his own head smashed against the pavement by the man who now sat opposite him.

'You told me to let you know if anything strange happened to the boy,' he snorted, as though Harry were not even worthy of that lowly title.

'When was this?' Regulus demanded.

'Yesterday. We only waited until today in case she'd got caught up in traffic.' He looked vaguely to the ceiling, wondering if the broomstick traffic lights had got stuck at red somewhere over the M25.

'I see,' Regulus replied. 'Was it the same witch who called? The one who visited a few days ago?'

'Same woman,' Vernon confirmed. He wasn't using any fancy terms; he wasn't acknowledging any of their magic nonsense, not in his house. 'Same woman that always calls.'

'No one comes with her?'

'Just on her own,' Vernon replied, beginning to feel more relaxed. It seemed that a close encounter with the pavement wasn't on the cards after all, and he could even enjoy the fact that the brat had gone from their cosy little lives.

He thought he'd washed his hands of this nonsense years ago, when his stupid cousin had drunk himself to death, after that unfortunate incident with the boy. Damned convenient that had been for Vernon too; he'd got the whole inheritance from their mutual grandmother to himself when she'd popped her clogs a month later. He'd just settled himself into a nice little life when Petunia happened to mention that her sister was ... one of them. Too late it had been, his Dudders was already born or he would have tossed the horse-faced Petunia out on the street where she belonged, pink rubber gloves and all. And then he'd had the Potter boy dumped on him and Petunia a couple of years later, opening up the whole nasty can of worms again.

He squinted at Black and then at Petunia; he wondered if they were following him around through his life. Magic indeed, he snorted to himself. The only magic thing Vernon could really think about was closing his front door on the lot of them forever; that would be magic.

Severus sat down at last. He had cleared up Black's mess in the kitchen, his mess in the bathroom, his clothes strewn messily over the upstairs landing, and re-tied the mess Sirius had pretended to clear up in the living room. They were the only rooms Snape had managed to make habitable in the three months that he'd been here, and Black and his damned house-elf seemed intent on letting them fall into their usual mess at every opportunity. On the odd occasions when either of them put anything away, they put them in the wrong places, stuffed things into drawers and cupboards that had no business being in the drawers or cupboards they put them in, so that Severus couldn't find anything.

He snarled resentfully to himself as he poured a tumbler of whisky, manfully ignoring the finger marks on the glass. He was going to have a few words with Black when he came in; he'd either have to clean up his act or walk. He didn't let it occur to him that Grimmauld Place was Black's house; that was irrelevant. Severus couldn't abide mess; it ranked with noise, second equal in his list of hates, just below people. He didn't take time to admit that if he hadn't had to clear up the mess he wouldn't have had much else to do; things had gone very quiet, and the wizarding world had gone about the post-war tidying up without help from him.

Severus had been tempted on a few occasions to pre-empt a meeting with Regulus, but he knew well that his hand would be much stronger if Regulus came for him. Apart from that, he wasn't entirely sure that he would have been able to hide the fact from Dumbledore. He hoped he hadn't allowed himself to become remote from what was going on, but as nothing untoward was really happening in the world he had to assume that Regulus Black was content to wait for now, and Severus Snape would just have to do the same.

He swirled the contents of his glass thoughtfully, letting himself wonder for a moment just where Black was, the Sirius version. Surely a meeting with Dumbledore couldn't take all morning; the very fact that Severus hadn't been invited himself meant it wasn't terribly important. He threw the whisky over his throat as he heard the door open and the harridan in the portrait serenade the arrival of her firstborn. That was another thing he hated, that damned portrait; he'd need to do something about it very soon. Maybe Black could take it with him when he left; he could take the elf too, for all the use it was.

There was something furtive about the Gryffindor grin as Black slid in the kitchen door, Snape thought, something underhand. He was trying to conceal a bundle under his cloak, with little success. Severus hoped it wasn't another ruddy turkey from Mundungus; the last one had threatened to outlast the two men who valiantly tried to eat it day after day. They had even invited Lupin on the night of the full moon to help them; he'd seemed quite pleased at the prospect of getting out of Mafloy Manor for the evening, one of the few things Snape couldn't fault him for. Andromeda always went round when the moon was full anyway.

'What's that?' he asked sourly.

'What?' Sirius asked; he looked ill at ease.

'The thing you're trying to hide under your cloak,' Snape replied, stifling the smirk that rose inside him. Damn Black, and his innocent blue eyes. Perhaps he should throw him over the table and fuck him senseless; he couldn't deny it would take up a couple of the hours he struggled to fill. Severus was feeling the strain of not having renewed his intimacy with Black since he'd come back, but somehow he'd never found the right moment; if he admitted it to himself the real reason was that he wasn't entirely sure that Black would welcome his attentions. They just seemed to have drifted into some kind of grudgingly neutral acceptance of one another. It still felt uncomfortable last thing at night though, on the nights that Black didn't slip out to see Lucius; although why he bothered to be furtive was more than Snape could understand. It was as though both of them were finding it difficult to slope off to bed, as though they each were issuing an unwanted invitation that the other would feel awkward at refusing.

'This,' Sirius said, heaving a breath which looked suspiciously like trepidation, 'is a baby.'

Severus said nothing; he was quite sure that Black couldn't possibly have finished. He watched in alarm that quickly mounted to full-blown horror as Sirius carefully laid a white blanket on the table; it was wrapped around something pink.

'You're pleased,' Black breathed, 'I can tell.'

'A baby what?' Severus heard himself ask faintly.

'A baby baby.'

'What's it doing here?' Severus swallowed hard; he wished he hadn't drained his glass.

'I'm glad you asked that.' Sirius had shed his cloak and put down the bag. He'd wrapped the handles around his wrist so that he could carry the baby as well as the bag without dropping either of them, and now he had a red mark on his wrist. The fingertips on that hand had turned blue for a while, and now they were exploding with pins and needles as his blood swam headily along his veins to stave off the gangrene he had felt sure he would develop on the short homeward Apparition.

As Sirius moved to the fire to warm his hands, the bundle on the table seemed to move a little of its own accord, confirming the worst to Snape. It was alive. 'What is it doing here?' he repeated, trying not to look at the blanket.

'It's ours,' Black declared. He looked like a man who'd been struggling to get something off his chest and had now realised that he didn't fancy where it was going to land.

'Very funny, Black.' Severus marched into the hall and pulled his own travelling cloak from the peg. 'You may send me an owl when it has been removed.'

'Where do you think you're going? Come back; I need you to help me.'

'I am going to see Lucius.' Snape let his eyebrow rise. 'Give it back to its parents, and when it has vacated the premises I might come back ... unless of course Lucius succeeds in his efforts to have me swap the dubious delights of Grimmauld Place for the ... dubious delights of Malfoy Manor.'

Somehow Sirius had managed to beat him to the front door; he stood against it with his arms outstretched in an effort to bar Snape's way. 'You're staying right here until we sort this out.'

'I have nothing to "sort out", Black. You are the one who brought that home.' Severus nodded to the kitchen door. 'Now behave yourself and take it back where you got it from immediately or I shall go to Wiltshire until you do. I am not a ruddy babysitter.' Black looked away, and Snape felt an ill-omened swell in the pit of his stomach. He was almost afraid to ask the next question. 'Just how long were you thinking of keeping it here anyway?'

'I want you to come back into the kitchen for a minute and sit down and I'll tell you.'

'Whom does it belong to?' Severus asked, narrowing his black eyes in suspicion. Somehow he had allowed Sirius to steer him back towards the relative warmth of the fire; there was something desperate about him that worried Snape a little.

'Not until you sit down.'

'Not until you tell me whose it is and when it's going back.'

Sirius held his eyes now, ominously defiant. 'It's ours and it's not.'

Severus felt himself slump down into the seat. 'I have something to tell you, Black, something your mother should have told you when you were a lot younger. I am a man, and you, for want of a more appropriate expression, which escapes me right now, are too. No matter how hard we were to try there is no possibility, may Merlin be thanked for small mercies, of us producing offspring. Now let us start from that point, and explain yourself calmly and succinctly.'

The bundle on the table began to whimper; Snape flinched, and Sirius winced.

Sirius wondered how long he could get away with the blank look he had pasted onto his face; not too long, he supposed as the white bundle began to fret in earnest. He should never have let Dumbledore talk him into this. It was too early; it wasn't fair and he'd told him as much, but the benign blue gaze had seemed completely indifferent to the fact that Sirius's delicate status quo with Snape would be upset.

Everything had been going about as well as could be expected in the months they'd been together. Regulus had gone quiet, Lupin had settled in the Manor, and Sirius had almost got Snape trained into not noticing his mess, almost thawed him to the extent that he didn't freeze up the windows when he got angry, which was admittedly quite often; sometimes he thought he'd almost got him to forget about James for as much as five consecutive minutes. In fact, all he had to do now was to pluck up the courage to go to Severus's room instead of his own when he climbed the stairs to go to bed. He was sure he'd manage soon; he just wished he were as sure that the door wouldn't be firmly slammed in his face.

'Take it back before it makes a noise.'

'I can't,' Sirius replied. He pulled a document from the pocket of his trousers. 'Every couple has to lend a hand in taking in the orphans.' He thrust the official-looking manuscript with a Ministry of Magic seal on it at Snape. 'It's all here. Same sex couples aren't allowed to exclude themselves.' He watched Snape sit back in his seat; he seemed to be torn between ignoring the Ministry decree and ignoring the baby. The preliminaries weren't going well; Sirius was a bit worried about what was going to happen when the real fireworks went off.

'In that case I return to my original thoughts on the matter.' Snape stood up and nodded to the baby. 'I am quite sure Lucius hasn't got one.'

Sirius bit his lip; he really needed to do something about the baby. He could hardly leave it lying on the table as an article to be argued over for much longer. It seemed intent on crying; that wasn't going to help matters at all. He took the time to notice that Severus hadn't objected to the term "couple"; maybe that was a good sign, but now he had the baby to consider. He began to wish he'd called at Snape's room last night; it was going to be off-limits tonight.

'Lucius has got one of his own, if you remember. And if you go there, you and Lucius will be a couple, and they'll give you another one ... that way you can have two,' he delivered in triumph.

'Lucius has Lupin to help him, and elves quite capable of keeping his son and heir out of his amazing hair,' Snape flared and gave Kreacher a deprecating look, as though he should not dream to consider himself worthy of even that lowly station in life. 'And I do not intend to be a "couple" with anyone. Anyway, that's a stupid description. Surely two individuals can inhabit the same house without being labelled in such an inane way.'

'Yeah, I suppose they can,' Sirius replied, omitting to add that one of them normally paid rent if they didn't inhabit the same bed too. 'But not if I shop you and Malfoy to the Ministry.'

'You wouldn't dare,' Severus snapped back, caught up in the hypothetical argument.

'Why don't you try me?' Sirius gave him a flat look. He hadn't wanted to do things this way, but Severus was being his usual intractable self. He scooped the baby off the table and began unwrapping the bundle of blankets; he hoped an instruction leaflet would be hidden somewhere inside, but either it had fallen out or someone with a good sense of humour had assumed that the new owner's maternal instinct would kick into overdrive.

'Can't you stop it making that racket?' Snape snarled.

'He's probably hungry,' Sirius replied and poked into the bag he'd been given along with the baby; maybe the instructions were in there. He groped about and produced a paper bag of white powder, the front of which was emblazoned with the legend, "Watch your little witches and wizards grow with Wendy Wonderful's Baby Formula". Sirius poked about again; there seemed to be nothing much more than a few clothes and some cotton squares of towelling he'd been hoping to avoid.

The baby boy had begun to cry lustily, the cry of a six-month-old infant who is becoming angry. Sirius picked him up again and he stopped; he laid him back on the table and he started again, and he picked him up and he stopped ... just like magic. He laid him gently back on the table as though the child wouldn't notice and tried to consider his options, but the baby was making such a racket that he could only do so when he picked him up. 'I've only got two fucking hands, you know,' he snarled at Snape, who was watching him in what he hoped was thinly veiled amusement. 'You could get off your arse and give me a spoon.'

'A spoon?' Snape enquired mildly.

'Yes, a fucking spoon, I need to feed him.'

'I see.' Snape stood up and crossed to the wooden chest. 'Only you seem to be so involved that I thought you intended to breastfeed it yourself.' He tugged at the top drawer, which grudgingly gave way in a rush, trying to spill its contents on the floor as it did so, picked out the cleanest spoon he could find, sat back down and pushed it

across the table.

Sirius snatched it up and opened the packet of baby milk powder one-handed, spilling about a fifth of it onto the table. He scooped a spoonful from the bag and held it to the baby's face. Nothing happened, so he pushed it against the tiny lips. 'Come on, little fella, eat up and tomorrow we can play Quidditch.'

'Perhaps if you were to dissolve that stuff in water?' Snape enquired with his eyebrow raised even higher. 'Unless of course you are intent on choking it.'

'He's a boy, not an it,' Sirius snapped back, trying to hide his relief. He had been playing a dangerous game of brinkmanship, and he hadn't been entirely sure that Snape hadn't seen through it. All he had to do was to continue to draw him out, and it would be fine.

'Don't think for one second that I cannot see right through you, Black.' Snape tipped the entire contents of the bag of accoutrements onto the table, and two glass bottles with rubber teats attached to them rolled towards Sirius. 'My input stops here.'

'Your fucking input doesn't stop until you put some warm water in one of those fucking bottles and mix some of this stuff into it.'

'And stop swearing in front of the baby.' Snape smirked.

'Why is it still making that noise?' Snape asked through gritted teeth as Sirius at last took the empty bottle from the baby, and he began to howl again; it was the third bottle he'd had.

Sirius frowned; he really should have looked up a book about this, or even asked the smirking Minerva McGonagall as she'd handed him the bundle and hastily closed the door on his face as he tried to balance a baby and a bag of accessories and turn away from her door at one time. 'D'you think he's still hungry?' he asked.

'I doubt it,' Snape replied dryly. 'He's eaten more than either of us has today. In fact I'm almost longing for another of Fletcher's turkeys.'

Sirius hoisted the baby up on his shoulder and rubbed his back. He remembered seeing Molly Weasley doing that to one of her babies when it was crying; although to be fair he also remembered Molly Weasley knitting as she fed a baby, but this was the easier option. He sat for only a moment rubbing the tiny warm back. The baby seemed to have become a little more content, a fact that Sirius wasn't sure he wanted to associate with the loud burp and the ominous gurgling sound that had accompanied it. The deathly silence from the other side of the table warned him not to look, but he just couldn't resist it.

This was very bad; in fact Sirius couldn't think of anything worse at that point than seeing Severus watching the pool of regurgitated milk on the table, especially when it was dripping off the front of his shirt. He watched as Snape wordlessly lifted one of the towelling squares which still lay on the table, and very slowly began to wipe the mess from his clothes; it was hard to clear clotted-white off black, and he wasn't doing an awfully good job of it. Sirius resisted the almost overwhelming urge to tell him he was only making it worse, and that he'd be better taking the shirt off, that and the even more irresistible urge to explode with laughter. He knew Snape had only foregone cleaning the mess by magic to maximise the impact; Severus wasn't above a little theatre when he felt the occasion demanded it. He watched Snape fling the cloth into the sink, after wiping the pool from the table, and stand up slowly; Sirius knew he was making for the door. The tiny boy chose that time to make the first pleasant baby sounds that he had made since he'd arrived, a lovely little singsong cooing sound, interspersed with a deliciously sleepy snuffling noise; it was really rather nice.

'Well, little Harry,' Sirius said in a mixture of trepidation and he wasn't quite sure what else. This hadn't gone well at all. 'It looks like it's going to be just you and me.'

Snape had stopped, mid-stride, and Sirius winced; he hadn't meant the name to slip out, not just yet. He was going to work up to a point where Snape had accepted the boy before he dropped the bombshell of just whose son he was; he'd been working on this for so long. And now he'd blown any chance of that, along with the fuse Severus was about to blow, if he hung about for long enough. He almost gasped as Snape turned on his heel and grabbed the child from him, hoisted him over his own shoulder and opened the door.

'Hoi ... what d'you think you're doing?'

'Taking him away from you,' Snape replied, 'before you cause him an injury. I have never seen such a display of ineptitude. Anyway you have far too much to do to take on looking after a baby.'

'What d'you mean?' Sirius asked suspiciously, but with a degree of relief that Snape hadn't yet left Grimmauld Place. 'What have I got to do?' He watched in puzzlement as Snape turned yet again and reached one-handed under the sink, groped about for a bit and dragged Kreacher by the ear into the middle of the floor, before kicking his arse and sending him sprawling, all without dropping the baby.

'You and that lazy piece of shit have got this place to clean up.' Severus bent down, still clutching Harry to his chest with one arm, quite competently, Sirius thought, and plucked Kreacher upright, with the same ear. 'And I mean clean,' he hissed dangerously into the ear he held. 'We're not bringing a child up in this pigsty.'

Snape hoisted Harry up again and made for the door. Sirius thought the look the baby gave him as the door closed was a touch too smug for comfort. He'd been here for two minutes and already they'd ganged up against him.

Chapter Nine

Chapter 9 of 17

Regulus shows a bit of his hand, and Severus reads a bit of his mind.

Chapter Nine

Severus leant against the door, breathing deeply to calm himself, waiting for his heart rate to drop to something approaching normal, before he looked down at the baby in the crook of his arm.

For one mad moment he had almost walked out. When Black was making his ridiculous display of pretending to be so incompetent that he hoped that Severus would just take the boy from him and be done with it, which was what Black had been angling for since he'd come in, after all, Snape had almost walked away. And why should he be lumbered with someone else's brat, he had begun to think sourly. He'd known for a while that they were going to have a child dumped on them at some time in the future; he had always intended to make himself scarce about then, perhaps strike out on his own and try to find Regulus. That would have cast him adrift from Black though, and

although Severus didn't care to admit it to himself, he didn't much fancy that idea. Quite apart from that was the glaring fact that he would then be homeless. Grimmauld Place was bad enough, without the thought of returning to Spinner's End. Of course, Malfoy Manor was always an option, but that would involve meeting Lucius occasionally, a pleasure he could quite happily forego unless it was absolutely necessary.

He stifled the boy to his chest; he had almost walked out, almost walked away from the only part of James that still lived on this earth. He sent a silent prayer of thanks to Merlin, and began to climb the stairs. There was life after death after all; you just had to know where to find it, or be there when it fell into your lap.

Sirius stared at the door as it closed, straining his acute canine hearing to see if the front door opened. Instead he was eventually rewarded by the sound of a creak, as Snape stood on the loose floorboard halfway up what had once been the grand staircase at Grimmauld Place. He let out a breath he hadn't realised he'd been holding, wondering if he should follow or bide his time.

He caught sight of the elf as he tried to slink back under the sink, muttering to himself about the infestation of half-blood paupers that had taken up residence in the once proud house, and stumbled to his feet to grab the filthy tea towel he wore before Kreacher could scuttle beyond his reach. 'The only infestation you have to worry about, you little shitebag, is the infestation of doxies upstairs,' he snarled, as he shook the elf to demonstrate his point, 'and any other nasty creeping things that are here without my invitation.'

The elf turned his baleful eyes on him, filled with contempt and other horrible things; Sirius could almost hear him wondering if that included Snape. 'Kreacher will ask his mistress what to do about the doxies when she wakes from her rest.'

'She's not going to wake up,' Sirius snapped. 'She's dead.'

The elf began to howl the lament that he always took up when Sirius made any attempt to clarify Mrs Black's status. Huge tears poured down his face to join the river of clear slime leaking from his nose, and Sirius dropped the tea towel in disgust. He didn't miss the quick look of triumph as the tears miraculously stopped, but instead of letting the elf escape as he usually did, he grabbed the relative safety of the scruff of his neck. 'You heard, Severus,' he hissed into his ear, the way Snape had done. 'Get cleaning.'

'Yes, Master.' Kreacher prostrated himself with such insincerity that it took all of Sirius's willpower not to shove him back under the sink again. He had decided to tough it out though; Kreacher was in for a culture shock ... he suspected they all were.

It was some three hours later when Sirius's head snapped up from the half-doze he was in, as he heard the sharp rap of the front door knocker. He wasn't expecting anyone, and number twelve, Grimmauld Place wasn't exactly accessible to the general public. He wondered for a moment if Snape had gone out and handed Harry back after all. He pulled the door open, and his mother screeched about yet another half-blood come to dilute the purity of her Noble House, as he tried to take in the mountain of parcels standing gasping on the doorstep, and the two warm amber-brown eyes peeping from a space between the packages.

'Did I miss Christmas?' Sirius asked as the parcels began to tumble from Lupin's arms into his own and spill onto the floor.

'You ordered it,' Lupin said breathlessly, as he followed Sirius into the kitchen and stopped short. 'Have I come to the right house?'

'I didn't order anything,' Sirius replied as he made yet another trip from the hall to the kitchen with the rest of Lupin's purchases.

'Have you been cleaning?' Lupin looked around again in suspicion.

'Just peeling off the first layer,' Sirius said as he shot a look at the elf, who had taken the opportunity to down tools. 'Get cracking, shitebag, you've got a long way to go,' he said, and turned his attention to Lupin again. 'I didn't order anything.'

'Snape did,' Lupin replied. 'He sent me an owl a couple of hours ago. He said you were paying for this lot, and no expense had to be spared.' He held out an invoice addressed to the master of the Ancient and Most Noble House of Black from Wendy Wonderful's Wee Witch and Wizard Emporium.

'Ah,' Sirius said, trying not to wince at the total at the bottom, to kindly be remitted within three days, or the goods would return themselves to the seller, and the amount of the bill would remain outstanding, increasing by the amount of five per centum per day until it was paid, when the said goods would still remain the property of the seller.

'Where are they?' Lupin asked. 'I wouldn't mind seeing the boy, Sirius. I only saw him the once before Minerva whisked him away from Godric's Hollow. I always wondered why she didn't just give him to Severus straight after the trial. I suppose she thought he needed some time to settle down somewhere.' He laughed his self-effacing laugh. 'I bet she had second thoughts when she heard where he'd settled though.' He trailed off as he caught Sirius's hard look.

'Actually, Albus gave the boy to my care,' Sirius replied defensively.

Lupin looked around again. 'Don't be ridiculous; you can't even look after yourself.' He nodded over to the door as it opened to spill a redressed Severus Snape into the kitchen; he seemed to have left the baby elsewhere.

'Ah, Lupin,' he said coolly in greeting, checking quickly to see that he hadn't brought Lucius with him. 'Do I presume these are the items I requested?' He turned to where Sirius had begun to feel like a spectator. 'I thought I told you to get that thing to clean up,' he said as he nodded to the elf, who was now casting dark looks from Lupin to Snape, as though wondering which was worthy of most contempt.

'The boy,' Lupin pressed, before Sirius and Snape started a long and tedious sniping match about nothing. 'Harry? Where is he?'

Sirius noticed that he addressed Snape, rightly assuming that Sirius would have no clue to his exact whereabouts. He sighed to himself. It would be just as well for him to admit that Albus's gift had indeed been intended for Snape; he was just the message boy.

'He is asleep, Lupin,' Snape replied, as though that were an end to the matter, and began to send the parcels up the stairs to some destination Sirius wasn't at all sure of.

'Don't you want to clean wherever that stuff is going first?' Sirius suggested, hooking a finger into Kreacher's tea towel as the last parcel levitated itself up the staircase.

'Do you imagine for one instant that I would allow that thing anywhere near the boy or his rooms?' Snape asked in some degree of what looked like genuine surprise.

'Can I see him?' Lupin asked again before they started again. 'I won't wake him, I promise.'

Snape touched the door between the room he had at one time intended to convert into his own private library, but had never quite got around to, and the bedroom he had sometimes hoped he would share with Sirius; he had never quite got around to that either.

'Are these men permitted to enter?' the Charm on the door whispered in enquiry.

'Yes, they are permitted,' Snape replied.

'Just this once, or for all time?'

Snape barely hesitated. 'For all time.'

'Always accompanied by yourself?'

Snape could feel Sirius's wonder turn to impatience. 'They may come alone or together, but not with others unless permitted by me.'

'They may pass unhindered from this time on,' the Charm sighed as the door swung soundlessly open.

If Sirius hadn't known that he hadn't gone out, he would never have known this room was in the Ancient and Most Ugly House of Black. It had certainly never existed in this form; in fact, he couldn't even recall what it had been.

'It was a cupboard,' Snape answered his unasked question.

Sirius couldn't really help the grin that spread across his face. 'I'll just leave you in charge of the refurbishment of the rest of this dump then, shall I?' he asked as he tried to take everything in, including the pleasure Severus was doing his utmost to hide.

The room was black and red for the best part, but where that might have been harsh or even frightening, it was soft and warm and mysterious instead, like Santa's Grotto might appear to a small child. A black-painted shelf ran the full length of all of the walls at the height of the door, and from it peeped a myriad of small animals. They looked almost like baby badgers, or nearly like small squirrels, and not quite like kittens. Some of them had spots, and some were striped or brindled, in reds and oranges and yellows and autumn colours Sirius wasn't even sure had names. They whispered and chuckled to one another, sometimes running along the shelf to speak to further away animals, and the sound they created was a soft murmur, rising and falling at the rate of the heartbeat of the boy sleeping below them. Sirius knew instinctively that they would have other sounds in their repertoire, waking sounds and feeding sounds and soothing sounds and playing sounds, but for now they were a muted sleepy hum.

The walls were a soft matt red, dotted here and there with pictures, and tiny shelves with strange ornaments which moved and clicked and whirred, and would be magnets to curious little fingers. Below the red curtains, which had been drawn against the night, sat a small tightly-packed bookcase and an ebony wood chest. He took in as much as he could in the few moments his attention was distracted from where the baby slept blissfully on his back, with his arms stretched above his head, ending in chubby loose little fists. His black hair had been brushed off his forehead, and Sirius felt a twinge of pain as he looked at the ugly red scar the Dark Lord had made on the perfect landscape. Above him a mobile of brightly dressed fairies on tiny swings slumbered over their charge, moving backwards and forwards, in time with the gentle rise and fall of the baby's breast.

'It's perfect,' Sirius whispered; there wasn't really anything else to say.

'Well?' Lucius asked, raising his silver eyebrow in amusement.

Lupin slouched into the corner of the settee opposite Malfoy. 'Very well, I would say,' he replied.

'I sense a "but", Lupin. You might as well tell me what it is.' Lucius watched the man opposite him, wondering again what it was about Lupin that had made him accept his presence in the Manor so quickly and easily. It was as though he'd slipped effortlessly into a ready-made role. Sometimes it was as if he'd taken up the slack that Narcissa had left in her wake; perhaps that was what it was. Lucius had not shared a bedroom with Narcissa, and he did not share one with Lupin. Severus had warned him very early on that the werewolf would not welcome his attentions in that direction; it hadn't stopped him making one quickly aborted attempt.

He knew Lupin had few expectations. Lucius knew he accepted his prejudices and moods, his hostilities and his slavish duty to "the Malfoy way", with dry amusement and few comments. Lupin never left the Manor without him unless Andromeda was there, and where Lucius would have felt stifled by anyone else, he felt comforted by Lupin. He could present the case to himself that it had something to do with the werewolf's pleasing manners, his outward diffidence, his careful blend of civility, without any hint of the servility Lucius would have loathed; whatever poverty Lupin had been brought up in, his parents had certainly taught him how to behave like a gentleman. But he knew it was more than that; it was more than the fact that he felt secure with Lupin here. Lucius had begun to regard him as one of the only things he had never really had before, that one thing he could not buy. Remus Lupin was his friend, one to whom no strings attached themselves, no price tag dangled in his wake but that of Lucius's making; he was all the more precious for that.

'I just hope that his initial frenzy of activity doesn't become obsession,' Lupin said as he sipped at a glass of wine he'd just poured.

'I hope not. He can be a bit intense when he tries.' Lucius made a face. 'Did you happen to find out if they had ... renewed acquaintance with one another?'

Lupin laughed. 'No, I didn't. Why don't you ask him yourself?'

'Why don't you just think up a way to find out?' Lucius replied with a pained expression. 'I am finding it somewhat inconvenient to entertain Black whenever he finds himself at a loose end for a few hours.'

Lupin raised his eyebrow lazily, much the same way he did everything. 'Have you someone else I don't know about?' he asked suspiciously.

Lucius looked away. No he didn't have anyone; his remark about Black had been a red herring, he had just wanted to know if Severus was still at a loose end. He rarely saw him at all now, and he was missing his company and everything it brought with it. He wanted to change the subject now. 'Why don't you go and get changed, and we can go out for dinner?'

Lupin looked at the Versailles clock on the mantelpiece and shook his head. 'Maybe tomorrow, it's too late tonight.'

Sirius crept up the stairs again, leaving Snape sitting at the fire, reading and drinking whisky; it was the fifth time he'd sneaked up to see Harry that evening. He listened for the Charm to whisper to him, and went in to look down on the baby boy. He'd been there just over two days now, and Sirius was already sure he would fit perfectly into their lives. He had slept all night last night again, and apart from waking up for a few hours to coo a bit, and have his bottles and get changed, and look around with startled interest at the animals on the shelves, and a bath that had left Sirius little drier than the baby, he had just slept all day again.

And this evening he'd only woken once since they had brought him upstairs. Severus had changed him quickly and competently, using more in the way of magic than Sirius would have expected. Snape had even let Sirius feed him again, just a little half-bottle to get him back to sleep; it hadn't been much, surely he would be hungry again, or need to be changed. He let his hand reach to the tiny arm; just a little shake should be enough, he was sure it couldn't be good for a baby to sleep so long. His fingers were almost there when he felt a grip like a vice on his wrist.

'Don't you dare,' Snape hissed at him.

'I was only checking,' Sirius said, rubbing his wrist where it tingled from the burn of Snape's grasp and something else he wasn't quite sure he could identify, not until he saw Severus rub his fingers on the palm of his other hand, as though he had felt it too.

Had they not touched one another at all in the months since Snape had been back? Had they each been going about the day-to-day business of living in the same house, without once having let their bodies come into contact, however innocuously, with one another? Sirius knew the answer; it came from the warmth he felt spreading from the pit of his stomach in all directions.

'How long d'you think he will sleep for?' he asked.

'Quite a while, I should imagine,' Snape replied. 'He will not wake until he is ready to do so ... unless someone pokes him.' He nodded to where the fairies dangled on their swings, moving softly back and forward, like the pendulum of an ancient clock. 'They will let me know when he wakes, the same way as they will let me know if you should happen to be tempted to help him along.' He looked back at Sirius, his mouth slightly open in cautious invitation. 'Are you going to stand there forever, Black?'

Sirius had just begun to close the gap, when the nursery door flew open to reveal Lupin's Patronus. It raised its head and howled silently at the two men.

It had been a pleasant evening. They had gone to one of Lucius's favourite London restaurants, the one he'd met Sirius at a few short months before. At a casual glance they looked like two immaculately but slightly oddly-dressed men, as though they were perhaps going to an Edwardian fancy-dress party later and had come out for dinner first: old acquaintances, perhaps lovers, who were comfortable in one another's company. Lupin always cast Charms about him; he did not want to risk being seen socialising with Malfoy even though they normally dined out in the Muggle world. He hardly noticed his disguises any longer, content to enjoy the soft comfortable cut of the expensive clothes Lucius bought for him, and the luxury of the undemanding attention.

In his own way Malfoy was very open-handed. Of course, Lupin knew it suited him to be seen with someone fittingly attired to accompany him, but there were other smaller generosityes, unnecessary ones that touched him. Just because he'd always been poor it didn't mean that he didn't enjoy the pleasure of owning nice things and not having to steal cigarettes. And then there was the unexpected bonus of his little music school; Lucius had made sure it had every type of instrument known to the wizarding world. He had even purchased a huge harp from some chateau in France which had fallen on hard times, ignoring Lupin's protests that no child would be able to reach the strings properly without the aid of a ladder. The school had worked very well; it had given Malfoy the comfort of knowing he had the perfect excuse for Lupin to be there. He was seen to be courting Dumbledore by allowing the school to be set up, and it gave Lupin something to do.

As he and Lucius shed their cloaks to one of Malfoy's elves, Lupin could see the drawing room door was open and the fire was lit. 'Go upstairs, Lucius,' he whispered. 'Do not come back down until either Severus or I come for you. I think we have a visitor.'

He was just in time; Malfoy had given him an anxious look and begun to climb the main staircase, when a second elf left the drawing room, leaving the door ajar.

'Master, you have a visitor, Master,' it called to his back.

'A visitor?' Lucius retorted loudly enough for his voice to carry to the open door, in more control of himself than Lupin would have given him credit for. 'At this time of night? Tell them I shall be down shortly. I need to see my son; I shall not be long.' He gave Lupin a look of appeal, as the werewolf turned towards the back of the Manor.

'Do not leave this house for anything,' Snape ordered as he tipped the Polyjuice he always kept ready to his mouth. He had already changed quickly into the clothes belonging to Lucius that he kept at Grimmauld Place for such an occasion. 'In fact, stay in this room. No one can come in here except Lupin, you or me.'

He waited only until the planes of his face began to change and his body bulked, before turning and following in the wake of Lupin's Patronus, leaving Sirius clutching the sleeping boy to his chest.

Lupin was waiting at the back door of the Manor. He led Snape through the familiar maze of servants' corridors to the elves' stairs, talking rapidly to bring him up to date. Snape ran up the scrubbed wooden stairs, and then walked slowly back down the grand staircase, taking the time to compose his thoughts. He clipped along the mahogany-floored hall to the drawing room, as Lupin went to sit where Lucius was in the nursery with his own son clutched to his chest. It had taken barely ten minutes, from the moment Lupin had sent Lucius upstairs, for Snape to reach the drawing room door disguised as Malfoy. They knew that without timing it; they had practiced it to a fine art.

'Regulus?' Snape asked, feigning some degree of surprise. 'I had assumed... my sister-in-law,' he said. 'I ... I would not have kept you waiting so long.'

'Not at all, Lucius, not at all.' Regulus smiled and stood, holding out his hand in greeting. 'I have not been here long. Did you have a pleasant evening?'

'Perfectly pleasant, thank you,' Snape replied without elaborating. He had his story ready if he needed it, but only if he needed it. 'Have you been offered refreshment?'

'Nothing, thank you,' Regulus replied. 'I shan't take much of your time.'

Snape let a frown crease Lucius's forehead. 'To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?'

'I was hoping you could give me information actually.'

'On what?'

'I was wondering if you knew why I am unable to gain access to my family home?' Regulus asked and sat back, watching him carefully.

'I'm sure you mean more than having mislaid the co-ordinates?' Snape blinked, and assumed one of Lucius's more vapid expressions. 'I confess to being at a loss as to what you actually do mean.'

'I would not care to find out that you know more than you are pretending to know, Lucius. That would be very unwise,' Regulus replied, and Snape thought that he had become more menacing in his three-month absence. He must have been practising; it was an uncomfortable confirmation of what he had suspected.

'And I think you would be wise to tell me straight just what you are asking me,' Snape said with a little heat, 'because I am completely in the dark.' He took stock of Regulus's self-assurance. It seemed that the obsequiousness he had perhaps been receiving in other quarters had bolstered his youthfully dangerous confidence to something quite different, something more threatening. And yet this very confidence was a weakness; it had been the same with Voldemort, which was hardly surprising, a self-belief based on the fawning of those too weak to resist, or those of such naturally evil bent that their very slavishness to him would mean nothing when the final die was cast. They were men without honour, attracted by what was in it for them, and like the rats they were, they would desert his ship if it ever threatened to sink, as they had before. And sink you shall, Regulus Black, Snape promised himself, and turned his attention the matter in hand.

'Perhaps you are at that.' Regulus nodded and looked around the room. 'I believe the werewolf has set up home here. Why is that?'

Snape bridled as though in distaste. 'It was your idea for me to kowtow to Dumbledore,' he said testily. 'He wanted me to allow Lupin to set up a ridiculous music school in one of the outbuildings, for pre-Hogwarts children. I saw no harm; in fact I thought there may even be a way to use it to our advantage in the future.'

Regulus nodded again, seemingly satisfied.

Snape had an uncomfortable notion that he knew all about the school, and reminded himself to have a look at the names of the pupils. He thought it was safe now to return to the question of the family home, but it was difficult always to work out what a surprised mind would do. 'What do you mean about Grimmauld Place?' he asked, managing to gasp only inwardly as he realised he should not even have known the address. What a stupid mistake he'd made; he would have been as well to let Lucius fluff his way through this ... he couldn't have done any worse. But then Lucius wasn't Legilimens; he would not have seen what Severus had seen, that the Voldemort-ish superiority wasn't even Regulus's own. The Dark Lord was reclaiming his territory from the Young Pretender.

'Where?' Regulus asked lightly.

'Grimmauld Place, your family home,' Snape repeated and felt the first tiny telltale push on his mind, a push he knew could not have come from Regulus Black. 'Come now, Regulus, do not be coy. Surely you know that Snape has had access to your family home for quite some time now. He killed Pettigrew there after all.'

'Yes, of course,' Regulus replied. 'I confess I had thought Severus would have been more discreet though. Did you have the opportunity yet to put the little suggestion I made to him?'

Snape could see he had wrong-footed him. He hadn't intended that; the last thing he had wanted to do was to have Regulus thinking about things he didn't want him to worry about. He was glad he had asked about himself though; he was on safer ground there. He looked away uneasily for a moment. 'He refused to listen to me. He said if you had anything to say, you could say it to his face; he didn't deal with messenger boys,' he said, drawing himself up the way Lucius would have done at the affront to his dignity.

Regulus laughed, and Snape suspected he was only now beginning to accept what he said. He went back to the question of Grimmauld Place. 'Why can't you find the house anyway? You're family.'

'I would like you to find that out for me, Lucius,' Regulus said in an even voice. 'Perhaps the werewolf can take you.' He began to stand up. 'I shall be back in touch in two or three weeks. By that time I would like two things done. The first one is that you find out for me as much as you can about whatever Charm has been put on my house.'

'And the second?' Snape asked, quite sure that he would tell him to have Lupin move out.

'Dispose of my brother.'

Snape didn't have to feign his surprise. 'You mean kill him?' he asked.

'Of course I mean kill him.' Regulus was pulling on his cloak. He began to walk to the door, leaving the man he assumed to be Lucius sitting in front of the drawing room fire. 'Oh, one other thing,' he said over his shoulder, like an afterthought, as he opened the door to the hallway. 'Find out where Dumbledore has taken the Potter brat. His uncle got in touch with me to say that someone had called for the boy the day before yesterday ... and had forgotten to bring him back.'

Snape nodded, a little reluctantly, with an uncomfortable suspicion that this had been what had precipitated the meeting. 'How do I get in touch with you?' he asked. 'By owl?'

'I shall get in touch with you.'

Snape nodded and looked down as though he were considering something. When he looked back at Regulus he had allowed Lucius's features to harden to the cold aloofness that was the Malfoy trademark. 'I have one more thing of my own, Regulus,' he said quietly, enjoying his moment. 'Do not presume to order me about. If I aid you in any way, I am doing so of my own accord and for my own reasons.'

Regulus was caught unaware, off guard; he made an attempt at a formal little bow, a supposed slight that Snape could see he knew had failed of its mark. 'Of course, Lucius,' he said with a smile. 'I presume no such thing.'

Chapter Ten

Chapter 10 of 17

Severus spills his secrets, and finds he has underestimated some people, and overestimated others.

Chapter Ten

Sirius dropped his wand to his side and exhaled. 'Well?' he asked. 'How bad is it? Is Lucius all right? Have you left him at the Manor?'

'Bad, yes and yes,' Snape replied, and nodded to Harry's crib. 'Put him back in his cot, and come downstairs.' He saw Sirius hesitate. 'He's safe here, Black, safer than anywhere else on earth, I suspect.'

Sirius nodded doubtfully and laid Harry down; he hadn't woken at all, and apart from snuffling as he settled again, he didn't wake then. Sirius felt the cold space where the baby had nestled against him.

He listened to Snape without interrupting him, becoming more and more alarmed as he described his meeting with his recently resurrected brother. Sirius wasn't worried for himself particularly. Regulus wasn't the first person to want him dead, and if he survived this threat as he fully intended to, he wouldn't be the last. He knew Snape could probably look after himself too, and he had hidden Harry in such a way that only the three men who would willingly die before betraying him could get to him. Sirius was worried about Lucius: how he would cope when he didn't produce the results that Regulus wanted, how he would manage if Severus didn't get to the Manor quickly enough one day, what would happen if Regulus, or someone working for him, came across Lucius somewhere else.

'We've hung his arse out on a flagpole, haven't we?' he said bitterly.

'I said I'd protect him,' Snape replied, 'and I shall.'

'How?' Sirius asked. 'How are you going to stop him coming up against someone hostile for the next ... I don't know ... thirty years?'

Snape looked away. He hadn't quite worked it all out yet, but he was sure he could do it, for a bit at least, to get over this next while and let the dust settle again. He felt Black's hand on his, felt the swoop of warmth at the contact. When he looked at him again he finally understood what he had been denying to himself. He felt his lip twitch without his permission; maybe Sirius felt the same. The long slow undemanding build-up had been good for both men. Maybe it was right to acknowledge him in a time of crisis; he had no way of knowing when fate would snatch one of them away. He let his eyes rest on Black's for a rare unguarded moment, an unspoken reply to an unissued invitation.

'Whenever he leaves the safety of the Manor, we shall swap identities,' he said quietly.

'Shit.' Sirius looked away. 'You'll have to move to the Manor.'

'I'll change places with Lupin,' Severus agreed quietly. 'It will keep Lucius safe.'

'What about you? What about Harry?' Sirius asked and let his eyes look to the ceiling to where the baby slept above them; it was better than watching the regret cross Snape's face.

'The boy will be safer in that room than anywhere else.' Snape gave a self-deprecating little laugh. 'Perhaps I wasn't ever destined to hold on to anything I cared about,' he said, and Sirius couldn't remember ever hearing anything so bitter.

Sirius looked to the ceiling again. He couldn't understand how all of his careful planning had come tumbling down around his ears so quickly. 'But I only did it for you,' he whispered. 'I brought him here for you. You can't leave us now.'

Severus looked at him, first in confusion, and then in mild shock. He tried to speak, but couldn't think of anything to say. 'You what?' he gasped at last.

'I brought him here for you,' Sirius admitted; his shattered plan had seemed so perfect, so flawless. 'The day I brought you from court I thought about it. Dumbledore didn't like it at first, but I could tell he'd been trying to work out something for the boy himself.' He shrugged uselessly. 'I thought it would give you back something of James. Mind you,' he said, with a poor attempt at his Gryffindor grin, 'I hadn't expected to bring him back this week. They dropped that one on me like a bombshell.'

Severus sat wordlessly. He had no way of expressing what he felt; that someone had done such a thing for him was too big to contemplate. He had never imagined what it would be to experience such a selfless act; nothing in his life had prepared him for how he felt ... gratitude was too mean a word. He watched Black stand and walk slowly to the back of his seat, felt his hands on his shoulders and wondered why they had waited so long, as he felt his breath in his hair, on his neck.

'You don't have to go tonight, do you?' Sirius whispered.

Severus shook his head; no, he didn't need to go that night. 'You manage to slip out to see Lucius, don't you?' he asked, surprised that he sounded like his cool self.

He felt Sirius nod. 'Sometimes.'

'About four times a week, but who was counting?' Snape replied dryly.

'Oh, I wasn't with Lucius all those times,' Sirius said. 'I usually went to see Harry ... well, not to see him, just to stand outside and be near him. No one really notices a black dog, no one except Minerva a couple of times,' he admitted. 'She enjoys materialising at my side from nowhere, but I think that's just to see if she can make me yelp in fright.'

Severus felt the breath catch in his chest; how badly he had underestimated so many people.

It was a different man to the one who had taken him when he had been here the first time. This Severus needed to give as well as take, but not in the way Lucius gave like a generous whore; this was infinitely more subtle. His gift was pleasure, excruciating in its intensity, almost unable to be borne, until a further frontier had beckoned, leaving even the impossible behind.

Sirius lay below him, conquered but not crushed, in the chains of willing enslavement. His was an honourable surrender, humiliation without degradation, his body but a vessel for the bequests of a benevolent master of his game. His chest still heaved, although his hammering heart had already begun to slow to a more measured beat. He closed his mind to thoughts of whether James had lain with Severus like this; somehow he didn't think so.

He felt Snape stir as he too returned to himself: spent, exhausted as Sirius was, but mindful of the fact that the man below him might need to breathe in the near future. Sirius pulled into the heat of his body again, not wanting to lose the contact, as Snape moved over onto his back, wisps of black hair plastered to his pale face.

'Can I ask you something?' Sirius whispered. 'I was going to ask Lucius ... but it didn't seem right. It felt like eavesdropping.'

He could tell Snape knew instinctively what this was going to be; he almost felt him clam up. This was private; it was Severus's own dark secret. He suspected the only person who knew anything about it was Lucius, and Sirius had a feeling he knew very little.

'You know what I'm going to ask you, don't you?' he murmured when Snape didn't reply.

'About Alexis?'

'Was that his name? Your brother? I didn't know, sorry,' he said. It felt personal to Sirius now too; a name, Alexis, not just any brother, or a mystery boy lost in the forgetfulness of time ... Severus's brother, Alexis.

'I can't talk about him.'

'Okay,' Sirius said in acceptance, but he knew one day Snape would. 'I just wondered if he were still alive ... and where he was.'

'No, he's ... he died.'

Sirius let the silence drift; it was heavy, loaded with questions. He pulled Snape a little closer. 'I shouldn't have asked, I'm sorry,' he said in an attempt to close the door.

'How did you know I had a brother?'

Sirius told him what he remembered Lucius saying, how his memory had been jogged at Spinner's End. 'It was just an unfinished story,' he admitted, 'and then, well, I noticed that you ... I don't know, you seemed to disapprove of the way I felt about Regulus. I just wondered, and there was no one to ask but you.'

He let the silence draw out again. He knew Snape had been relieved that Lucius's indiscretion had been so long ago, when it could hardly even have been deemed as such. Sirius didn't think he was asleep; his breathing was too slow, too measured. He suspected he was coming to terms with the fact he had given his anonymous memory a name, that it was demanding its right to be remembered, that he had already begun to unburden his story, to share its weight. He let him come to it in his own good time.

He listened without comment as Severus told him things he knew he had never told another living soul, things Sirius suspected he did not even know that he knew. Things about James and Lucius and Alexis, and Spinner's End and Hogwarts, and the Death Eaters: little slices of other people's lives, all jumbled up, all mixed in a pie labelled Severus Snape; as though he were the sum total of other people's experiences of him, of whatever thing they had stolen from his life. Sirius said nothing for a long time after he knew Snape was finished. He wondered if he would ever have the courage to do the same thing, to bare his soul's tortures as Severus had done, for another to pick over.

'What age was he?' he asked eventually, as he sensed the tension drain away. 'What age were you?'

'He was twelve, and I was fifteen.'

That surprised Sirius, made him realise that there were even more unfolded horrors. Alexis had never been to Hogwarts that he knew of, and he would certainly have noticed another Snape slipping in; there must have been a reason for that.

'They wouldn't let him go,' Snape answered the unasked question. 'My father wanted him to stay at ... at Spinner's End. He said he could learn everything he needed to

know there, and he didn't need any other damn wizards in the family,' he said flatly. 'He was right about that much.'

Sirius knew the hesitation had been his reluctance to call it home. There was just one more thing he felt he wanted to know, something he knew wouldn't hurt Severus. 'Did you kill your father?' he asked into the darkness.

'Yes,' Snape replied, and Sirius could hear the degree of satisfaction in his voice. 'But only indirectly. I frightened him into drinking himself to death.'

That was good, Sirius thought; that much at least was good. 'Can you put it away, Severus?' he asked. He turned his head to look at Snape at last, watched him nod, unwilling, unsure.

They were quiet for a long time; but for the occasional pressure of a hand, or the brief caress of lips on a shoulder, they might have been asleep.

'This is what we're going to do,' Sirius whispered at last into the long black hair. 'We're going to give Regulus a little dose of his own medicine.'

'I had wanted to suggest that,' Snape confessed dryly. 'I must say I was not sure how to ask you to stage your own death, so soon after your brother's tragic demise. It has been such a trying time for the family.'

'You can move Harry's Charm, can't you?' Sirius asked, pleased that Severus seemed to be more like himself again. He vowed to himself that he would never refer to anything they had talked about again, unless Severus brought it up.

'No,' Snape admitted. 'But it will allow me to create its sister in a location of my choosing, as long as it approves.'

'So we're all moving house?'

'I've heard Wiltshire is pleasant at this time of year,' Severus replied, and even in the darkness Sirius could see his smirk, 'as long as one can avoid the natives as much as possible.'

'All of you?' Lucius looked across the laden breakfast table as Lupin ambled in, giving Sirius, Snape, and the small bundle Sirius had in the crook of his arm, one of his mildly enquiring looks. 'What d'you say, Lupin?' Lucius went on, as the werewolf stopped to tickle under Harry's chin.

If either of the other two men were surprised that Lucius had seen fit to ask Lupin, they didn't show it.

'I think he looks like Lily actually,' Lupin replied.

'Yes, yes, you would, of course,' Lucius said testily. 'But I meant about Severus's master plan.'

'What is it?' Lupin asked, as he slouched comfortably and familiarly into a seat, and helped himself to coffee. 'Personally, I think they should all move over here. We can get Dumbledore to arrange one of Minerva and Andromeda's fancy Charms to keep part of the Manor inaccessible, the same way Grimmauld Place is. That way I don't have to rush all over the place looking for Severus when we need him ... he'll be right here.' He looked at Lucius's blank expression. 'Oh, don't be difficult for the sake of it, Lucius. You've got rooms here you've never been in.'

Malfoy sighed theatrically. 'That was the master plan.'

'In that case, I approve. It's a good idea,' Lupin said with a smile, before turning to Sirius and winking at him in a way that suggested he could handle Lucius Malfoy, probably better than anyone else. Sirius had a suspicion that Malfoy only pretended not to notice; he was quite intrigued.

Malfoy's attention was reluctantly diverted from his breakfast as an elf handed him four scrolls. He looked absently at the first three, laying them aside, and tapped the fourth one across his hand. 'This is from your brother, Black. I confess that even before I open it, I am somewhat relieved that he has seen fit to send an owl rather than deposit himself in my drawing room. He gave me quite a turn.' He unrolled the scroll and read it, frowning as he did so. 'It's just a reiteration of what he told you last night,' he said to Snape. 'I wonder why he saw fit to write. I trust it is not because he knew he wasn't speaking to me. You didn't make a mess of things, did you?'

Sirius flashed Snape an anxious look, but he didn't look terribly concerned as he scanned the letter for himself; he hadn't even deigned to respond to Lucius. 'He is backtracking,' he said with satisfaction. 'He has couched this in very different terms to the way he spoke last night.'

'It's still a death warrant,' Sirius said flatly.

'Indeed,' Snape replied, and seemed to lose interest as he looked to the window to where a great grey owl was trying to find a way to open the snib from the outside with her hooked yellow beak. He let her in, and detached the scroll from her leg, unsurprised when she accepted his gift of a piece of bacon rind from Lucius's plate, but made no move to leave. He unrolled the scroll and began to read it out loud, as Lucius gave the owl a threatening look when she eyed his plate again.

"My dear Severus,

I spoke with Lucius last night, and I have come to the conclusion that I perhaps slighted you in not asking you to meet me yourself. I did not intend to insult you and trust that you will look upon the slip as one where I was, to put not too fine a point on it, testing the water. I am available to meet you at a time of your choosing this week, and would welcome a chat to see if there is any way in which we can link our forces for the common good of wizardkind. I would be pleased if you would bring Lucius with you when you come, as I have some information that may assist him in carrying out a couple of things he has agreed to do for me.

Shall we say the Potter house at Godric's Hollow tomorrow at noon? If this is inconvenient, the owl I have sent can take a return message.

Regulus Black."

'Too fucking right it's inconvenient,' Sirius snapped. 'Who does the snotty little upstart think he is? A time of your choosing as long as it's noon tomorrow, indeed.'

'Tell him you're not going, Severus. How can we both go at one time?' Lucius added. There was something panicky about his voice. For a man who had come through the war years on the tightrope Lucius had walked, he seemed to be terribly nervous about the peace; perhaps that was why.

'What are you going to do?' Lupin asked when he saw that neither Sirius's nor Lucius's comments had any effect on Snape.

'Either you or Black will accompany me, if I decide to agree to going at all. Perhaps you would be the better bet, Lupin; your turn of phrase is less likely to arouse suspicion.'

'Fuck you, you arrogant prick,' Sirius snapped. 'I can speak just as well as Lupin can. I'll just stick a few marbles in my mouth; it'll be no bother after that.'

'That is as may be, but I would not care for your brother to recognise some little nuance or mannerism as your own,' Snape said with a smirk, 'not when you are number one on his hit list.'

'Well, that's all right then,' Sirius agreed grudgingly, and gave Lupin a wink. 'Just ask me anything you want to know about him.'

'I do, however, agree with Black.' Snape nodded to Lucius, ignoring Sirius's attempt at humour, whilst acknowledging his input. 'I, for one, do not intend to jump just

because some ... "snotty little upstart" ... says I should. He's not ordering me around. Get one of your elves to bring me some parchment until I fire off a few lines. Green ink, if you don't mind.' He seemed oblivious to the fact that he wasn't above ordering people around himself.

"Regulus.

I was somewhat surprised to get your message, in view of the fact that you were the one who saw fit to inform the Ministry that I killed Peter Pettigrew. Perhaps that little detail slipped your mind; let me inform you that it hasn't slipped mine.

I doubt that we have any mutual interest to discuss, and I confess to not even having heard Lucius out when he intimated to me some time ago that you wanted to meet me. I am not at your disposal tomorrow, or at any other time. I can, however, spare you, say, half an hour next week, at Florian Fortescue's in Diagon Alley, although I am sure you will be wasting your time. As to whether Lucius will accompany me, why don't you write to him yourself and ask him? I certainly do not intend to. I am not in his confidence, nor is he in mine.

Severus Snape."

'That's better.' Lucius smiled his expensive smile from the top of the table as Sirius finished reading out Snape's jagged scrawl. 'I confess to being rather pleased that everyone is here. We were a little isolated out here, weren't we, Lupin?'

This time Snape and Sirius exchanged a quick glance. For one moment it was though there were something going on between Lucius and Lupin, but one look at the werewolf denied that. He was sitting with Harry tucked into the crook of his arm, paying little or no attention to anything else. At that moment a small person scuttled into the room on his hands and knees; he was so remarkably blond that he couldn't be anyone other than Draco Malfoy. He was a couple of months older than Harry, and had noticed the other baby. He crawled across the room and hauled himself unsteadily to his feet, up Lupin's leg. Lupin scooped him up into his other arm, and the two boys regarded one another warily, until Draco pointed at Harry and clapped his hands together, before reaching over to grab a fistful of Harry's dark brown hair.

Snape watched them, as Harry began to cry; and Draco began to cry in sympathy, as Lupin untangled the hair from his fist; and Sirius made to rise from his seat, as though he were about to issue some sort of divine retribution to the little blond boy; and Lucius reprimanded him, saying Draco was only a baby, and Sirius should stop acting like a Gryffindor bullyboy; and Lupin told them both to sit down because they were upsetting the boys; and the babies began to howl in earnest. Severus wondered if this was what it felt like to be a family.

Chapter Eleven

Chapter 11 of 17

Regulus makes some unwelcome discoveries, Dumbledore has some uncomfortable suspicions, and Lupin makes an uncomfortable decision.

Chapter Eleven

'Are you sleeping with Black?' Lucius asked, as Sirius and Lupin disappeared down the garden. He gave Snape a quick sidelong look, misreading his usually standoffish expression as discomfiture. 'I'm only asking, Severus.'

'Yes, yes I am.'

'I see.' Malfoy stifled his sigh. 'I had always hoped ... well, you know what I had hoped.'

'And so had Black, as far as you are concerned,' Snape said candidly. 'An uncomfortable triangle if ever there were one. How are you getting on with Lupin? He seems to have fitted in very well here. I admit to being somewhat surprised.'

'Let's leave Lupin out of it, Severus,' Lucius said firmly. 'He has no place in this conversation.'

'As you wish.'

They walked towards the walled garden, to where Lucius had planted another tree on Alexis's new resting place. It was a Japanese Acer, and it sat beside the weeping cherry that had come down from Spinner's End of its own accord, and although everything else in the garden slumbered below the hard winter soil, the Acer's red-fringed leaves, and the soft green leaves of the cherry, remained bright and alive, fluttering gently in their own breeze. They seemed to sigh when Snape approached, as the fairies acknowledged him.

'Thank you,' he said quietly, 'it's beautiful.'

'It is enchanted,' Lucius replied. 'No one will ever disturb him. In fact no one but you or I can even see it, or the spot where he rests.'

Snape nodded his appreciation as he realised that Lucius had actually physically planted the tree himself, and not foisted the task onto an elf. 'I cannot come to you, Lucius. I love you, of course, but not in the way you want me to.'

'I know,' Malfoy replied, forcing down a sigh. 'It is enough that you're here. I suspect Black may be better for you than either of you ever imagine,' he added a little ruefully.

'He wanted you, you know. Black really wanted you,' Snape said as they walked on. As they turned away, the Acer disappeared from sight, leaving just a perennial weeping cherry standing sentry over a place no one else would ever see, a place one's eye would slide past as though it were not there.

'But like you,' Lucius murmured, 'I could not love him the way he wanted me to.'

'And what about you?' Snape asked as they stopped walking again.

'About Lupin,' Malfoy began, surprising Snape. 'Oh, no, not what you think; he is not that way inclined, as you pointed out yourself. But I am content with his company; I find it rewarding in the oddest ways, as though I see value in what I once saw as worthless, and no worth in what I valued.'

'You've changed, Lucius,' Snape said, 'for the better.'

'Have I? Do any of us really change? I doubt it. I suspect we just react to the way circumstances change around us.' Malfoy let his pale grey eyes hold Severus's for a long moment. 'I need this chance, Severus. I need to right wrongs too.'

'Yes, I know you do. There was always one thing that set you apart from the others, your one saving grace, and all the more so because not only did you fail to recognise it, but others failed too.'

Lucius looked at him. 'What do you mean?' he asked.

'You have one thing no man can ever take from you, Lucius,' Snape said. 'It is the one thing Regulus has not seen, and would never understand if he did. You have a conscience.'

As Malfoy began to walk towards Lupin and Black, Snape called him back, scanning the rest of the grounds uneasily. 'I do not want you leaving the Manor alone, Lucius. Last night showed us that Regulus is not above dropping in for a visit when he sees fit. It would not do for the master of the Manor to meet him in the grounds alone,' he said, raising his eyebrow, 'like a common gardener.'

'Am I to consider myself a prisoner?' Lucius asked.

'If you like.'

Sirius and Lupin reached the bottom of the row of sandstone stores at the foot of the kitchen garden. As Lupin whispered to the end door it swung open to reveal a space that could not possibly exist in such a small building. The charmed hall had a vaulted ceiling and a polished mahogany floor, in the middle of which sat such an assortment of brightly-coloured bagpipes, and horns, and oddly-shaped stringed instruments, and skin-covered drums, that Sirius winced at the thought of the noise they could produce in children's hands.

Lupin lifted a small wooden pipe, and ran his hand over it. 'Good, eh?' He nodded to where the huge harp loomed down over everything, dwarfing the other instruments as though it had been made to quite a different scale. 'That was Lucius's idea, of course.'

'It's great ... even that monster. How many kids come?'

'Not many at first,' Lupin admitted. 'There weren't that many people who were keen to send their kids to learn anything Malfoy Manor might have had to teach them, but Dumbledore helped, and once the first few parents had come to have a look, it kind of escalated. A lot of families have too many kids below Hogwarts age under their feet, what with the orphans and so on,' he added. 'It didn't take that much persuasion to give them a break a couple of days a week.'

Sirius grinned. He could picture Lupin in the centre of a circle of young children who were blowing noise at him with some sort of vengeance, whilst he scratched his head and wondered what had happened. 'And what about Lucius?' he asked; he'd been meaning to ask before, but he hadn't got Lupin alone until now.

'He stays away,' the werewolf replied. 'It's not quite his scene.'

'How are you managing here, with him I mean?'

Lupin looked surprised. 'With Lucius? Fine, much better than I had expected, I suppose. It's been a lot easier than paying the rent was.'

Sirius nodded, wondering if Lupin had glossed over any underlying relationship, or if there just weren't one to gloss over. He wasn't quite sure how to ask.

'I'm not sleeping with Malfoy, Sirius,' Lupin said with distaste. 'I can tell that's what you're wondering.'

'I did not,' Sirius lied, at once relieved and puzzled. 'I just wondered how you're getting on with him.'

'I got on with him very well. He let me live a life I would never have been able to live without his good grace. In return, I offered him the security he needed.'

'Got?' Sirius said with a frown. 'Needed? What d'you mean.'

Lupin laid the wooden pipe down on top of a little drum, watching as it rolled back and forward for a moment before settling. 'I'll be moving on now,' he said. 'There's no necessity for me to stay here. Don't forget why I came in the first place.'

Sirius began to say something, but he couldn't work out what it was. Lupin was right; it was Sirius who had brought him here to watch out for Lucius ... if he and Snape were here there was no good reason for Lupin to stay. He nodded glumly; sometimes things looked a little too perfect, usually just before they fell apart. 'You'll still teach at the school though, won't you?' he asked. 'Look at the work you've put into it already.'

Lupin smiled his slow smile. 'We'll see. I'm going to see if Dumbledore's got a post for me at Hogwarts; that way I don't have to worry about rent.'

'You'll never need to worry about rent,' Sirius snapped. 'Damn it, Moony, why can't you just ask for money if you need it? You know I forget until you're starving. I wish you wouldn't let me do that.'

They found themselves almost back at the spot where Lucius and Snape were waiting. Sirius shivered; somehow the brief winter sun didn't feel as warming as it had when they'd set out. 'You should go and have a look at his school, Severus,' he said with a grin he didn't much feel like now. 'It's really good. Merlin knows what racket the kids kick up with the assortment of pipes and drums and stuff they've got.'

'Awful,' Lucius confirmed, giving Lupin an openly affectionate look that made Sirius frown, one that made him realise he had to get the blond Slytherin alone for a few minutes, for a very different reason to his usual one.

Lupin looked up; he hadn't heard anyone coming along the corridor.

'What are you doing?' Lucius asked and nodded to where Lupin's clothes lay scattered on his bed, his one battered leather travelling bag already stuffed to bursting.

'I'm moving out, Lucius,' he replied. 'You've got enough protection now, and I've got other things to do with my life.'

'What other things?' Lucius asked and sat on the bed, shoving some of the clothes over a bit to give him space. 'Where are you going?'

'I'm going to Hogwarts ... at least, I'll start there.'

'But ... what about the music school?'

'I'll try to fit it in. I'm sure I can work something out with Dumbledore.'

He watched Lucius look away. Only once had he had to set him straight about his sexuality; he'd managed not to make it an awkward moment, and both men had brushed

it off without either being embarrassed. Lupin watched him look back at him now, stifling the urge to put a hand on his shoulder the way he would have put one on Sirius's, in case Malfoy misread something in the touch.

'What about me?' Lucius whispered at last. 'I thought ...' He trailed off, as if he weren't really sure what he thought. 'Don't you like living here?'

'Of course I do. I mean, I'd be mad not to,' Lupin said reasonably. He was beginning to find this very difficult; the last thing he really wanted to do was leave the comfortable little niche in which Sirius had placed him.

'In that case, I would prefer if you took that stuff out of that bag and stopped acting like a petulant child.'

'I beg your pardon?' Lupin stiffened slightly.

'Behave yourself, Lupin,' Malfoy said. 'I am not about to force what I am well aware are my unwanted attentions on you, but ... I thought we were friends. I thought we had left that behind us and embarked upon something I have valued greatly.'

Lupin felt himself relax as he allowed himself a sigh, and even took the step of sitting on the bed at Lucius's side. Malfoy gave him an overtly arch look that made him laugh. 'I valued it too,' he said. 'I valued it very much. But things have moved on.'

'That's nonsense,' Lucius argued lamely. 'Anyway, I'm struggling to say that I want you stay here without you getting the feeling that ... I don't know. I don't want you to feel as though you are taking advantage of hospitality I am ... fuck. You're not taking anything I don't gladly give, Lupin. You didn't have to sell me your friendship ... I thought we had learned that much about one another.'

'I can't live like a parasite,' Lupin replied. 'I need to earn whatever way I can in life.'

'You talk some sanctimonious drivel sometimes,' Lucius replied with a pained expression. 'Now you're beginning to sound like Severus. How much do you think it would cost me to get a music teacher in for the multitude of brats you've dumped on me twice a week? And who's going to help me with looking after Draco? And Severus and Black will gang up against me ... I'll have no life once those two start.'

He looked to the door as it seemed to open of its own accord, until a small, very fast person scuttled in on all fours, with his thickly cotton-clad bottom in the air. He was followed by another slightly smaller boy, who didn't move just as surely; he toppled over onto his own well-padded backside with a bump, as the first boy hauled himself up Lupin's leg, and demanded immediate attention.

'And I'm not being left to deal with two of them,' Lucius added for good measure.

Outside the door Padfoot grinned to himself and trotted back along the corridor towards the nursery, leaving the tiny fairy sitting on top of the still open door to watch the boys; she'd followed along of her own accord, and he hadn't seen fit to argue. Sirius hadn't really been eavesdropping, but he'd thought it was a good move to shepherd the boys along to Lupin's room when it sounded as though Lucius was struggling.

They had put Draco and Harry in one room now. Sirius and Lupin and Lucius had called over Harry's entire store of newly-acquired clothes, and the animals from his shelves in Grimmauld Place, with Accio Charms, as Severus set his Fairy Charms to watch over them. Sirius didn't think he would ever forget the sight of the strange little animals traipsing through the Manor, giggling to one another as they pointed at portraits of long-forgotten Malfoys, and the fairies ushered them along under the steadily rising eyebrow of the current master of the Manor. At least he hoped he would never forget, as he tucked it into the thin file marked "precious memories".

Sirius didn't know how Snape called the fairies. He had only ever read about how it could be done by those picked somehow by the fairies themselves. He knew it was a very rare talent, only bestowed on a wizard of unusual power; that bit didn't surprise him. Snape had left the original fairies in Grimmauld Place; he told Sirius they would be content, and that the room would always be a safe haven for any of the four of them who needed it. Sirius had thought for a moment that he'd included Lucius as the fourth, until he realised Snape meant Harry. Severus had seemed a little uneasy about including Lucius in the new Charm though, until Sirius pointed out that they could hardly prohibit Malfoy from seeing his own son when he was in the nursery in his own home. Sirius wasn't entirely sure that Harry's fairies didn't have an extra set of instructions though.

He changed back to his own form and pushed open the nursery door, kicking the slumbering elf who was supposed to be watching the boys.

'Is he indeed?' Regulus said, giving the elf a thin smile of distaste.

He had wondered where Severus had holed himself up since Dumbledore had got him off. He had tried to find him a few times now, but Spinner's End wasn't occupied, and it had the air of a house that was never going to be occupied again, as though it were about to disappear back into the miserable ground from which it had sprung. He had suspected he'd gone to Lucius, but his visit to the Manor had denied that when he'd gone there two nights ago, on the pretence of wanting to talk with that supercilious idiot, Lucius. He hadn't wanted to send Snape another owl, not just yet; Regulus preferred to let him worry that he'd been a little too curt with his reply. He'd just decided that Snape had gone abroad, perhaps to seek out Voldemort himself, or gone to Hogwarts; Dumbledore had a record of providing shelter for hybrid half-blood trash ... and now it seemed not.

Regulus needed someone to confide in. There were too many thoughts in his head, and just sometimes he found the conflicting ideas and emotions of himself and Voldemort were more than he could deal with. He had already cast Snape in the role of confidante; he couldn't think of anyone else who would fit the bill as well as the dark snake would. Regulus was just a little put out that he couldn't find his family home though, and Severus Snape had his feet firmly under the kitchen table.

He eyed the elf again, trying to stifle his disgust at it; he'd always hated it. 'What do they talk about?' he asked.

'They talks very little, Young Master. The half-blood is very cruel to Kreacher; he send him away when he talks to the master.'

That hardly surprised Regulus. Snape was one dour uncommunicative man; he doubted his brother's dubious charms would awaken his passionless soul. He had found himself sceptical of the rumour that had flown around after the Potters had been dispatched that Snape had been having a fling with James; it must have been a figment of someone's overtaxed imagination.

'Tell me, does he share a bed with my brother?' he asked; he might as well discard it right away, offload any excess baggage, so to speak.

Kreacher gave him a sly look back. 'Once he did, Young Master,' he said. 'Then he left my mistress's house and Kreacher did not see him for days. Then he came back again, three moons ago.'

Regulus gritted his teeth. He knew he was going to have to drag everything out of the elf; it would not lie to him, he doubted that it could, but he knew it was up to him to think up the right questions. 'And now, do they share a bed now?' He was mildly shocked for some reason that Snape had indeed succumbed to Sirius. It must have been animal magnetism, he snorted inwardly in derision. He hadn't taken the old snake for a dog lover; he was almost disappointed in him.

'Only when the other half-blood came a few days ago.' Kreacher began to wail. 'There is now more half-bloods than pure peoples in our Noble House, Young Master.'

'Lupin?' Regulus asked in some surprise. He had been informed that the werewolf was staying at the Manor; both Andromeda and Macnair said so. It was a fact that Lucius hadn't seen fit to deny either.

'Not the wolfman, Young Master, a small half-blood. It can't walk yet, and the master feeds it, but Kreacher knows it will grow if it is allowed to.'

'Potter.' The name escaped Regulus's lips before he could stop it. He felt the fury rise in his blood. That his brother had brought Snape to the house was one thing, he had intended to woo the dark snake himself; he knew that perhaps Snape alone had the power to help him when it ultimately mattered, but to have spirited James Potter's half-blood spawn to Grimmauld Place and away from his reach again, was unthinkable. He grabbed the tea towel the elf wore, just below his throat. 'Why did you wait so long to seek me out?'

'Kreacher was not allowed out, Young Master,' the elf howled, jerking his head so that his tears and the slimy drips from his nose landed on Regulus's tightened fist until his "Young Master" dropped his hand in revulsion. 'But when they all went out they forgot to tell Kreacher to stay at home,' he said, and gave Regulus another cunning look, 'and Kreacher comes to you, Young Master. They will not even notice poor Kreacher is gone.'

'Let us hope not,' Regulus murmured. 'Can you get me under whatever Charm they have cast?'

'Oh yes, Young Master,' Kreacher declared in triumph at last. 'When the witches sealed it to only peoples who was in the house, they forgot Kreacher was there too. All the peoples in the house was allowed to take visitors.'

'In that case, we shall go visiting.'

'They has all gone out, Young Master,' Kreacher said doubtfully. 'Kreacher does not know when they returns.'

'Oh, that's all right,' Regulus said, smiling at last, 'I don't mind waiting.'

'It involves a lot of very complicated lies, Sirius,' Dumbledore said sceptically. 'And you'll have to stay out of sight for ... forever maybe?'

'Oh, that's all right,' Sirius replied airily. 'I don't get out much anyway.'

'No, this will not work. You have not given it enough thought,' the Headmaster said firmly now. 'I am surprised at you, Severus,' he said reproachfully to where Snape sat at the end of the dining table, quite un-put-out by his opinion. 'I would have thought that you, at least, would have thought things out a little more carefully.'

'Quite,' Snape replied. 'I should certainly have thought more carefully about allowing Black to put our case across.'

'Oh dear,' Minerva said, clutching theatrically at her bony breast. 'That sounds as though there is more.'

'Of course there is,' Snape retorted. 'Black just wanted to get the bit about himself in first.'

Dumbledore listened, reluctantly beginning to see Snape's reasoning. The seat of the Malfoys was a vast Gothic Manor house that had stood for centuries; there were parts that he knew of that were virtual ruins. He remembered exploring the back of the eastern wing of the Manor with Lucius's grandfather when he was but a boy himself; it had been inhabited by nothing but a few errant mice ... and whatever else had moved in in the interim period. It would be no great task to annexe a couple of rooms. He had to agree that, even with Regulus's intention to "dispose" of Sirius, Lucius was the most vulnerable of them. He needed the protection of the men here; he was the one who was expected to produce results in a steady stream over the next few years. Dumbledore thought, not unkindly, that the presence of the other three would also go a long way in preventing Lucius backsliding into his old ways. The Headmaster knew, perhaps better than any of them, just how easily Lucius could be swayed by the trappings of power and glory, be they dark or light.

He wondered uneasily just what had hastened Regulus into making his visit to Malfoy Manor. He could not know Sirius was a direct threat to him just now; it was out of context with the rest of his planning. Dumbledore wondered if Regulus already knew that Harry had been moved; in fact had it not been for Lupin's constant vigilant presence in the Manor, he admitted that he would have automatically cast Lucius as a potential traitor. That led him to more uncomfortable thoughts centring on the Potters' son. Perhaps it would be well for him not to resist this; it would protect everything that needed to be protected for the time being.

Dumbledore would have liked to come face to face with Regulus himself, just to confirm what Severus had already identified, but he couldn't risk it. Voldemort, or whatever part of him Snape seemed to think dwelt within Sirius's brother, would know he could not dupe Albus Dumbledore the way Snape had deceived him into thinking he had fooled Lucius. And, if what Snape suspected were true, as Dumbledore admitted to himself he knew it to be, he could not afford to send what remained of the Order to Europe on a wild goose chase to attempt to find whatever remains of the Dark Lord were hidden there; he had an uncomfortable feeling he would need them right here.

He was just about to voice his concerns and his agreement when the dining room door opened. At first he thought it had simply been a stray draught, until he watched Severus stand, his face white with anger; it was only then that he noticed a fairy had perched on his shoulder and was whispering into his ear. He almost gasped in surprise as he caught Minerva's eye, and saw her astonishment too. It was very strong magic to control a fairy the way Severus obviously controlled this one; they were not of this world, and as such concerned themselves only with that which pleased them in it. He had never taken Severus Snape for being a Fairy Beckoner; it was an extremely rare talent which could not be inherited or learned, one only bestowed by the fairies themselves.

'What's wrong?' Sirius had jumped to his feet too; he'd also seen the fairy. 'The boys, where are they?' He began to run from the room.

'They are safe, Black, come back,' Severus called. 'We have another quite different problem.' Snape sat down. He'd set the fairy on the table, and she seemed content to dance in a little circle in front of him, singing to herself.

'What's happened,' Lucius whispered anxiously from where he sat at the other end of the table, with Lupin on one side and Andromeda on the other, nodding to the fairy. 'Damn it, Severus, are you going to tell us what's wrong?'

None of the other men seemed surprised that Snape had the fairy; they obviously already knew. Dumbledore assumed he had summoned it to watch over young Harry, a more pleasing and powerful Charm than any reluctant blood ties with Muggle relations. He watched as Severus turned to him. 'The Nominatum Perpetuum Charm, Dumbledore,' he said. 'I think we've made a terrible mistake with whom we allowed under the Charm.'

'I thought it was just the people around this table,' Lucius said with a frown. 'Apart from me of course,' he added, failing to mask the fact that he still felt slighted, as he looked around the others with suspicion-laced superiority.

'There was someone else in the house at the time, Lucius,' Snape said quietly, shaking his head at some folly Dumbledore was just beginning to recognise. 'Someone none of us took any heed of.'

'Fuck,' Sirius whispered. 'The elf?'

Snape nodded. 'The elf has just brought Regulus to number twelve, Grimmauld Place. I suspect we didn't move a moment too soon.'

Sirius closed his eyes for a moment and shook his head slowly, before eyeing the little fairy with concern. 'What about the other fairies, the ones you left at Grimmauld Place? Will they be all right?'

'Oh, yes, nothing in this world can harm a fairy,' Severus looked at the tiny greenish-brown girl, barely the height of his finger, with her pointed ears and her dress that looked as though the skirt were a dandelion clock, and her minute grass-stained feet, and her little black mouse eyes, before closing his hand gently around her; when he opened it she had disappeared. 'At least there is a small way we can use this to our advantage.'

Dumbledore looked at him with a renewed respect. This was powerful magic indeed; they would all know that. But there was one thing they wouldn't know; they would not know that a fairy could only be summoned for good, and if she ever were bidden for anything but a blameless cause the Beckoner would cease to be. He wouldn't even die; he would simply cease to have ever existed. He wondered when it would occur to Snape to remind Sirius that he should have told the elf not to leave the house before they

left; he thought he'd keep that to himself just now.

'Can they spy?' Sirius asked.

'No, they will not leave the vicinity of the room they protect if they sense danger,' Snape replied. 'But at least we will know if Regulus moves away from the house.'

Dumbledore watched Sirius nod in what was to be a short-lived relief; he closed his eyes in anticipation.

'You only had one thing to do before we left the Ancient and Most Treacherous House of Black,' Severus said, shaking his head slowly. 'And you forgot that.'

It was a quite different Charm to the Nominatum Perpetuum Charm that Dumbledore eventually approved. This one allowed free access to those who knew the rooms were there, and it meant that any other Order members who were not there just then could also visit if necessary. Sirius and Severus had spent some time arguing which rooms they thought were near enough to Lucius's main living rooms, and remote enough not to be looked for. Dumbledore suspected the remains of the large sunken bath Lupin had almost fallen into while they were exploring, might have had something to do with their final choice.

He finished setting the Charm. He felt much better about this now, and he knew much of that comfort stemmed, not only from the fact that Lucius had agreed to move the nursery within the Charm, but that the fairies were willing to move too. Tricky little things fairies, it was very easy to offend them; Dumbledore knew that, he knew that a fairy scorned was a much more spiteful being than any woman scorned could ever hope to be. He was quite pleased with the balance of magic here. They had checked that the Patroni could pass the Charm, but the elves could not, and Dumbledore knew the whispering fairies were the ones who set the limits. He allowed them their victory; they had already made a mistake with one elf. Quite apart from that, he was an old man, and old men were easily enchanted by little girls.

He was just about to leave, had just taken Minerva's proffered arm, when Sirius stopped him.

'Aren't you going to help us clear up this mess,' he asked, looking at the sky through a hole in the roof.

'Come, come now, Sirius,' he replied. 'You need something to keep you out of mischief for a while.'

Chapter Twelve

Chapter 12 of 17

Regulus makes a decision, and Severus makes a mistake.

Chapter Twelve

Regulus went up the stairs again. He wondered when Sirius would be back; he'd like a long serious word with his older brother. He hoped Lucius hadn't taken him on his word and killed him yet; that would be a trifle inconvenient. Anyway, he didn't particularly want to have Sirius killed just now. If Sirius had the Potter boy, he might end up back in Dumbledore's hands if he died, just when he seemed to have slipped out of them. Having Sirius killed hadn't been his reason for calling on Lucius anyway; he had only wanted to check if it were indeed true that the werewolf had taken up residence with the smug Slytherin, and to see if Lucius knew anything about the Charm which had excluded him from Grimmauld Place ... and of course, the current place of residence of the Potter brat. He had not imagined just how interlinked two of the answers would be.

He let his mind flit to the werewolf and Malfoy, as unlikely a combination as there was; he wondered what was in it for Lucius, perhaps he was amused by a bit of rough, he thought with a disgusted twist of his lips. He would let Malfoy squirm a bit more, and send him an owl tomorrow to let him know that it had now become inopportune to kill Sirius. It would be unwise to deviate from his master plan; there was no real point in having one if he didn't intend to follow it. So much of his planning depended on things settling quietly back to a pre-war footing, and Lucius Malfoy doing his bit; in fact Regulus had only been tempted to come back to Britain when Vernon Dursley got in touch with him.

Perhaps it would be better to keep an eye on Lucius for a while though, now that he was here anyway, just in case his absence let Malfoy forget to whom he was answerable. That was one thing he was just a little uncomfortable about; Malfoy usually had so many irons of his own in the fire that there was rarely room for anyone else's. Regulus was finding it difficult to come to any hard and fast decisions; there were too many pieces missing, that and the fact that the constant battering on his mind of Voldemort demanding to have his own ideas recognised, was becoming very trying. Sometimes he found himself wondering whose thoughts he was thinking; it was quite disconcerting.

He found his thoughts slipping to Severus as he unknowingly passed the room Snape had occupied up until a few nights before, when he had returned to Sirius's bed. Severus was a dark horse in all ways. Regulus had been stunned when Sirius had let slip that he was a member of the Order of the Phoenix, that was until the embryonic scrap of inhumanity that was Voldemort had informed him that he had been acting as his spy, just before Regulus had shut him up for a while, by taking what he needed himself and shipping the rest off with that idiot Karkaroff, hopefully to moulder into dust, being worshipped by the sycophantic fools who watched over him.

Regulus had tried to work it out. Sometimes it sat comfortably and other times it didn't; there were too many contradictions: the Sirius connection, the Potter brat, James Potter himself, if that were indeed true. And yet Snape seemed, on the face of it at least, not to have curried favour in any quarter since Voldemort had been brought down; in fact, he had appeared for a time to be more interested in going to Azkaban than saving his skin. But he had killed Peter Pettigrew, and every time Regulus factored that little item into his equation he felt the unease. He was left with the distasteful notion that Snape had indeed been having a relationship with James Potter; it was the only way it all stacked up ... unless Snape was his enemy, and that didn't suit Regulus at all.

He found himself walking back along the upper hallway, stopping at a door and frowning; for some reason it looked nearer the bedroom door next to it than it had in the past. He tried to recall what it was; a storeroom, a cupboard, whatever it was it was locked, and nothing he tried would open it. He went into the room next door and frowned again. The room went back as though the other door should open into it too; he went back into the corridor to check his eye had not been deceived. He wondered why he had not known there was a secret chamber in this part of this house of secrets, but it was new of course, that was why he had noticed the door in the first place. He had an insight that someone had been hidden there; he wondered if it had been the Potters' son ... perhaps he was still there.

'Kreacher,' he shouted downstairs.

The elf shuffled up the stairs, and gave him a baleful look.

'What is behind that door?'

'Doxies,' Kreacher whispered loudly. 'Kreacher has hidden them.'

Regulus kicked him and made his way back down the stairs, berating himself for becoming so paranoid. Damn it, where was Sirius? He would have liked a word with him. It was quite late when he came to terms with the fact that his brother wasn't bringing the boy back that night, and even later when it occurred to him to ask the elf when he had actually left.

'Two days ago, Young Master,' Kreacher said with a sly grin.

Regulus closed his eyes. It was his own fault; he should have known by now that he had to be very specific. He ran up the stairs and into Sirius's bedroom, pulling open his wardrobe door. The ancient mahogany gave way grudgingly, revealing the fact that wherever Regulus's brother had gone, it didn't look as though he was coming back for a long time.

'I should have told the fucking elf to stay at home,' Sirius muttered again; he'd been going on about it for a whole day now, and everyone would have forgotten about it if he hadn't kept bringing it up himself. 'I can't believe I forgot.'

'You were in a hurry, Sirius, don't beat yourself up,' Lupin remarked, tapping a spoon on a boiled egg, and managing not to shoot Snape his version of a warning glare, which admittedly wasn't up to much anyway. 'It's almost become boring.'

Sirius gave him a hurt look and then grinned as something seemed to occur to him. 'At least he knows what to say if anyone asks what's in the nursery.'

'What did you tell him?' Lupin asked.

'I told him to tell anyone who asked him that it's full of Doxies.'

Snape rolled his eyes. 'Was that the best you could do, Black?'

'Actually yes,' Sirius snapped. 'I didn't even hear you coming up with an idea at all.'

'Quite,' Severus snarled back. 'I made the monumental error of assuming some things could be left up to you. Now behave, Black, you are putting the boys off their breakfast.' He looked back down to the task he had taken in hand, and the small boy blinked back up at him and opened his mouth. 'In fact eat up your own; you'll need your strength for the cleaning you have to do today.'

Sirius gave him a hard flat look. 'I suppose I'd better bring him back here,' he muttered. He didn't really want Kreacher at the Manor, but at least he could keep his eye on him, and the elf couldn't refuse the call of the master of the House of Black. 'I'll wait until after breakfast ... I wouldn't like anything else to put you off.'

'Don't you ever think?' Severus asked blandly, and yet another spoonful of egg yolk disappeared down Harry's throat, as the boy watched him, seemingly only blinking when absolutely necessary, in order not to take his eyes off Snape for any longer than he had to.

'Yes, and right now I think I've had enough of your smart mouth.'

'Oh, stop it!' Lupin interjected. 'Just listen to the two of you.'

'I agree.' Lucius raised his head from where he was sorting his morning mail into that which he would read and that which he wouldn't bother to open; it was an assortment of owl post and Muggle mail. 'We're not used to noise and bickering at the breakfast table, are we, Lupin?' He glanced across to them, then looked to where Lupin was trying to persuade Draco to eat, before dropping his head again to sift through his correspondence. He stopped only when he got to a scroll addressed with the now familiar hand of Regulus Black. He scanned it with a puzzled frown on his pale forehead.

'What's wrong,' Sirius asked. 'Who've you to kill now?'

'No one, no one at all. He seems to have changed his mind,' Lucius replied. 'You have been given a reprieve.'

Sirius watched Snape look up sharply from where he had been feeding Harry the softly-boiled never ending egg; there was something as pleasingly unselfconscious as it was unaffected about the way he carried out the mission, admittedly using quite a lot of magic to remain an egg-free zone himself. Sirius thought that Harry looked like an expectant baby bird, watching Snape carefully as though wondering whether to let him know that he should be dipping the stag horn spoon back into the yellow stuff. He looked across at where Harry's white-blond counterpoint sat on Lupin's knee, in exactly the same pose; they looked to Sirius like a bizarre pair of sparrow chick bookends.

'Has he indeed?' Snape said, depositing Harry and the egg on Sirius, and relieving Lucius of the scroll. 'I had wondered at the order; it didn't make sense in the first place. As Dumbledore said, it was out of context with his long slow plan.' A smirk crossed his harsh features. 'Now write him a nice letter, Lucius, and tell him he is too late.'

'I'd better not call the elf after all,' Sirius said with a grin, as Harry decided he'd had enough egg and spat the last mouthful down his shirt.

Sirius watched over Lucius's shoulder as he wrote the message Snape dictated to him; he hoped Severus wasn't just poking Regulus with a stick for the fun of it. He knew he was a little concerned that he hadn't had a reply to his own message; the time of Regulus's proposed meeting at Godric's Hollow had come and gone, and they were well into the week that Snape had offered to meet him at Florian Fortescue's. It looked as though Regulus didn't intend to submit to someone else's pressure any more than Snape did. Sirius got the uncomfortable feeling that Snape was hoping to rile him into coming head to head with him; he would have liked to place a bet on that little battle for supremacy.

Lucius scrawled his name at the bottom of the letter and summoned his eagle owl. When he wafted through the door, he had company; Albus Dumbledore had come to tell Remus Lupin of the tragic death of his friend Sirius Black. But for the fact that Sirius was sitting at the end of the table, it would have been a truly emotional scene.

'It will run on the front page of the Daily Prophet tomorrow, Sirius. Please remember not to leave the Manor now,' Dumbledore murmured. Sirius could see he was still unhappy about the situation, and that wasn't allowing for the fact that he didn't know that Regulus had written to Lucius to withdraw his request; he had a funny feeling none of the tight-lipped men around the table were going to tell him. 'And now I have news of a serious nature, I'm afraid,' the Headmaster went on.

Sirius was going to ask what could be worse than his own death, but something about the old man's gravity stopped him. 'What's happened?' he asked instead.

'There has been a mass breakout at Azkaban,' Dumbledore replied. 'Evan Rosier, Barty Crouch Junior, and Bellatrix, Rabastan and Rodolphus Lestrangle have all escaped.'

'God, I hope they don't come here,' Lucius remarked. 'I hate Bella.' He gave Dumbledore a look of appeal. 'They don't know, do they? You promised they wouldn't.'

'I am not in the habit of breaking my word, Lucius,' Dumbledore replied.

'Know what?' Sirius asked.

The Headmaster glanced at Lucius before he answered, but the blond Slytherin just shrugged and cast an anxious look to where his own son now sat playing on the floor

with Harry; there seemed to be a lot of hitting and shrieking involved. 'It was Lucius's evidence that put the Lestranges in Azkaban in the first place,' Dumbledore murmured.

Sirius wondered if he were the only one who noticed that the Headmaster had almost ignored the two little boys playing on the floor; he thought that was strange, so strange that he was about to ask Dumbledore why, until he caught the warning look the old man gave him.

Regulus unrolled the scroll with a frown. He had told Malfoy that he would get in touch with him; he hadn't expected Lucius to presume to write unsolicited letters to him. He hoped Lucius's attitude wasn't going to become tiresome; he hadn't cared for the flash of superiority he had shown just as he left the Manor. He hadn't cared for the cool way Lucius had listened to him at Godric's Hollow three months before either, but his sources reported to him that Malfoy had indeed embarked upon some sort of courtship with Dumbledore, and Regulus had contented himself to pass it off and wait for results.

Lucius's detached arrogance could, of course, be bravado; then again it could be the legendary core of steel that had managed to preserve some last vestiges of respectability for the House of Malfoy during the final mad days of Voldemort's reign, when the Dark Lord had begun to show signs of what Regulus recognised as insanity, and he had begun to make his own plans. And yet he knew Lucius would not be at Dumbledore's beck and call, any more than he was at any man's; it had been Lucius after all who had agreed to get Regulus back into mainstream wizarding society to spy for the Death Eaters, he'd been with him in the Three Broomsticks when he'd met Sirius. Lucius played his own game; it was just up to Regulus to make sure the odds were stacked against him when the final hand was dealt.

Voldemort had fouled up his own plan by picking that very time to dispose of the Potters. What a fool he was, Regulus smirked to himself; he had ever been the one to rush into things, not content to let his tide come in in its own good time. He wasn't going to make that sort of mistake; it could take ten years, maybe even more, and Regulus wasn't in any hurry. He smiled to himself, unrolling Lucius's message, as he felt the part of Voldemort that was within him gnashing his teeth in impotent fury.

"My Dear Regulus,

Had I but known that you were indecisive I should not have issued my instructions so hastily, but I had not taken you for a man who was irresolute when you intimated that it was inconvenient for your brother to remain alive. Suffice it to say that your letter of this morning arrived too late. I'm afraid Sirius Black was found dead earlier this morning, under somewhat sordid circumstances, but I suppose it was a fitting end to one who led a less than unblemished life.

I confess to being unsure whether this owl is able to reach you or not, or whether you were just flexing what you seem to consider is your authority over me by suggesting that you would be the one to keep in touch with me. If it does not reach you, I'm sure you can read all about it in the 'Daily Prophet' tomorrow. I believe Rita Skeeter is writing up the story herself, so all the squalid little details will be there.

I am, yours sincerely,

Lucius Malfoy."

Regulus hurled the screwed up letter across the kitchen in fury he knew he could only direct at himself, then forced himself to be calm. He would not do what Voldemort had done; he would not embark on a trail of useless destruction in a knee-jerk reaction to something that was his own fault. Perhaps he would have been better just telling Lucius he had called at the Manor to find out if he knew where the Potter boy was; sometimes the truth was easier than the web of deceit. But for now he would let Malfoy do the wondering; he had a bigger fish to fry.

He cleared a space on the kitchen table. Sirius might have taken his clothes on his final departure from Grimmauld Place, but he seemed to have left his mess behind. Regulus had a letter to write, and he was toying with just what tone he would set. Perhaps condolence would be trite, dictatorial wouldn't work; he contented himself that a simply worded missive was his best course of action.

"My Dear Severus.

Thank you for your last letter.

I have been unable to respond until today and trust that you are still available to meet me at Florian Fortescue's this week. I hesitate to suggest a day ..."

... No that wouldn't do; he wasn't going to hesitate to suggest anything. He started again.

"Severus.

I am writing to inform you that I can be available for a short time on Thursday at Florian Fortescue's in Diagon Alley. I shall, of course, be under Charms. If you could pick table twelve outside, I shall meet you there. I do not know if you will be under Charms yourself, so if I see a man alone, I shall presume him to ..."

... He stopped again; why was he explaining himself? What need did Regulus Black have to explain himself to anyone, far less a half-blooded pauper? He knew the answer to that; Regulus needed Severus Snape, he needed his power and his brains and the fact that Snape was the only man he knew of who would probably be able to fuse Voldemort's magic within the awareness he already held. Of course, there was the added bonus that the magic was quite possibly neatly within Snape's grasp.

Regulus smiled to himself; perhaps his brother had proven to be of some use to the cause at last, it was just a pity he wouldn't be around now to witness it. His brow creased in suspicion he knew had come from Voldemort's awareness inside him, and he found himself on his feet, walking into the hall.

'Mother,' he said to the still, flat portrait, watching in disgust mingled with satisfaction as it awoke and gave him a fawning look. 'Mother, I have been told that Sirius is dead. Is that true?'

Her eyes went flinty with rage. 'Yes,' she hissed, 'the traitor to my womb and your father's loins is dead.'

He winced at her choice of words, and turned away satisfied, to finish his letter.

Snape opened his eyes and let them drift to the steamed up bathroom window. He'd almost been asleep; the warm water scented with cinnamon and orange blossom had pervaded his senses to the extent that he was nearly nodding off. He had noticed that Sirius's cleaning efforts had mainly concentrated on using his magical skills on getting the sunken bath usable, without bothering to notice that he hadn't objected much to that himself. He let his toe dig the man opposite him in the ribs.

'Open the window, Black, you have an owl,' he said lazily.

Sirius looked round. 'It's for you.'

'You can't know that,' Snape argued mildly.

'Of course I do; I'm dead.'

'Not everyone knows that yet though. Now let the owl in.'

'Why can't you do it?'

'Because I am quite comfortable here, and it may be cold out there,' Snape said reasonably, 'and you're on top.'

'Only when it suits you, I notice,' Sirius snapped and began to haul himself out of the warm water. 'You're one lazy tart. You're as bad as Lucius,' he grunted, as he flung open the window.

The owl wafted over to where Snape sat in the deep water with his hand already reaching out to her. 'Hurry up and close the window, Black. You're letting a draught in,' he said, laying the scroll on the chair beside the bath, as the owl settled on the towel rail to await a reply. He watched as Sirius began to dry himself; he was wearing a petty wronged look and seemed to have slipped into a sulk. 'Don't be like that,' Severus said with a frown. He hadn't meant to break the mood; he just hadn't wanted to get out of the bath.

'I'm not being like anything,' Sirius replied and nodded to the scroll. 'Are you going to open that?'

'When my hands are dry. What's wrong, Black? Regretting shuffling off your mortal coil already?'

'Don't get too clever, Severus,' Sirius replied. 'I'd prefer if you didn't end up like James.'

Snape nodded slowly and took the towel Sirius handed to him, reluctantly separating himself from the warm water; it really had felt very good. He sensed the pale blue eyes watching him. He didn't know what to make of Black at all, but he suspected he might be struggling to be under the same roof as Lucius, without any of the fringe benefits he might have hoped for. Whatever it was, Severus had felt the ... coolness wasn't quite the right word ... but he felt that Sirius had gone off the boil since he had arrived there, and Severus did not intend to be on the receiving end of a rejection. He knew he had backed away himself, until that very afternoon in fact, until Sirius had decided to join him in the vast marble sunken bath he had put so much effort into. The whole bathroom reminded Severus a bit of the Slytherin prefect's bathroom at Hogwarts; he had a suspicion that was what Sirius had modelled it on and wondered just which Slytherin prefect had entertained him.

He unrolled the scroll and read it quickly, stifling the little thrill of danger that he thrived on, as he stifled the regret that he had not got out of the bath to get it himself. 'Thursday,' he said. 'At Fortescue's.'

'I'm going with you,' Sirius replied.

'You can't,' Snape said, shaking his head. 'Anyway, I want you to stay with Lucius. Regulus seems to have forgotten that he wanted me to bring him along, unless he got a separate invitation.'

'You're not going on your own. I'll cast a nice Charm, perhaps a curvy blond for you for a change?'

'Black, Regulus would see under any Charm you care to cast if he had any suspicion you were yourself ... and he will be checking. The little fact of your death being reported will not completely satisfy him; he will have doubts if he is half as smart as he thinks he is. You're not going.'

'Yes,' Sirius replied, 'I am.'

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter 13 of 17

Severus meets Regulus, but finds on his return that he has to distance himself from Malfoy Manor.

Chapter Thirteen

Snape walked across from Flourish and Blotts, and made a show of walking past the tables once. He and Sirius had got there almost an hour early, and the old man and his almost as old cocker spaniel had strolled the surrounding streets for a while, moving from one Apparition point to another, the man looking for someone, whilst the golden spaniel sniffed around for the scent he found about fifteen minutes before the appointed time for the meeting. It had been useful to discover that they could even Charm Sirius's Animagus form.

Sirius had traced Regulus and Bellatrix and Barty Crouch Junior, just before the three sat down at two separate tables. He had then settled himself under a table beside two old witches, who hadn't even noticed him, as Snape dropped his Charms and approached the table where Regulus sat alone. Sirius could hear the conversation from where he lay half-under the adjacent table, stretched out as though fast asleep; he just hoped the two old witches would stay put for long enough.

'Do not bother with the preliminaries, Black,' Snape said as he sat opposite Regulus. 'I have no felicitations to offer in response. I know what the weather is like, and we have no mutual friends to ask after.'

'As you wish, Severus,' Regulus responded from below his complex Charms. 'Do I offer you condolences, at least, on the death of my brother?' he enquired, and paused to take in Snape's long hard look. 'Ah, perhaps not,' he said with what he must have assumed was a disarming smile.

'Black, I do not have all day, and I have no inclination to speculate about why your brother may have been found hanged in a Knockturn Alley brothel, with whatever ladies undergarment he had tied over his head. Kindly get to your point, or I shall take my leave.'

'Where is Harry Potter?'

Snape began to stand. 'I do not know. Goodbye.'

'Severus, wait,' Regulus said, and grabbed his sleeve. 'Sit down. I apologise. It was a quick shot to see if I could catch you off guard. Not my real reason for asking to meet you. And I apologise, too, for approaching you through Lucius.' He gave another charming smile, which could almost have been genuine. 'Now sit back down; tea is on me.'

He signalled the waiter to the table and ordered tea, and then turned the talk to his grand plan, or at least it had seemed he was about to, but Severus noticed how carefully neutral much of what he said was, as though he were waiting for Snape to pre-empt the conversation. He suspected he was waiting for something or someone else too, and Severus had a suspicion just what it was; in fact he would have been almost disappointed if he'd been wrong.

'Are we waiting for Lucius?' he enquired. 'Or have you asked me to meet you to discuss such inconsequentialities as you have done so far?'

'No,' Regulus replied with a cool smile as the waiter reached the table again, 'we're waiting for tea.'

Snape smelt it straight away, the tiny telltale hint of almond; masked as it was by the jasmine tea, it would never have been noticed by one less wary. He wondered just who the waiter was. Regulus had been more prepared than he had expected, but then again he had thought he had been cutting it fine at only arriving fifteen minutes early. Of course, he would hardly have been clumsy enough to try to slip it into Severus's tea under his nose.

He sipped carefully, as though the tea were too hot for his taste; the Veritaserum antidote he had dosed himself with before leaving the Manor only worked with very small amounts, and he couldn't afford to make a mistake now. Regulus was the one man who could get him face to face with Voldemort, and Snape had debts to pay.

'Who are you working for, Snape?' Regulus asked; his questions becoming more and more open as he assumed the Veritaserum took hold.

'I hold faith only with one man, Black.'

Regulus raised an eyebrow. 'Voldemort?'

'No, not Voldemort,' Snape replied, and narrowed his eyes slightly, as though he were puzzled by his own answer.

'Dumbledore?' Regulus asked. 'Are you working for Dumbledore after all, Severus?'

'Nor Dumbledore. I ally myself only to myself,' Snape said quietly. 'That way I am never disappointed.'

'Where is Potter?' Regulus asked.

'Dead,' Snape replied and looked away.

'I meant his son.'

'I do not know. I only saw him once when ... when Sirius brought him to Grimmauld Place,' Snape said. 'I do not know who would have him now that your brother is dead.'

Regulus seemed disappointed in his answer, but laid it aside. 'Were you having an affair with James Potter?' he said smoothly, as Snape sipped again at the tea.

Severus could feel him watching him; he could feel the two Death Eaters at the other table watching him too, as he looked down at his hands. He knew well the confusion Veritaserum caused, the surprise when one heard unintentional confidences uttering from one's own lips.

'Severus?' Regulus said softly. 'Were you having an affair with James Potter?'

'Yes,' Snape replied quietly, frowning again in bewilderment. From the corner of his eye he saw the two elderly witches begin to rise from the table under which Sirius lay; damn, he had hoped for a better fall of the dice. Black waited until their backs had turned and trotted after them; it was only then that Severus began to feel really exposed.

'I see,' Regulus responded. 'Were you working for the Order? Of course you were,' he said without giving Snape a chance to reply. 'Sirius said as much.'

Snape looked up quickly, as though in a flash of anger. 'I have never betrayed our Lord,' he said. 'Not like some I could mention.' He caught the look of relieved satisfaction, and cautioned himself not to relax too much.

'I meant no such thing,' Regulus said in a hurry. 'I only meant in your capacity as spy for Voldemort. Let us go back to the boy, Severus,' he said in an almost honeyed tone. 'Where have you taken the boy, James's boy? I know you wouldn't have let him slip through your fingers.'

Snape let the bemused frown of regret crease his brow. 'I don't know ... He had been moved when I got back to Grimmauld Place.' He shook his head slowly. 'I don't know what became of him ... I ...' he stammered as though unsure of himself.

'You what? What happened when you got to Grimmauld Place?' Regulus whispered, leaning across the table now. 'Was Dumbledore there? Was that who took the boy?'

'I don't know ... I had no one to ask,' Snape replied quietly and dropped his head. It was enough; he wanted to get away now, he had done enough, and any more may well be too much. He began to stand, aware that the two Death Eaters at the next table also made preparation to leave. 'I ... perhaps we can meet some other time, Black. I feel a headache coming on.' He almost staggered as he got to his feet.

'Of course,' Regulus said in feigned concern. 'Where are you staying? Can I accompany you home if you are unwell, at least to your door?'

'No, no, I am fine ... just a headache.' Snape began to turn away.

'I shall be in touch, Severus,' Regulus said solicitously. 'Where are you staying?'

'I have a room at Hogwarts ... it lets me keep my eye on ...' He swayed a little, and held the table as though for support. 'I shall be fine.'

He began to walk away, knowing he was being followed. It didn't matter; Sirius knew where to meet him, he would already be at Malfoy Manor.

Lucius watched the barn owl tap at the window, and let go of a breath he hadn't realised he'd been holding as he recognised it as a Hogwarts owl. He flung open the window even before Sirius could get to it, and unrolled the scroll attached to her leg.

"My Dear Lucius.

Just a brief letter to ask if perhaps we can meet next week some time to discuss your appointment to the Board of Governors. I shall be at Hogwarts all week; any day will do as well as another. Regards,

Albus Dumbledore,

Headmaster."

Had Dumbledore's message cancelled a fictitious meeting, it would have meant that there was either trouble, or that Snape had not returned.

Lucius looked to the darkening outside. He wasn't quite sure why they had retired from the comfort of the drawing room to the warmth of the kitchen, but it had seemed like a good idea. Kitchen tables were made for sitting worrying around, with their constantly boiling kettles and endless cups of tea. 'He'll probably stay the night there; you know what Dumbledore's like when he gets started,' he said, taking the advantage of Lupin bending to scold Draco for lapping out of a saucer of milk he'd just laid on the floor for the cat, to give Sirius an openly inviting look.

'I'm going to put this one to his bed,' Lupin said as he straightened.

'Yeah.' Sirius dropped his eyes from Malfoy's. 'I'll put Harry down too, in case Severus is late.'

Lucius watched them go. He doubted Severus would be back that night, but even if he were, it might not be a bad idea if he got annoyed enough with Black's nonsense to drop him; perhaps that way there was a chance for him. Lucius didn't intend to give up until he had Severus, not only where he wanted him, but under the conditions he had always wanted, and Snape had resisted so far with a resilience that bordered on insulting, but Lucius was remarkably thick-skinned where Severus was concerned.

Anyway, he was beginning to feel the odd man out in his own home. Lupin seemed content enough to float off to the delights of the girls at the Leaky Cauldron whenever the chance presented itself. The werewolf didn't seem to be looking for a serious relationship, although Lucius had noticed the pretty little witch who milked the cows and made the butter and cheese looking speculatively at him a few times. He also knew things weren't quite what they might be between Black and Severus. How could they be? What could Black possibly have to offer Severus that he didn't? It was best this way, best to nip it in the bud, so to speak, before they became too involved with one another.

Severus had been right about the uncomfortable triangle; Lucius wanted Severus, Black wanted Lucius, and Severus didn't much seem to want anybody but James. He satisfied himself that it was only sensible that at least one of them should get exactly what they wanted; it might as well be Lucius, to his way of thinking.

Sirius bent over the cot and kissed the sleepy little boy's forehead, closing his eyes for a moment as he always did when he looked at the scar, swearing as he always did that he would repay Voldemort for everything he had dealt out to Harry. He winked at the fairy whose turn it was to watch him that night, and she wiggled her bottom back at him. Cheeky little things fairies were, he thought with affection. Only once he bid Lupin goodnight and returned to his own room did he let himself think about Severus and Lucius.

He didn't know where to send his thoughts first. He had loved Lucius for so long that it was just a nagging ache now; one that he dosed every now and again with his company, even in the knowledge that it would never be anything more than a fling for Malfoy. He didn't know why he did this to himself, why he didn't just let go, and yet even as he thought it, he began to realise that he had almost done just that, almost, but not quite. The truth was Sirius was frightened to let go completely, just in case Severus wasn't there after all when he did.

For a time Sirius had hoped Severus and he would hit it off properly, unlikely as that had ever looked before a few months back, but now they were at the Manor everything had changed again. The slow climb to the point they had reached just before they left Grimmauld Place had made him feel that he had finally built something he could rely on, but now Severus had become remote again. And then he thought of Lucius again; he loved Lucius, what did it matter if he were only picking at the scraps he was thrown, he was a dog after all. He tried to put Snape out of his mind; he was safe, Dumbledore had let them know that much, and Lucius was right, it was late now, and Dumbledore would want to attempt to fatten him up at one sitting.

He found his thoughts had drifted away from Lucius of their own accord, as he smiled to himself at the thought of Severus enduring hours of Dumbledore's company with no one but Minerva to break the monotony, gritting his teeth in silent fury. Sirius decided just to go to bed and wait for him; he was glad when he made his decision. He was already regretting having thrown his little tantrum the other day, and not having just got back into the bath. It had been stupid; after all, Snape was never going to get out of the warm water when someone else was there to do it for him, it wasn't as though Sirius didn't know that. He was half-undressed when he felt the draught as the bedroom door swung open, and all of his resolve passed Lucius Malfoy in the doorway.

Snape had been very careful. He knew he was being followed, just as he knew that the outside of Hogwarts would be watched for quite a few days. As he approached the Apparition point disguised as Kingsley Shacklebolt, he noticed a man standing in the rain, pretending to be looking in the direction of Hogsmeade. It was very late; obviously Regulus's troops took their work seriously. Snape smirked to himself; he hoped it would rain all night, perhaps tomorrow too.

For a time he had thought that he wasn't going to get away from Dumbledore at all that night; he had talked him almost into a stupor. He knew if he allowed himself to be coerced into staying overnight, he would also be expected to have breakfast at Hogwarts, and he would be lucky to be home by lunchtime the next day. Anyway, although he was loath to admit it to himself, he had decided he wanted to see Black. He had meant to go to his room after Sirius's little tantrum in the bathroom, but he hadn't quite got around to it, and had settled for sitting at the kitchen table with Lucius and Lupin and Black, agreeing to let him accompany him to Florian Fortescue's.

He supposed he really should try harder, but the trick was not letting Sirius know he was. On the other hand, Black had seemed to cool somewhat when they got to the Manor, perhaps just the closeness of Lucius. Severus began to wonder if he had been imagining that, if he had just assumed something and had drawn back himself. Whoever was to blame, it was Black who had made the attempt again when he went to the bathroom two days before. Severus had tried to find a way to make what had happened Sirius's fault, but he hadn't managed. He should have just got out of the ruddy water himself, and let the ruddy owl in, and caught a ruddy head cold while he was at it ... that would have kept everyone happy, he thought sourly. He couldn't abide backing down, even to himself.

He was still thinking as he Apparated to the kitchen garden and pushed open the back door onto the almost dark kitchen, still under the guise of Kingsley; it would be another half-hour or so before the Polyjuice wore off. He made his way through to the front hallway, hardly surprised to find the house quiet and only a few wall sconces lit; everyone had gone to bed. He began to climb the stairs and found the werewolf coming down to meet him; he was all dressed up with somewhere to go. Snape laughed to himself at the thought of Lupin's nocturnal ramblings, not quite missing his concerned look. For a moment he mistook it for disquiet at seeing Kingsley at the Manor so late, but Lupin knew whose identity he had been going to take; it had been his idea, after all.

'Severus,' he said, rather more loudly than Snape would have expected. 'I thought you'd stayed at Hogwarts.'

'Apparently not,' Snape replied and began to climb the stairs past Lupin, as he realised what was worrying him. 'Am I to take it that you are not the only one who did not expect me back?' He turned on the stairs. He didn't need an answer; the werewolf's damned worried frown said it all. 'Oh, do not concern yourself, Lupin. I shall not disturb anyone else.'

Sirius thought he would be first down for breakfast; he'd left Lucius trying to untangle his hair, and he knew Lupin would be late. The old wolf had been heading for the Three Broomsticks last night; Sirius thought he had a girl waiting for him. He was surprised to see Severus already drinking coffee; it was just as well he'd gone to his own room to get showered and dressed, the timing was neater than he'd expected.

'I'd have thought Dumbledore would have at least given you breakfast, Severus,' he said with a grin as he watched Malfoy come into the dining room and sit at his customary place.

'Back early, Severus?' Lucius said with his expensive smile. 'Hogwarts's breakfasts not up to scratch these days?'

Snape had replied to neither man, and now Lupin was coming in to sit at his own place. He looked from Snape to the other two men and back at Snape. 'How did it go yesterday, Severus? What's the story?'

'I'm gratified that at least someone here wants to know just what happened. I was beginning to wonder if I had imagined leaving here at all,' Snape replied. 'It went much the way I expected it to, Lupin. Regulus waited until he thought I was under the influence of Veritaserum and began to question my allegiance. He also seems to have an altogether unhealthy interest in the whereabouts of Harry. I admit to being very concerned about that.'

'He's fine,' Sirius offered with a grin. 'I put him down last night. Have you seen him this morning?' he asked.

'Not this morning, Black, no,' Snape replied without turning to him. 'But he seemed as satisfied as everyone else in the Manor last night.'

Sirius closed his eyes, there wasn't any point in saying anything; when he opened them he caught sight of Lucius rubbing his fingers on his forehead as though he had a

headache. Severus had stood from the table and was already walking out of the dining room. Sirius didn't miss Lupin's reproachful look either, as the werewolf rose a moment later and followed him out.

Lucius found him in the walled garden. At first he thought he was talking to himself, or Alexis, and almost turned away to give him privacy, until he realised he had the little Potter boy in the crook of his arm.

'Look, Severus,' he began, 'it's nothing. We just didn't expect you back, and ...' He broke off as Snape spun to him.

'Do not feel the need to justify yourself to me, Lucius,' Snape said coolly. 'Not here. What you do under your own roof is your concern, and I can assure you it does not affect me in any way, as long as my own safety, and that of this boy, are not compromised. I care about nothing else; so do me the courtesy of sparing me your sordid little attempt at rationalising your behaviour,' he snapped as he noticed Sirius standing in the gap in the wall that led from the rest of the garden. 'I expect no more and no less from either of you.'

He crossed the walled garden to the gap, and was walking through it when Sirius grabbed his arm.

'Don't touch me, Black,' he hissed, pulling away from him. 'Don't ever touch me again.' He couldn't understand why he felt so hurt as he clutched the baby boy to him and made his way back up the path to the Manor.

'What do you mean, they've gone?' Sirius asked as he stood in alarm.

'I mean they aren't here anymore, Black. What did you think I meant?' Lucius replied, running his fingers through his mass of hair as though he'd find Snape and Harry nestling in the roots somewhere.

'Fuck,' Sirius snarled as he slammed his fist against the table. 'He'll be at Hogwarts. Surely he won't have taken Harry to that ... that place up north.'

Lupin gave the two of them a long hard look of disapproval as he stood up. 'I'm disappointed in both of you,' he said. 'That wasn't necessary, you know. There are courtesies involved in relationships if you ever want to make them last, other people's feelings count too. If you didn't want him, Sirius, you should just have told him.' He gave Black another long look, before turning it on Lucius, lacing it with accusation as though he knew just what Malfoy was up to. Lucius at least had the good grace to look down, as much of an admission of guilt as anyone would ever get from him. 'I'll get in touch with Albus to check he's there,' Lupin went on in disgust.

'I'll do it,' Lucius said.

'Let Lupin do it,' Sirius said. 'I think we might have done enough.'

It had been three weeks since Snape had moved out of the Manor, and he knew that, but for Harry, he would have sunk himself back into the despair he'd felt at Spinner's End. He couldn't even enjoy the relative oblivion drink gave him, not with the boy to watch over, and the constant possibility that he might have to go to the Manor at short notice if Regulus turned up.

He knew Lupin was concerned about that; he'd said as much when he'd been there the day before, that because Snape had to leave Hogwarts to Apparate it would take too long, that and the fact that he would have to do so under the guise of Lucius. It was uncomfortable; he should not have distanced himself in this way, but he'd had to, he owed himself that much space from Black. And yet he couldn't stop thinking about him; there was little else to take up his thoughts. Apart from one brief owl message, Regulus had gone quiet again, and it was reasonable to assume that he had contented himself with going back to keeping a weather eye on things from Grimmauld Place. Severus knew he was still there; the fairies had let him know that much. Dreadful gossips fairies were, telltales too, that was how he'd found out that Sirius had not slept with Lucius since he'd left.

Malfoy had come to Hogwarts only once since he'd left, full of what Severus thought was genuine contrition, but you never could tell with Lucius, consummate actor that he was. He'd literally begged Severus to go back, flinging every piece of emotional blackmail he could at him, using everyone from Sirius to Draco, and even accusing him of abandoning Alexis; it was at that point that Snape turned his wand on him. But Lucius had just stood there in the doorway, looking back over his shoulder with his most superior smile on his face. 'If you won't do it for anyone else, Severus, why not do it for yourself?'

He'd closed the door, leaving Severus staring at it. He couldn't do that; he couldn't back down. What if there was nothing there; what if Black weren't sleeping with Malfoy through Lucius's choice and not Sirius's ... what if whatever slender hopes he still harboured were dashed away? Perhaps that was why he'd left in the first place, just in case there was nothing left, and he could not even deny it to himself.

Severus stifled a sigh of impatience as Harry began to fret; this was another battle he was losing. He had flattered himself that he had the patience to look after a child, especially one who Dumbledore insisted he kept in his rooms in case someone at Hogwarts happened to mention his presence to someone else. Harry had become used to the freedom of crawling about Malfoy Manor with Draco; he missed the Manor, he missed the other little boy, he missed the elves shrieking after them when they upset something or hid from them ... even the fairies had become a bit glum.

He'd just picked Harry up when the diffident knock he recognised as Lupin's sounded on the door; at least Lupin took his responsibilities seriously, he thought, pretending he wasn't aiming his barb at himself. When he opened the door he was surprised to find Lupin wasn't alone. A small boy preceded the werewolf into the room; he walked five steps and fell onto his bottom with a bump and began to cry, the tears stopping miraculously when he looked up at Snape, and saw Harry struggling to be put down on the floor.

'When did he start walking?' Snape asked, trying to hide his feeling of bitterness that he had even missed this once in a lifetime event.

Lupin blinked. 'He didn't ... I mean, right now ... I just put him on the floor because he was struggling ... I thought he was going to crawl in,' he said with a silly smile of pride on his face. 'Oh dear, Lucius won't be pleased; he's been trying to explain to him how to do it for days now.'

Neither man saw the fairy on Draco's shoulder wink at the fairy that sat on the table watching Harry.

Lupin had begun to make tea. He'd come to see Severus every couple of days, never trying to talk him into going back, always alone, with the exception of the time he had stayed upstairs when he'd accompanied Lucius. He just updated Snape with the fact that nothing much was happening. Lucius had received an owl from Regulus asking about his current status with Dumbledore, and suggesting again that he try to find out where Harry was, but he had not made any attempt to meet him, and Severus suspected he was biding his time. Snape had dictated the reply to Lupin when he'd called that afternoon, and nothing had been heard of him since.

'It should be safe enough now, Severus,' Lupin said as he passed Snape a mug of dark bitter tea, and patted his pockets down for his cigarettes.

'What should?'

'Well, you've covered the fact that you've got rooms here; you've been around for long enough for it to have looked like a permanent arrangement to anyone who was watching,' Lupin replied. 'It's not unreasonable for you to have just moved on again; it wouldn't be suspicious.'

Snape knew what he was doing; he could see the carrot, the little lure wrapped in a parcel of common sense. He had given him a way out; he hoped he had the balls to take it. 'It might spur Regulus into trying to find me again,' he said with a frown.

'Don't try to kid me that's not what you want.'

'What's not?' Severus asked, more defensively than he would have hoped.

'You want Regulus to crawl back out of the woodwork,' Lupin replied. 'I know you do. You're fed up with nothing happening ... just look how moody you're becoming.'

'I beg your pardon?' Snape retorted. 'I am not moody.'

Lupin laughed. 'Anyway, the boys miss one another.' He looked across the room to where Harry and Draco were taking turns at eating scraps from the breakfast that Harry hadn't wanted earlier; they had tipped it out of the bowl first, and were on all fours, dropping their heads to eat it off the floor like two small puppies. 'Lucius and Sirius think that you've come here to verify what you told Regulus. You don't have any backing down to do, Severus,' Lupin said quietly. 'I know that's worrying you.'

Snape found himself nodding reluctantly. He had valued Lupin's company this past three weeks, his undemanding candour, his way of not looking as though he were skirting the very issues he was avoiding. 'I don't know, Lupin. I don't know if I can do that to myself again.'

'He's not James, Severus. He doesn't have anyone else, and no one else has a claim on him,' Lupin replied. 'You know it was all Lucius's doing anyway. He ... well, you know what he's like; if he can't get what he wants by fair means, he doesn't mind getting it by foul ... and Sirius was just weak enough to be taken in by him.'

'I know that,' Snape admitted.

'It would probably be easier if we both went back at the same time. We'd Apparate separately of course, but I'd meet you outside. We could go to the Apparition point in the grove, instead of the kitchen garden. It would be easy, Severus, I promise.'

'You've got it all worked out, haven't you?'

Lupin nodded. 'I gave the two of them another real tongue-lashing to prepare the way last night; in fact I'm surprised Lucius hasn't thrown me out. I accused them of not even bothering to find out how you were getting on, when you'd taken the step of placing yourself in such isolation for so long for their benefit.'

Snape said nothing.

'I told them to make sure they dredged up a little interest when you came back today. I told Sirius you were furious that he hadn't even bothered to write to you. I must admit he looked a bit surprised, before the worry took over. But anything was better than the way he's moped about for the last three weeks.'

'Well done, werewolf,' Snape said dryly. 'You have quite worn me down. But you did cheat.' He looked across to where Draco had stood unsurely, putting one hand to a chair to steady himself and holding the other one to Harry.

'Of course I did. It's not only foxes who're wily; wolves can have their moments too.'

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter 14 of 17

Regulus pays a visit to Malfoy Manor, and Severus discovers some truths he would rather not have known.

Chapter Fourteen

Lucius seemed to have opted for staying out of the way, and Sirius found himself alone in the kitchen, wondering sourly for a moment why it was that everyone chased around after Snape, dragging him back when he got the slightest bit offended. He was running through yet another rehearsal when he heard the last sound he expected to hear coming from the garden, the sound of laughter, two men laughing, punctuated by baby-like screeches of delight. Damn, Sirius swore to himself; he wasn't ready yet. He hadn't practiced enough; he hadn't practiced this at all.

He watched the door open on Snape and Lupin, but neither of the men even glanced at him; their attention was riveted on the boy who walked beside Lupin, holding his hand, and the other little boy who walked between the two men. Harry was holding one of Lupin's hands and one of Severus's; his bare feet hardly touched the ground, until he was whisked into the air, shrieking in laughter, only to be let back down to take another few supported steps. From behind him Sirius could hear the stirring of elves, as they scuttled to the back door to greet the boys, fussing and laughing in a way that made Sirius feel as though he were watching a party to which he hadn't been invited.

'When did they begin walking?' he asked, hoping to drag himself into the fun.

Snape seemed to notice he was there at last. 'If you had got off your arse at any time over the last three weeks you would know that for yourself.'

'Yeah, well, I didn't think I should leave here,' Sirius replied, avoiding his eyes. 'Anyway, I thought I was supposed to be dead.'

'You could have written,' Severus snapped back at him. 'Unless your arm was broken too.' He looked behind Sirius to where Lucius had decided to come into the kitchen after all. 'And what's your excuse?'

'I don't have one, Severus, as you well know,' Malfoy replied. 'That aside, I'm glad you're home; it has been difficult being here without you.' He gave Lupin and Sirius a sweeping glance before turning his attention to Draco. 'I missed him walking; damn, I seem always to be second these days.'

Sirius had bent down to pick Harry up, but the boy had fussed and tugged away, grabbing a fistful of Snape's trousers instead, hauling himself unsteadily to his feet, shouting something that might have been, 'Up, up,' in his baby voice.

'I didn't know he could speak,' Sirius whispered.

'He couldn't, not English at any rate,' Snape replied dryly. 'I confess I had not known quite what his first language was going to be until now; it certainly wasn't one I was familiar with.' He made to hand the boy to Sirius as though in some sort of gesture of peace, but Harry struggled. 'Perhaps you should let him get used to you again, Black. Three weeks is a long time in a little boy's life.'

'Yeah,' Sirius replied, 'it was a long time in mine too.' He turned away and sat at the table; there was a lot more mending to be done than he'd hoped for.

'Snape left Hogwarts this afternoon,' Bellatrix reported to Regulus as they both shed their cloaks.

'Really?' Regulus replied, feigning only the mildest interest. He was finding it damned inconvenient to go outside and wait for every ruddy visitor, and then wait for Kreacher to come back outside and invite him in. Once he was sure the bloody elf had deliberately left him standing cooling his heels on the pavement. He'd like to wring the neck of whatever idiot had set such a restrictive Charm on the house, and yet he hesitated to leave; there was something about Grimmauld Place that made him feel it held more secrets than it had disclosed to him thus far. 'Do we have any idea where he went?' he asked, looking first to where Barty had slouched lazily at the end of the table, and then to his cousin.

Bellatrix shook her head and her raven hair tossed on her shoulders. Her crowning glory had been shorn in Azkaban, but the careful Charms she had cast about herself preserved the woman she had been before she went, and hid the ravaged hag she had reduced herself to in her fury of capture. 'Does it really matter, Regulus?' she asked. 'Are we not better to keep this in the family? What do you need with that sullen ugly pauper of a half-blood?'

'Why don't you let me be the judge of that?' he snapped. 'Anyway, more important than Snape's wanderings, have you found out what I wanted you to find out?'

'No, no one seems to know where he is.'

'Damn.'

'I don't know what you're worried about a baby for,' Bellatrix retorted. 'I mean he's hardly going to be able to cast a simple repairing spell by the time ...' She trailed off as though in some sort of indiscretion.

'By the time what, Bella?' Regulus asked as he sat down, glancing round in distaste at the horrible kitchen. He had to get away from this dump, untold secrets or not. He hated it here; it wasn't a fitting place for one such as he.

'By the time you're ready to do whatever it is you're going to do,' she replied, not at all put out.

'He managed to put Voldemort out of action, which is more than any of you lot had the balls to try,' Regulus replied flatly.

'Yourself included, cousin.'

'Just watch your mouth, Bella,' Regulus snapped. 'I want that boy found.' He didn't add that if he were anywhere near Snape or Dumbledore it wouldn't take either of them too long to recognise that he held Voldemort's magic. In fact it was only because he was still a babe in arms that they did not know already.

'We are trying, Regulus,' Bellatrix replied with a hard look of her own, nodding to where Barty still sat at the end of the table watching the two of them, as Kreacher handed round mugs of tea. She looked at the grey liquid the elf had given her; it seemed to have an unwholesome looking scum on the top of it. 'Do you really have to stay in this house?' she asked, wrinkling her nose.

'No, actually, I'm just thinking about moving,' he replied with a smile as he reached for the blank parchment that sat at the far side of the table.

They had staggered through the evening meal. Severus knew it was up to him to unburden the atmosphere a little; he just had to try to drop the cutting edge from everything he said to either Black or Lucius ... just, it was a tall order. He could see Black was becoming moody and withdrawn; he could hardly blame him. He was everyone's whipping boy; every time he as much as opened his mouth someone jumped down his throat, and Severus was mildly impressed that he hadn't stormed out yet. Lupin was obviously getting fed up playing referee, and Lucius had become more and more testy and challenging. No one ate much, except Lucius, which was a pity; for once the elves hadn't overcooked the lamb.

Snape roused himself from his thoughts as he realised Black had spoken to him and he hadn't a damn clue what he'd said. 'What?' he asked with a frown he just knew would be read as a scowl; he'd try to do better next time.

'I said, do you want some more wine?' Sirius replied through gritted teeth.

'Yes, the red,' Snape nodded in reply and watched Black blink back the retort he had been ready to throw; he had a funny feeling he was just on the point of losing his temper. He thought it quite amazing the change that came over Sirius; he seemed to relax and drop the bristling defences he'd put up around himself as he bent over Snape's shoulder to fill his glass from the new bottle he'd had to get from the dresser. Severus tried to ignore the thrill of the deliberate bodily contact. He felt quite magnanimous; it must have been a rush of blood to the head, along with the other places it had rushed to without his permission. He thought he'd try it out on Lucius too. 'Why is everyone in such foul moods?' he asked. 'I'm beginning to wish I had stayed another few days at Hogwarts.'

'I'm not in a mood,' Sirius replied as he sat back down, without offering his services as a wine waiter to anyone else despite the fact that Lucius held out the glass he had drained in anticipation.

'I'm not in a mood either,' Lucius added, with a brave attempt at his expensive smile, which fell rather short of its mark.

'Neither am I,' Lupin said, his own slow smile acknowledging he knew just what Severus was up to turning to a frown as he looked to the window to where an owl tapped for entry. 'Oh damn,' he swore mildly, 'what's this?'

Severus kept his smirk to himself. He suspected that Regulus had just got word that he'd left Hogwarts; he'd asked Andromeda to give him a head start before she informed on him to her sister. Regulus would be writing to him to ask where he was staying now; perhaps he was going to offer him a bed at Grimmauld Place. He stood up and crossed to the window and let the owl in, surprised when she flew to Lucius.

"My Dear Lucius,

I shall be staying slightly longer in England than I had anticipated as I, indeed we, still have some unfinished business. I would be grateful if you would be so kind as to have two guest rooms prepared in the manor, one for myself and one for your recently returned sister-in-law. We shall arrive tomorrow evening in time for dinner, and I look forward to catching up then and enjoying some of your legendary hospitality.

Regulus Black."

'You just had to start with him, didn't you?' Lucius accused; he'd gone a horrible colour. 'You had to get Andromeda to let that bitch Bella know you were moving. I've got enough damn Blacks here without Bella and Regulus coming too. Do something about it, Severus.' He'd stood up and was waving the offending scroll in Snape's face; there was nothing like a little crisis to get things back to normal.

"My Dear Regulus,

Thank you for your letter, although I confess to being somewhat surprised at your request. As you are well aware I do not see eye to eye with my sister-in-law, and there

are few people on earth I would be less inclined to share the manor with than her. Unfortunately, there is also the fact that I'm afraid you're too late again. Only this afternoon I agreed to let Severus stay here for a while; he seems to be homeless again. I confess I am rather concerned for his welfare; he has become quite the vagabond of late, and what with Lupin staying here too, I feel, in the interests of your own safety, you should perhaps take up whatever other generous offers you have been made.

I remain yours,

Lucius Malfoy."

Regulus stifled his fury; it would not do to be seen to have been thwarted again, or indeed snubbed, as the letter indicated, not in front of Bellatrix, not when she had Rabastan and Rodolphus with her. He wondered two things for now; the first was how owls managed to find him when he couldn't even find the house himself without Kreacher's help, although he suspected that answer lay within the owls themselves, the other was just what Bellatrix was doing here so early. He wished her owl hadn't managed through; it would have been much more satisfying to learn that the vicious harpy was standing in a London street for hours on end waiting for Kreacher to come for her. Of course, he could have left her there and pretended, but he needed information. He was beginning to regret having told the world at large, and Lucius in particular, that he was dead, and it had not escaped his notice that no one had seen fit to retract that; perhaps it was time for a resurrection.

'Lucius Malfoy is becoming somewhat too clever for his handmade shoes,' he murmured, half in invitation for her comment.

'Maybe not,' Rodolphus said when Bellatrix had nothing more to offer than a twist of her lips. 'His security leaves quite a lot to be desired, for one thing.'

'How so?' Regulus asked. 'He never leaves the Manor without Lupin. It's really quite touching.'

'Lupin teaches at his music school,' Rodolphus scoffed. 'He was there alone when Bella and I visited yesterday to look it over for our 'nephew'.'

'Have you got all the opening times now?' Regulus asked.

'Yes, it would be no problem to go to the Manor and deal with Malfoy while Lupin is involved with his kiddies.'

'Deal with Lucius? With Severus Snape on the premises? He would blast you and whomever you took with you to particles of dust without using his wand.' Regulus gave him a pitying look and waved the scroll at him. 'Anyway, you cretin, I need Lucius just now, not that I would expect you to understand.'

Regulus stood up and tapped the scroll across his hand. He had played a very close game so far; none of the others really knew the pivotal part Lucius Malfoy played in his plans. If he could just get the Potter boy somewhere under his own watchful eye he could go back to his long-term ambitions, away from this place, somewhere he could concentrate on sorting out the jumbled thoughts he was struggling with.

It had all been so neat and almost clinical before the waters had been muddied by the Potter boy being moved; all Regulus had really had to do was sit back like a grand master of a chess game while Lucius Malfoy moved the pieces that mattered within his control. He couldn't deny that Malfoy appeared to be doing a decent job with Dumbledore; Andromeda had told him that Lucius had been approved to join the Board of Governors of Hogwarts next year, that was a very nice stepping stone to other things. Regulus smiled to himself, wondering how much it had cost the supercilious prick.

Now he needed to see Snape again; he needed to begin to bring him closer to him, but he dared not underestimate him, he was a tricky one to deal with. At least he was comfortable with the fact that Snape's allegiance still lay with Voldemort; however he had tried to convey that he was answerable to no one but himself. Regulus had seen his loyalty to the Dark Lord for himself, under the influence of Veritaserum; even Severus Snape couldn't resist spilling his secrets under that. He contented himself that it was time to begin to bring Snape into his plans and his confidence; the dark snake would understand better than anyone else the importance of getting Voldemort's magic back from the boy, Regulus just hoped he would know how to.

He was going to write to him, tonight when he had the leisure and was alone; then again, perhaps the personal approach was better. He would wait a couple of days and let him settle in and go to see him; it would be better this time, now that he could dispense with the worry of whose side Snape was on.

'Regulus is here, Severus. He's asking to see you,' Lupin said as he pushed the door open on the interlinked charmed rooms that Snape and Sirius had almost finished getting into some sort of order. Work on them had miraculously begun again when Snape returned from Hogwarts to find that Sirius had done nothing much at all to them in his absence. 'He seems to be alone,' he added.

'Where's Lucius?' Snape asked as he donned his black frock coat, before turning to the fairies who sat at the corners of the huge wooden playpen he had given the boys to play in to keep them out of their feet. The fairies listened carefully, their little black eyes watching him and then watching the two boys, as they nodded their understanding.

'He's upstairs. It's all right, he knows Regulus is here,' Lupin replied as he followed Snape from the charmed room, leaving Sirius casting an envious frown after them. 'We'll come back down here once I know you've got Regulus occupied.'

They passed through one ruined room, which Andromeda had enchanted to make it look as though its dust hadn't been disturbed for years, even the roof was partly open to the elements in the far corner, before opening a door onto the main east corridor in the hallway just beside the dining room. Of course, the door could not be seen from the corridor side, and if it could have been one would have assumed it led into the dining room; it could hardly have led anywhere else. Lupin left Snape in the corridor and headed upstairs.

Severus cautioned himself to maintain a balance. He needed to get Regulus to confide in him; he needed to move forward again. He needed to find the rest of Voldemort and destroy it before it had the opportunity to grow to full malignancy like the cancer it was.

'Regulus.' He nodded coolly, ignoring the proffered hand and sitting stiffly opposite him on the most uncomfortable chair in the whole Manor. 'To what do I owe the pleasure?' he asked, managing to make it sound like a mortal insult as he warned himself again not to be any more standoffish.

Regulus dropped his hand to his side without losing composure, and settled back into his seat. 'I felt it was time for another chat, Severus,' he said. 'We seemed not to move forward last time.'

'And have you laced all of the cups in the Manor with Veritaserum on the off chance that I offer you tea?' Snape asked. 'Not that I am going to.'

'Come, come, Severus,' Regulus replied disarmingly. 'One has to be sure where the allegiance of those one intends to take into one's confidence lie. We are both men of the world.'

Men of the world indeed, Severus snorted to himself in derision at the audacity of the man. 'I shall give you, let us say, half an hour to present your case to me. After that I have reading to do and it will take something very interesting to keep me from it,' he said, sitting back as best he could in the straight chair.

He listened carefully at first to Regulus, then found himself almost losing track of what he said as the fascination of identifying the times when Regulus was speaking and the times he seemed to be mouthing Voldemort's ideals took over; he suspected Regulus did not even realise what was happening to himself. Once he began talking about Harry, Severus became much more attentive to his meticulously prepared manifesto, as Regulus confirmed to him what he already knew, that he had managed to preserve Voldemort's awareness within himself.

'What has any of this to do with me, Black?' Severus asked.

'It is not his awareness I need you for, Severus,' Regulus replied, 'it is his magic.'

'I don't understand,' Snape admitted. 'You must know where his remains are. Why not take his magic the same way you took his mind?'

'His magic isn't in his remains,' Regulus said and held Snape's eyes for a brief troubled moment. 'It is inside Harry Potter.'

'I see,' Severus said quietly, as he finally realised the danger Harry was in. Without Voldemort's magic, Regulus Black was just another tyrant standing on a soapbox made of sand. 'I had wondered at your desire to know where the boy was. Have you found him yet?'

'No, but he will not stay lost for long,' Regulus replied. 'I'm sure Dumbledore will know where he is, and the people I have in Hogwarts are in his trust.'

'Perhaps he has gone back to wherever he was before your brother moved him?' Snape asked, pleased to see that remark seemed to lull Regulus further into a sense of security that Snape had not known who had taken the boy from his aunt's house.

'No,' Regulus replied. 'Vernon Dursley would have told me if he had him back.'

It took Severus enormous effort not to freeze at Dursley's name as it rushed through his head, threatening to poison his mind as it went. 'Dursley?' he managed to ask. 'Who is that?'

'The boy's uncle. He's a Muggle, the husband of Lily Evans's sister,' Regulus replied. 'He is unimportant.'

Severus felt the little push on his mind, the telltale sign that Voldemort had seen something that Regulus hadn't. He carefully shut his own mind down, smoothing the edges to make sure they could not get picked away. 'What would you have me do? If you do not have the boy, how am I supposed to find him? I am not in Dumbledore's confidence any more than you are.'

'But Lucius is,' Regulus replied. 'And the werewolf probably. Anyway, that is not your problem, Severus; I shall find the boy. My reason for coming here was really to bring you up to speed on what no one else knows.'

'Why?' Severus asked, and once again he felt Voldemort trying to gauge him.

'I need to know you're in this, Severus,' Regulus replied and this time it was Severus who pushed his own mind to try to find Regulus's.

It was a mess, a turmoil of doubts and confidence and fear and foolhardiness, all competing with one another for supremacy. Snape decided to play the card he had hoped he could use, the one that would trump Regulus without him being aware that he was handing the control of part of his game to another. 'You want me to help you push him back into his place, Regulus, don't you?' he asked with his version of smile. 'You're afraid he's gaining control of you and you need my help to keep him in check. Quite apart from that is the fact that you have not got the first idea of how to take the magic from the Potter boy, when we find him, and metamorphose with it. How am I doing so far?'

It was the first time Snape had seen Regulus look unsure of himself since James Potter had died, but he recovered quickly. 'Very good, Snape. Now, are you in?'

'I have a question of my own first,' Severus replied. 'How did you manage the first transmutation? I mean, how did you actually go about taking his mind?'

'I didn't. The Dark Lord used the last drop of magic he had doing it himself,' Regulus replied. 'He didn't even leave enough to control me. Such a pity,' he said tragically.

Snape smiled thinly again. He wanted to finish this now; he had a lot to think about and none of it was good. He stood up from the straight-backed chair with some relief. 'Very well, Black,' he said. 'Let me know when you find the boy, and if I'm still around I'll have a look at what I can do.'

'And that's it?' Regulus asked, standing too.

'Oh, no. You have not given me time to think of my own terms and conditions,' he said. 'But do not worry; I shall get around to it.'

'One other thing, Snape,' Regulus said. 'Perhaps it may be wise to keep Lucius in the dark for the time being. Just in case he accidentally lets something slip to Dumbledore; he's not the brightest star in the firmament.'

That made Severus angry for some reason he couldn't think of; he turned it back to Regulus. 'Perhaps you should be more careful of whom you recruit in that case,' he said coolly; it would have to do, it was the best he could think of. 'How do I get in touch with you? Where are you staying?'

'In Grimmauld Place,' Regulus replied, watching for his reaction.

'That dump?' Snape didn't bother to disappoint him. He looked pointedly round the lavish but elegantly faded luxury of Lucius's drawing room with a superior smirk on his face that he knew would annoy Regulus. 'How on earth did you get under Dumbledore's Charm?' he asked. 'I confess to being impressed.'

'It was magic,' Regulus replied, smiling in what he must have assumed was supremacy at last.

Snape watched him, wondering why he didn't just kill him there and then, but his revenge would somehow feel incomplete, and he needed to check that what he had said about Harry was true. If he killed Regulus now and it was not, he knew he would never find Voldemort.

'Where is the rest of him, Black?' he asked.

'Quite safe, I assure you.'

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter 15 of 17

Severus pays a visit, and Regulus makes a discovery.

Chapter Fifteen

Dumbledore had just left, not before cautioning them all, collectively and individually, about watching themselves and one another and the two boys. He was sceptical of the fact that Voldemort had used all of whatever power he had left to invade Regulus Black; he agreed though that whatever other part of him remained would be very weak, but given time that power would strengthen to a degree again. He concurred with Snape that it was of the utmost importance to find where Voldemort was. There was no point in killing Regulus just to find that someone else replaced him.

He had finally admitted openly that he had suspected that Harry held the magic, or most of it at any rate; he had felt the boy's power when he first saw him at Godric's Hollow, when it was raw and new and confused and hadn't hidden itself away. Sirius understood now why Dumbledore had avoided Harry; it was in case Voldemort realised he would see just whose power the boy held, in case the awareness and the magic could somehow communicate with one another. Sirius thought that was fanciful, but he preferred the Headmaster's caution, where Harry was concerned at any rate. He was glad when Lupin asked the question he knew neither he nor Snape wanted to ask, but Dumbledore just shook his head and said that magic could not be good or evil in itself; it was only the mind that wielded it that made it so.

Sirius had expected Severus to react strongly to having been kept in the dark, but he seemed preoccupied with something else; not quite worried, it was more as though he were suppressing some type of rage. Sirius wondered if he was the cause; his expectations of himself were on the low side just then. He watched Lucius and Lupin leave the Charm, and turned to where Snape sat at the table in the room they had made into their living room on the few occasions they weren't in the main house. He grinned to himself at the thought of Severus's never-ending complaints about the dust, and the fact that the furnishings seemed to be nothing much more than old packing crates; considering where he had been brought up, his taste had become a little picky.

'Are you going to tell me what it is?' he asked, as he lit a cigarette and squinted through the smoke.

'It's nothing, Black,' Snape replied doubtfully, shaking his head as though he had just realised Sirius had noticed he was troubled.

'Is it about Harry?'

'No.'

'Look, Severus, I didn't explain what happened with Lucius ...' Sirius trailed off as he caught Snape's look of puzzlement.

'Forget it; it has nothing to do with any bedroom antics you and Lucius see fit to get up to. That is your business,' he said without rancour. 'Anyway, I am fully aware that a dog has little control when presented with a bitch in heat, like Lucius tends to be.'

'We don't get up to bedroom antics,' Sirius snapped back. 'One lousy mistake, that was all. And it was lousy, come to think of it,' he added. 'Have I to pay for it for the rest of my life?'

'You were the one who brought it up.'

'What's wrong, Severus?' Sirius asked again. 'We've got enough problems I know about, without you starting to keep secrets too.' He watched uneasily as Snape seemed to deflate before his eyes. He slumped down in his seat, and dropped his head to his hands in what looked to Sirius ominously like despair. He let him sit that way for a few moments, before grinding out his cigarette and rising from his own seat to move to the back of Severus's, putting his hands on the rigid shoulders. 'I think you had better tell me what else has happened,' he said quietly. 'Whatever it is; it's easier shared.'

Severus lifted his head and nodded. 'What do you know of the people Harry stayed with before he came to us?' he asked.

'Us', Sirius like the word "us"; he liked the inclusiveness, the meaning that there were two halves of whatever whole it made up, and that he was one half and Severus was the other. 'Nothing really,' he said. 'Just that the woman was Lily's sister, and that was why Dumbledore wanted him left there, for the blood protection. I didn't know anything at all about the man until you told us what Regulus said.'

Severus nodded slowly again. 'Can you get me the address?'

'How can I get it? I can't even leave here.'

'Maybe when Andromeda comes she could get it from Albus?' Snape suggested. 'I don't want it to have come from me.'

'Why?' Sirius asked. 'What's wrong?'

'I need to know,' Snape said, and hesitated for a moment as though trying to decide whether he should confide in Sirius. 'And I don't want Dumbledore to find out what I'm thinking ... in case he already knows.' He shook his head as though his own thoughts confused him. 'Although I doubt that; I doubt he could know.'

'Know what?' Sirius asked in exasperation, looking down on the black hair, wishing he had stayed facing him, but knowing Severus would prefer the less obvious scrutiny.

'Do you recall what I told you about the night Alexis died?'

'Of course I do,' Sirius replied, even more puzzled as the conversation took a turn he neither expected nor cared for. He squeezed the shoulders a tiny bit in an unconscious gesture of comfort. 'What's this about, Severus?'

'I found out later that the man who raped me, the stranger, was actually a cousin of my father's, quite a bit younger than my father was, but quite a bit older than me, maybe halfway between. I hadn't known him until then, and I never saw him again until my father's funeral; that was how I found out,' Severus said, turning in his seat to face Sirius, 'and I've never seen him since.'

'No, Severus,' Sirius said, hearing the pleading tone in his own voice. 'Tell me I'm not thinking where you're going here.'

'I think you are,' Snape replied, holding his eyes. 'His name was Vernon Dursley too.'

Sirius looked away; he hoped Snape would continue to forget that he knew exactly where the Dursleys lived. He'd sat outside the house often enough as Padfoot to know how many bricks were in the garden wall.

It was two days later when the golden Labrador and the tall slim grey-haired man walked down Privet Drive, from the high-numbered end, the dog stopping at every second lamppost for the man to scan the houses for where they all had little numbers in different places: some on their gates, some on their doors, and yet others tacked onto the side of the buildings; Sirius didn't know why they weren't all in the same place. He knew Snape had only started at the wrong end in case they were being watched; this way they would look like the strangers they pretended to be. He stopped outside number four and cocked his leg obligingly at the gatepost as Severus looked at the house.

Andromeda's husband had given them a few typically Muggle names to ask for, so as not to arouse any suspicion, and Sirius had talked himself hoarse trying to convince Severus not to do anything untoward to the man, until after they had dealt with Regulus. Snape had promised that all he was going to do was to establish if in fact this Vernon Dursley were the same one as he remembered. Sirius felt the tug at the lead as Severus clipped up the neatly slabbed pathway and knocked on the door.

A curtain twitched, and the front step flooded with artificial light, startling them both momentarily, as someone threw a switch inside the house; it was followed by the rattle of a chain being put in place, and the sound of a key being turned.

'Who is it?' a wheezing voice said from the crack in the door that the security chain had allowed to appear. It was the kind of voice that comes from a very fat man who has had to get up off a chair and walk a few reluctant steps.

'I am John Spencer,' Snape said. 'I am looking for Richard Graham; I was told he lived here.'

'You've got the wrong house,' the fat man said, seemingly at ease enough with Snape's bland appearance to slip the chain and open the door properly. 'This is number four, the better end, you know.'

'Sorry,' Snape replied. 'I apologise for disturbing you. I have been given the wrong information. I was quite clearly told number four, Privet Close.'

'Ah, well, that's it you see,' the man said importantly. 'This is Privet Drive.'

'Is that not the same thing?' Snape asked.

'Of course it's not,' the man retorted. 'The drives are the best parts. The avenues and closes, well, between you and me, they're the cheaper end. Hey, watch that dog of yours; I don't want it pissing on my roses.'

Sirius wished Snape would just walk away now. He knew he was only dragging this out for one of two reasons; either he wasn't sure about the man, or he was definitely the same man and Severus was struggling to come to terms with leaving him alive. He tugged at the leash in an effort to spur him on. As Snape began to turn Sirius caught the look on his face; even below his Charms, and in the half-light of the outside lamp, he could see he was white with fury and something else he didn't like. Sirius moved forward a bit until he was almost at the man's feet, and lifted his leg against the front step, pissing over the maroon leather carpet slippers Petunia Dursley had given her husband for his birthday; his only regret was that he couldn't reach the roses too. He doubted he'd be able to pee again for a week.

'All quiet?' Sirius asked as he ambled into the drawing room, to where Lupin was sitting at the table playing poker with himself, and Malfoy was stretched out lazily the length of the settee in front of the fire, half-dozing like a lethargic cat.

Lucius looked up as though he'd been disturbed from some fantasy Sirius didn't want to contemplate. 'Where were you?' he asked. 'Where's Severus?'

'We just had something to do,' Sirius replied. He'd made sure everything was secure before they'd left, made sure Lupin knew not to answer the door, and that Lucius himself instructed his elves to say he was not at home if anyone called. Regulus had not been refused entry before now; it would not look suspicious once in a while.

'And the other bit?' Lucius enquired as he dragged himself upright. 'Where's Severus?'

'In his room.' Sirius made to leave them to it; it was late by then.

'What's going on, Sirius?' Lupin asked. There was something wary in his voice that Sirius knew he had to set at rest; it would not do for either Lupin or Lucius to think there was agenda floating about to which they were not party.

'Will you accept that it was something personal, and that it has nothing at all to do with Regulus, or Voldemort or the Death Eaters?' he asked.

'Yes, of course, sorry,' Lupin replied as though slightly abashed. 'I didn't mean to pry.' He gave a little laugh of what Sirius recognised as relief. 'I suppose we all assume that the world revolves round Regulus Black just now; it's quite rewarding to find that's not the case.'

Sirius winked at him; it helped him avoid Lucius's sharp look of interest. He didn't know what Lucius knew of this, if anything; if Severus wanted to tell him, that was up to him.

Severus listened to the door closing next to the room he slept in, in the main part of the house. There was no need to use the charmed rooms during the night; they were there as safe bolt holes if they were needed, but at night the two little boys and Sirius and Snape all slept in the main part of the Manor. For a few moments he thought Sirius had gone along to his own room; he couldn't really think why he should expect anything else. They had reached yet another hiatus in their intimacy, and Snape couldn't think how to restart it. He was sure Black would come up with something if he felt so inclined; he hoped he'd get a move on.

He'd just decided that Sirius wasn't coming when he heard the same door open and close again. A few moments later he was rewarded with the light from the sconce outside his room illuminating the familiar silhouette.

'Are you asleep?'

'Not now, I'm not,' Snape replied.

Black was still standing in the doorway; surely he wasn't waiting for an invitation he wasn't going to get, surely he knew Snape better than that.

'Can I come in?' he asked hesitantly.

'I rather thought you already had.'

'You're determined to make this as difficult as you can, aren't you?' Sirius asked as he closed the door, so that only the one candle at the bedside now lighted the room. He crossed to sit on the bed, throwing off his boots and socks, tossing the latter across the room in the way he knew Severus loathed.

'Yes,' Snape replied, 'and pick up your socks. You have some disgusting habits.'

'You'd better believe I do,' Sirius replied with a somewhat reduced version of his Gryffindor grin. 'Want to see some of them?'

'How much is it going to cost me?'

'We can talk figures later,' Sirius replied. 'Maybe once I mellow you up a bit.'

'You'll have to be really good,' Severus said dryly. 'Right now I wouldn't part with two Knuts.'

Sirius had managed to get out of the rest of his clothes, most of which had joined the socks. 'You haven't got two Knuts, Severus Snape,' he said as he slid under the covers. 'I know you anyway; you're just angling for a freebie.'

'Don't use up too much energy, Black; you still have a lot of cleaning to do tomorrow.'

'You know something, Severus?' Sirius asked. 'Your pillow talk leaves much to be desired.'

It was late when Snape awoke the next morning; the sun had already begun to move away from the window. Sirius had seemed to take no heed of his warning not to use too much energy, Severus smirked to himself, as he nudged him where he lay with his mouth half-open, and his leg across Severus's like a fallen tree trunk.

'Get cleaning, shitebag,' Sirius muttered.

'I beg your pardon?'

'Oh,' Sirius grunted, sitting upright in confusion, 'sorry, I was dreaming ... about the fucking elf. It had come to clean the rooms.'

'Please don't explain,' Snape said dryly, wincing as the blood flowed back into his leg.

It was quite early when Bellatrix and the Lestrangle brothers arrived to report to Regulus that they had nothing to report. He hoped they didn't think they were going to hang about Grimmauld Place all day; he had things to think about, and he wanted to be alone to do so. It took much more concentration nowadays to think things through clearly, and Regulus knew why that was.

He was glad he'd brought Snape on board. Perhaps he could talk him into leaving the Manor and coming to stay at Grimmauld Place; it would be good to have some decent company, half-blooded though it was. Apart from that, if they went out, Regulus wouldn't have to stand in the rain waiting for Kreacher to hear his summons with the two deaf ears he seemed to have developed when it suited him.

In a way he was relieved that Snape had recognised what he had been denying to himself, the one thing that had begun to alarm him, almost frighten him: that he was losing control of his own mind to Voldemort. He knew Snape was Legilimens, knew he'd read it from him, and yet he didn't mind that. He'd call on Severus again in another couple of days, and put it to him that he should move back here; whatever it took, he would convince him to come here, and then he wouldn't feel so vulnerable. Snape would know what to do about Voldemort; he had almost said as much. Regulus sat back in satisfaction. That would put Bella and the Lestrangle brothers back in their places; no one would try to undermine him when Severus was here.

Bellatrix had just handed him a cup of coffee when he happened to glance at Kreacher. The elf was standing with his mouth open, nodding; he had an insincere grin on his face.

'Yes, Master, Kreacher is cleaning hard for you,' he said and scuttled away to get a dirty mop from beside the sink. He rubbed it over the floor enthusiastically enough to push the grime into the corners, on top of the years of grime that already lay there.

'What are you doing, Kreacher?' Regulus asked.

'Cleaning, Young Master,' the elf replied.

'It doesn't look much like it,' Bella replied with her lip turned in distaste.

'Shut your mouth, Bella; I am not speaking to you,' Regulus said without glancing at her. 'Who told you to clean, Kreacher?' he asked softly.

'The master tells Kreacher to get cleaning, and Kreacher must obey, Young Master.'

'The master is dead, Kreacher,' Regulus said, trying to quell the ominous feeling in the pit of his stomach. 'Isn't he?'

'Kreacher must clean when his master says,' the elf wailed. 'He told Kreacher my poor mistress is dead too.'

He was going to let it pass; the elf obviously hadn't a clue which Blacks were dead and which Blacks weren't, Regulus only knew how far down the pecking order he still seemed to be. He stood up instead and went into the hall, drawing a deep breath.

'Mother,' he said, and waited until Mrs Black focussed her adoring gaze on him. 'Is Sirius dead?'

'Of course the treacherous scum is dead. He must have been a changeling, soiling my womb, and come to soil this Noble House too. Did you think I would lie to you?'

'When did Sirius die, Mother?' Regulus asked, aware that both Bella and Rodolphus were watching from the doorway.

'The day he joined Gryffindor of course,' she replied.

He felt the rush of fury; he had been tricked, tricked again. He knew Malfoy was behind this; it smelt of his double-dealing. He wondered if Snape knew.

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter 16 of 17

Lucius makes a mistake, and Regulus makes a move.

Chapter Sixteen

It started like an ordinary day, as ordinary as any of their days had been there at the Manor. Lucius held court in his inimitable fashion at the top of the table, nodding to Lupin every now and again to back up his more ludicrous remarks, quite ignoring the fact that Lupin in turn ignored him and continued trying to feed Draco. Sirius and Severus bitched with one another about everything from Sirius's renewed lack of enthusiasm for finishing the cleaning of the charmed rooms, to whether it would rain later or not. Harry helped the bickering along with the odd little sounds that Sirius insisted were words, and Severus maintained were merely grunts that Sirius must have taught him to indicate that he wanted food.

Lupin stood up first, depositing Draco on the floor to scuttle away to where Snape had put Harry down too. 'I'm heading into Hogsmeade for cigarettes before my music class today,' he said. 'Anyone want anything?'

Nobody wanted anything, and the werewolf left the dining room, whistling tunelessly. Snape stood up next, and Sirius had a sinking feeling that he was going to insist that the cleaning be finished; he wasn't disappointed.

'Don't think you're going to be malingering the day away, Black,' he said over his shoulder as he left the room. 'You have ten minutes to finish that coffee you only poured

so that you could waste another hour.'

Sirius made a face at his back and picked up the coffee cup to nurse it. He noticed Lucius was watching Snape's disappearing back. Malfoy waited until he heard the door close on the corridor door to the charmed rooms before he spoke.

'What was yesterday all about?' he asked.

'I think you should ask Severus that,' Sirius replied. 'It's not my place to tell you his business.'

Lucius nodded uneasily. 'I was just wondering if it had anything to do with Vernon Dursley.'

'I don't know what you mean.' Sirius didn't want to talk about this behind Snape's back.

'Suit yourself, Black.'

'Look, Lucius, I don't know what, if anything, you know of Severus's business, and I will not discuss it with you. You'll just have to accept that.'

Malfoy nodded again. 'Of course, you're quite right. It's just ... don't let him do anything stupid. We've got enough on our plates right now.'

'I won't. I promise.' He was going to leave it there, but something was worrying him; it was worrying Malfoy too. 'How much do you know, Lucius?' he asked.

'Very little,' Malfoy admitted. 'But I do know that Vernon Dursley was a cousin of Severus's father. Dumbledore told me that a while ago when he ... when he asked me whether I thought Severus would accept looking after Harry.'

Sirius masked his surprise that Dumbledore had asked Lucius's opinion on Harry's future. 'Why would he say that?' he asked instead. What he really meant was, "How would he know that?", but he supposed Dumbledore would have checked the family out, particularly for magical connections before he left Harry there. Sirius could see Lucius was struggling, but he was loath to say any more.

'I'm not sure, Black, but for some reason it was one of the reservations he had about where Harry was, one of the reasons he wanted him moved.'

'I don't think either of us know any more than the other; let's leave it there,' Sirius suggested.

'You're going to tell Severus I asked, aren't you?' Lucius asked.

'Yeah, I reckon I will.'

'Don't let him do anything stupid,' Lucius repeated.

'Why would you think he's going to do something stupid?'

Lucius looked to the door as though to check Snape wasn't standing eavesdropping. 'I'm going to tell you something in confidence, and I expect you to keep it that way,' he said quietly. 'Dumbledore had the Dursleys thoroughly checked; that was how he found out about the relationship. What he didn't know, what in fact I only found out this morning, was that Vernon Dursley almost went to Muggle prison for raping a fourteen-year-old boy in a public toilet. In fact, he only got off when the plaintiff, whose mother just happened to buy an expensive new car the week later, dropped the case. Now ... I don't know if those facts have any bearing on Severus or not, and I'm not asking you to break any confidences between you and him ...' He hesitated as though searching for the right words. 'I think that Severus may have been abused at home, and I ... Damnit, Black, I'm just worried his past is coming to haunt him when he needs it least.'

'Trust me, Lucius,' Sirius replied. 'I'll look out for him; I swear I will.' He stopped for a moment as something occurred to him. 'How did you find out about Dursley being charged with rape?'

'There's very little I can't find out.' Lucius tapped the side of his nose with a manicured finger. 'Remember I do business in the Muggle world too.' He took a letter from his pocket and laid it on the table. 'When I saw Severus's reaction to Regulus's mentioning Dursley the other day, I had my Muggle lawyer do a little Muggle checking, the kind Dumbledore doesn't have at his fingertips.'

'I'll look out for him,' Sirius repeated.

Lupin wished they'd hurry up; he was hungry. It was the third time the Roundtrees had come to see the school, and once again they hadn't even brought the nephew for whom they wanted a space. Lupin had almost begun to wonder if the nephew existed, or if the couple had some weird fetish about musical instruments.

Mrs Roundtree picked up one of the small flutes. For just a moment Lupin thought she was going to play it, just for a moment though, until his sense of danger kicked in as he realised they were playing for time. He had his hand casually in his trouser pocket anyway, his wand pocket, wartime habits died hard, and he felt its reassuring length.

'Look, Mrs Roundtree,' he began, and watched her lookup sharply; he knew this wasn't good. 'Can we finish off now? Only I have other things to do.'

Mr Roundtree was between Lupin and the door; he wasn't doing much, if Lupin didn't count standing what looked suspiciously like guard. 'What's the hurry, Lupin?' he asked. 'You'll be quick enough to take our Galleons, so you can spend a little time with us here.'

'I don't think I much want your Galleons, Roundtree,' Lupin replied, 'but then I was never getting them anyway, was I?' He drew his wand, but he knew he was no match for them, not for three of them, as another man materialised from outside, a man who wasn't in disguise. Lupin was sure Barty Crouch Junior didn't have a nephew for the music school either.

Lucius dusted the imaginary flecks from his black doublet for effect, just in case anyone asked him to do anything, not that they would be inclined to waste their breath. 'Are you going to be much longer?' he asked. 'Only, Lupin will be back by now.'

'He means he's hungry,' Sirius translated, as the last of a swathe of black velvet left the end of Snape's wand to drape the window.

'Why don't you make yourself useful, Lucius, if you're bored?' Snape asked. 'It would help to take your mind off food. We shall not be much longer.'

'I'm not that bored,' Malfoy replied. 'I doubt that I ever shall be. It's very bad form for a man in my position to gain a reputation for manual labour.'

'You're perfect, Lucius,' Snape said dryly.

'I know,' Malfoy replied with his expansive smile, and left them to it.

Malfoy made his way to the drawing room, wondering what was keeping Lupin; he wasn't usually as late as this, and it had been a good half-hour since Lucius had heard the infernal din the children made when they left. He seemed to remember Lupin had mentioned something about parents coming to look the place over again; Merlin alone knew why, he couldn't possibly take any more kids just now. He found he had meandered into the kitchen to where the elves were beginning to take lunch through to the dining room. It looked good, he thought, as he filched an Orkney crab claw from one of the plates.

He opened the back door and stepped outside, squinting through the still leafless fruit trees, which separated the kitchen garden from the rest of the gardens and the outhouses, to see if he could see Lupin's familiar figure slouching his way up the gravel path with a cigarette hanging out of his mouth. It was a lovely day, sparkling late winter sun just beginning to hint of spring; he'd walk down and hurry him up.

The pain was so intense when it hit him that Lucius thought he'd had a seizure. He remembered his grandfather falling to the ground in agony one day of what had later been described as a spasm of the heart; Lucius doubted that, Grandfather Malfoy hadn't had one of those. And then he was kicked over onto his back, and found himself looking up at Regulus Black's wand.

'Careless, careless, Lucius,' Regulus said with a smile like a hungry shark. 'But then you never were one of the world's thinkers.' He held out his hand and began to haul Lucius to his feet. 'You and I are going to have a little chat.'

Lucius waited until he was almost upright, and Regulus was slightly off balance from pulling him up, before he lunged himself forward, knocking the wand from Regulus's hand as he groped for his own. He would have managed too, even through the pain; he would have managed to gain control if Barty Crouch had kept his nose out of it.

There was no point in accusations. It was everyone's fault: Lupin's fault for being late, and for not realising that there was something suspicious about a couple coming three times to view his school without a child; Sirius and Severus's fault for not keeping their eye on Lucius when Lupin was at the school; Lucius's fault for ignoring the one rule he had not to break; but Severus knew he should have killed Regulus Black ... he'd had enough chances.

'And don't start that crap,' Sirius snarled at Snape as Minerva handed Lupin a painkilling potion. 'This isn't your fault.'

'Enough,' Dumbledore raised his hands. 'Every one of us is to blame, including Lucius himself. He knew not to leave the house alone, and yet he did.'

They had already been to Grimmauld Place, but no one was there, and Kreacher told Sirius that Regulus had not been back since he had gone out in the morning. Snape had stood over him as Sirius issued the elf with very explicit instructions about calling him if anyone tried to come to Grimmauld Place. Lucius was not included under the Nominatum Perpetuum Charm, so Kreacher was the only one able to allow any of Regulus's band access. Severus had listened as Sirius questioned the elf with a skill he would hardly have credited him with, dragging out the fact that Regulus had gone into a mindless fury when Kreacher obeyed Sirius's dreamlike order to get cleaning.

Snape had watched Sirius close his eyes in realisation of just what had happened to let loose the chain reaction that ended with Lucius being taken prisoner, and admired his tenacity again as he stood and squared his shoulders under the burden of his guilt. He didn't fool Severus though; he knew how he'd feel about that, and he knew better than to offer any platitudes.

They had been to Godric's Hollow too, but it seemed deserted; it didn't look as though the ruins had been disturbed at all. They were at a loss, and Dumbledore's comment that Regulus would have taken Lucius in an attempt to get his hands on Harry did little to quell anyone's anxiety. There wasn't much they could do but wait for his demands, and worry, and steep themselves in guilt that they had only had one thing to do at the Manor, and they had failed in that.

Even expecting the owl, and longing for it to appear, didn't lessen the shock of its arrival. Snape got to it first; it was heading for him anyway.

"Severus.

I am sure you are already aware that I have seen fit to take Lucius Malfoy prisoner. You may let my brother know that Malfoy will be released unharmed when I have Harry Potter delivered to me.

I am making the assumption that you know that Sirius is still alive; if you do not, it is well that you do, and if you do know, I shall be interested to know why you kept that fact from me.

Whatever the case may be, I feel that if we are to maintain any sort of trust in one another that you leave Malfoy Manor and come to me. I shall tell you where in due course.

Regulus Black."

Snape laid the scroll aside and tried to think. He couldn't recall if they had mentioned Sirius at their last meeting; he knew they had made a few references to him at Florian Fortescue's, but he thought he could brush that off if he had to.

'What are you thinking?' Lupin asked as Minerva left his side to attend to the two little boys; they had sensed the tense atmosphere and had become fractious and clinging.

'I'm thinking of where they have taken him, Lupin,' Snape replied. 'I have an idea; not one which I like very much, and for that very reason it is a possibility.'

Dumbledore looked up. 'Where, Severus?' he asked.

'Spinner's End,' Snape said quietly. 'He knows the house is empty.'

'Why do you think that?'

Snape looked round at the old man as though he'd asked him what colour of socks he was wearing. 'Have you a better idea?'

'I have no ideas, Severus. However, I want to know every last thing you are planning. I want to know that every "t" is crossed and "i" is dotted before you leave here,' Dumbledore cautioned. 'I will not allow any of you to risk your necks on a wild goose chase.' He was interrupted by the arrival of Andromeda.

'Has something happened?' she asked. 'I got a strange message from Bellatrix, telling me not to visit Grimmauld Place just now as no one would be there. She also asked me to keep her informed if the Headmaster left the castle.' She trailed off as she took in the sombre faces. 'What's happened?'

Snape watched over Andromeda's shoulder as she wrote her message to her sister in her long flowing hand. He had to keep bearing in mind that it was not only Regulus who would have this relayed to him. He had to be careful; fooling Regulus was one thing, fooling Voldemort was quite another, and he certainly did not intend to compromise Andromeda's safety.

Andromeda signed her name at the bottom of the parchment and handed it to Dumbledore. The old man read it, clearly unhappy, but just as clearly grudgingly accepting. At length he nodded and turned to Sirius's cousin.

'I will only agree to this if you bring your family within the walls of Hogwarts until we have dealt with the danger, Andromeda,' he said. 'Remember this, we do not know if Kreacher told Regulus that you were one of those who cast the Charm on Grimmauld Place; that being the case, we do not know if your own cover is secure.'

'I doubt Ted could get the time off work, Dumbledore. I don't think his customers would appreciate being told they can't get milk because his witch wife says a wizard might come and get him.'

'In that case, I will not allow this,' he said, unmoved by her attempt at levity.

'Very well,' she said, slightly abashed. 'Ted will understand. He'll make arrangements. Let us just hope it's not for too long.'

Dumbledore nodded gravely and turned to where Snape had sat at the table. 'And now, Severus, you have a letter to write too, and do not think for one moment that you're going to be sending it until I have analysed every word of it.'

'I was thinking of delivering my lines in person,' Snape replied.

Vernon Dursley looked up at the window from where he sat, quite petrified to do anything more than squeak his occasional objection to being held a prisoner in his own home. No one had called, which was hardly surprising. The decent people in this neighbourhood were going about their lawful business at this time of day; that was why he had paid so much for the house, so he could surround himself with decency. Vernon hadn't bothered to wonder how Petunia was faring since the black-haired woman had taken her away, but he hoped Dudders was all right; Vernon knew all about prioritising, and right then his priority was his own skin.

He glanced across to where a man lay in a tangle of strange black clothes. He had ridiculously long, pale yellow hair; it must have been bleached by some poof hairdresser ... he was another one of them. The world was full of them; something should be done about it. Vernon intended to have a strong word with his local Member of Parliament once he got out of this. The blond man hadn't moved since Black and another two men had dragged him in and let him lie where he fell; Vernon thought he might be dead. He hoped not, not from any sense of compassion, but it would be one less thing to explain if it ever got down to it.

He looked at the window again, wondering if he should tell the stony-faced Black that a ruddy owl was hopping up and down on the window ledge; he knew it must be for them, respectable owls didn't come out through the day. Mind you, neither should bogeymen, but they did, and he had a feeling that Regulus Black was about as bogey as they came. He made a noise to attract attention, halfway between a cough and a squeal, and as Regulus turned to him he nodded to the window, to where the owl blinked her eyes. She looked like a large feathered cat; Vernon wouldn't have been surprised if she was.

He watched Regulus try to take a piece of rolled up paper from the owl's leg, but the bird bit him. 'Get Bella,' Black hissed, and stuck his finger in his mouth.

The woman with the black hair came into the room a minute later; she took the paper from the owl and began to read, with Black looking over her shoulder. He seemed to relax just a fraction as he read. Vernon thought it must be good news; that was fine by him, he would like Black to have all the good news he wished for, as long as he was out of his bloody life forever. He wondered if it would be appropriate to ask to use the toilet; his bladder was reminding him of the extra two cups of tea he had had, and the fact that he wasn't getting any younger. One glance from Black told him to hold on as long as he could.

'It's from Andromeda,' Black said to the other man in the room, a thin-faced, even younger man, with brown hair and slightly mad-looking eyes. 'Dumbledore's left Hogwarts; he had a bundle with him.'

'The boy?' the other man asked.

'Perhaps,' Black said, and Vernon could see he said so with some degree of satisfaction.

He watched Black stoop down to the prone blond man and grasp a handful of his hair. 'You must be very important to him, Lucius,' he said, as Vernon watched the eyelids flutter. 'Even now they are rallying to your cause. I can hardly wait.' He dropped the handful of hair, and the man's head fell to the floor again with a soft thud, causing him to groan.

At least he was alive, Vernon thought. He noticed that Black seemed to think the groan indicated consciousness too, and he stooped again. 'Tell me, Lucius, while you're awake, as I know you are... is Severus Snape in Dumbledore's confidence too?'

Vernon whimpered, as he felt a squirt of urine leave his body at the mention of the last name he ever wanted to hear again. It was just a little spurt, he was sure it wouldn't be noticed; maybe it would take the pressure off the rest, he thought, as he felt the wet patch on his outsize white cotton underpants begin to cool.

Lucius tried to think through the pounding pain in his temples, whether it was better to feign unconsciousness for longer, or if he would have a better chance if he knew where he was and something of what was going on, but the only thing he seemed to be able to think about was how furious Severus was going to be that he'd moved out of the Manor alone. He hoped Lupin was all right; Sirius and Severus could look after themselves, but ... he hoped Lupin was safe.

He'd heard Regulus tell Bellatrix to write to Andromeda. He couldn't think what that meant, and he was about to try puzzling that through again when he felt someone stooping to him, felt the tug on his hair. He almost smiled to himself; he would have if it hadn't been so fucking unfunny. He'd had so many years of practice, with Severus or Sirius or someone else pulling his hair during heated bedroom games, that he had learnt not to wince, learnt that it could happen when he was blindfolded or hooded, or even just semi-conscious as he was then, and that the worst thing to do was wince. He allowed himself a tiny groan, as his head hit the floor again, not that it had been terribly far away.

Lucius had been expecting the question. Whatever had caused Regulus to make his move must have been important, and yet he was relieved that Severus's cover seemed not to be blown; he didn't intend to be the one to expose him. Lucius knew he had to make this good; he hoped he had the balls.

'I don't know,' he said quietly, pleased to find his voice sounded tired, but not laced with the dread he felt.

'Tell me, Lucius,' Regulus asked, grabbing another handful of hair and pulling his head up. 'Why should I trust a man who did not even have the courtesy to let me know that my one brother was still alive?'

He hadn't expected that one; it shocked him, but obviously denial was pointless, feigned ignorance might not be though. 'Sirius is dead, Black.'

'The elf seems to think not,' Regulus replied.

'I don't understand.' Lucius slurred his words as much as he dared. 'I know he's dead ... I paid for him to be killed ... it was in the paper, for fuck sake. Where am I?' he asked. 'What's going on?'

He felt Regulus drag him upright, and found he didn't have to fake almost blacking out with the pain in his head; it was all he could do to keep it attached to his shoulders for the time being. Black seemed to recognise the fact and let him sit for a few moments to compose himself. That told Lucius that Regulus wasn't sure; that was good. If he weren't sure, he needed him alive; if he weren't sure that Sirius was alive, he also wasn't sure if Lucius had double-crossed him. He let his eyes open reluctantly, and frowned; he had never been in such a strange room in his life. He recognised it as Muggle; he had enough dealing with the Muggle world to see that much, but the confusion of sugary-pink and peach and pale green made him feel almost sick. 'Where am I?' he asked in genuine confusion.

Sirius and Severus had just arrived back from Spinner's End with Kingsley, disappointed and dispirited, when Andromeda's owl returned to the Manor after its side trip to where its mistress was at Hogwarts. Andromeda had only taken a few moments to frown at her sister's return message, before resealing it and addressing it to Dumbledore. She wasn't sure what it meant, but she was sure the others would find some meaning.

It took Severus all his time not to tear it out of Dumbledore's hands, especially as he saw the nod that meant the Headmaster had gleaned something of value. He was shocked to see the tiny tremor in his own hand as he reached for it.

"Dear Andromeda,

Thanks for the information. If anything should come to your ears regarding our late unlamented cousin, Sirius, who seems not to be as late as we had been led to believe, please write straight to Regulus. Between you and me, sister, he was bit put out when your owl bit him.

You can't come to us just now; we're in hiding for the time being until we get the boy in a swap for Lucius. Suffice it to say we're very safe, even though it's only a handful of useless males here, we're not even in the magical world as such ..."

Snape let the letter drop from his fingers, and turned to Black; he didn't need to read any more. He only realised his mouth was open when he felt it snap shut. 'The stupid arrogant bitch,' he said in triumph, as he realised Black had added two to two and come to four as well.

'Wait,' Dumbledore said firmly. 'You will stay here until I get more men here.' He'd stood up again to emphasis his point.

'What's happening?' Lupin said, jumping to his feet too. 'Tell me, someone.'

'Severus and Sirius seem to think that Regulus is staying where Harry was sent when James and Lily died. Am I correct in my assumption?' Dumbledore asked as he looked over his glasses at them, waiting for Sirius's nod. 'I have to agree. And where Regulus and Bellatrix are, Lucius is also likely to be.'

He bent over the table and composed a short letter, suggesting that Andromeda ask Bellatrix if they needed any more Death Eaters, or if they had enough men with them, in an attempt to find out just how many they were dealing with. A couple of hours at the very most for the owl post would not make much difference; nothing worse should happen to Lucius by waiting such a short time, and another indiscretion on Bellatrix's part could make all the difference to a successful outcome.

He watched the owl fly off to Hogwarts; Andromeda wouldn't take long, she was as anxious as anyone else. He reminded himself to recommend her for the Order of Merlin once this was over; she had played a dangerous and vital part in this, and soldiers tended to forget those who prepared their way by pulling strings this way and that. It was the way of the front men, the ones who did the bleeding if it all went wrong.

Dumbledore turned as Sirius pulled on his Muggle leather jacket and began to cast Charms about himself. Instead of speaking, he removed his wand from his dusty silk robes and pointed it at the younger man; it was a much more effective way of getting his attention.

'We were just going to watch the house for a few minutes,' Sirius said lamely.

'I would prefer not to deal with you or Severus by magical means, Sirius.' Dumbledore turned to look behind him to where Lupin had begun to get to his feet again. 'And you too, Remus. But be assured that I shall, if you make any attempt to leave here without my approval.'

'It's from Andromeda again,' Regulus said with a frown. At least this one was addressed to himself, he thought, as he gave the owl a superior look he suspected was wasted on it. He scanned the message quickly and paused, tapping his teeth with his index finger.

He looked to where Lucius sat with his head bowed; a thin trickle of blood ran from his mouth, and one of his hands lay in his lap, without its manicured fingernails. He had been a far tougher nut to crack than Regulus would have given him credit for. He had a sneaking suspicion that Lucius had been telling him the truth; in fact he would have suspected so a while back, were it not for the constant interference of Voldemort insisting he was lying. He would flatter Lucius back into his confidence, and together they would seek out the Potter boy, and put this unpleasantness behind them. If Sirius wanted to play at being dead, he could do so; it was a silly restrictive game as Regulus had found out to his own cost. He would just give Lucius one more try, just to be on the safe side.

'Bella, write back to Andromeda and tell her we have enough men here. Tell her where we are, and ask her to bring me some Veritaserum; there must be some at Hogwarts,' he said and sat down on the floor beside Lucius; he might as well make begin to make amends now. 'Lucius, it isn't for you,' he lied. 'I believe you. Rest now for a while.'

He looked across to where Dursley sat whimpering to himself. He would never understand Muggles. Why on earth the fat idiot had seen fit to sit in a pool of his own piss, instead of asking to go to the toilet, was quite beyond him. There was one thing for sure; they certainly weren't fit to mix with decent pure-bloods. The sooner he got out of this awful house the better. Regulus wished he'd gone to Spinner's End; at least it was empty.

It was almost another hour before there was a knock on the front door, a sharp short rap of the kind an impatient man would make. Regulus pulled the curtain aside and almost gasped in satisfaction; Andromeda was standing on the doorstep, and Severus Snape was with her.

'Barty, come with me,' he snapped to where Crouch was dozing on a fireside chair; the knock hadn't even roused the lazy dog turd. 'Do nothing, unless I tell you.'

Regulus went into the hall, drew his wand and opened the front door. 'Well, well, well,' he said. 'The mountain has come to Mohammed at last.'

'Indeed,' Snape replied dryly. 'Kindly do not point that thing at me unless you intend to use it. And may I suggest that you do not. You and I have much to discuss, Black, and that is laying aside the insults contained in your last missive, which be assured I shall return to. Where's Lucius? Is he here? Or was the Veritaserum for me again? Only I have quite gone off it.'

Regulus nodded him in, knowing he would not have missed the fact that both he and Barty still had their wands on him and his smart mouth. He nodded to Andromeda next, and took the package she handed him.

'Do you want me to stay, Regulus?' she asked.

'If you like,' he replied absently, and stood back to let her pass, without taking his eyes from Snape.

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter 17 of 17

It's the little things that count, as Severus, Sirius and Lupin find to their cost.

Severus let himself look at Lucius for just the briefest moment, enough to satisfy himself that he held his head with pride, just as Severus had expected him too; he wasn't a Malfoy for nothing. He hadn't let them down, and Severus could have asked for no more. He carefully ignored the fat man sitting on the settee; it would not do to look at side issues just now. He turned at last to where he knew the two men's wands pointed at his back.

'What is all this nonsense about your brother, Black?' he asked. 'Andromeda seems to know no more than I.' He read the confusion before Regulus opened his mouth. It was becoming worse, and Snape recognised how dangerous that was; he dared not let Regulus know too early that he was a cornered rat, for now he had to let everyone get into place.

'Let us leave my brother out of this, Severus,' Regulus suggested.

'Let us go somewhere private to talk,' Snape countered. He heard Dursley whimper as Regulus mentioned his name, but he didn't take time to enjoy the grim satisfaction of that. 'I have a great deal I would like to clarify.' He nodded to where Lucius seemed to sit more upright, as though he were ready to spring to his feet; he suspected his injuries were superficial.

'Let us just stay here,' Regulus said. He fingered the flask that Andromeda had given him. 'Perhaps you could fetch me some water, Barty,' he said, 'if you're not too tired, that is.'

Regulus worked open the glass stopper as Crouch stamped off, and sniffed the hint of almond, the telltale sign of Veritaserum, which was hardly surprising as it was almond essence from Hogwarts's kitchens. He measured four drops from the flask into the water Barty brought back for him. 'Cover Snape,' he said to Andromeda and Crouch, as he dropped to Lucius's side, holding his wand to Malfoy's face until he drained the glass.

He waited for a few moments before he started. 'What is your name?'

'Lucius Augustus Malfoy,' Lucius replied with a frown.

'Are you a Death Eater?'

'Not now.'

'Is my brother alive?'

'No.'

'Is Severus working for Dumbledore?'

'Not that I know of. But Severus is right there; why don't you ask him?'

Regulus grasped a handful of the mane of white-blond hair, streaked as it was by a little blood. 'I am asking the questions, Lucius. All you need to do is answer.'

Snape could hear the rustle of Andromeda's robe at his side; he felt the shift of position when Regulus grasped Lucius's hair. He hoped there wasn't going to be a rash action, not now, not now that they were almost ready to make a break for it.

'Now, where does Severus's allegiance lie?' Regulus tugged the hair, and Lucius closed his eyes briefly. 'Or so help me but I'll pull every last stand of this out by the roots.' He tugged viciously again to demonstrate his point.

Above him Snape heard a muffled thud; someone had become messy. He looked towards the ceiling. 'Do you have company?' he asked mildly.

'Andromeda, go upstairs and see everything's quiet up there,' Regulus ordered, distracted from Lucius for a moment. 'And, you, keep your smart mouth closed for now, Snape.'

'Shall I go too?' Barty asked.

'No, you cretin, what is the point of everyone being upstairs, and me being down here on my own?'

He was losing the place; Severus could see that. One moment he was Voldemort and the next what was left of Regulus Black: just a confused mess, a stupid vain pup who'd gone into the long grass to have a piss with the big dogs, and found he'd got lost. Snape had had one kind fall of the dice with Andromeda being asked to leave the room; it shouldn't be long now, just a few more minutes until the Polyjuice completed its cycle. He knew the kitchen was secure; he'd seen the door swing a tiny bit, just after Barty had got Regulus's water. They'd even anticipated that. Kingsley had not to break in until he had seen someone get water for the Veritaserum, and if that didn't happen he had not to assume anything, but wait for a signal.

Sturgis Podmore and Lupin and Barney Finnegan should have secured upstairs; as far as they could tell there was only Bellatrix and the two Lestrage brothers at the most, and the Dursley woman. In fact Severus had only forgotten one thing, one tiny miscalculation; but that was all it ever took ... just one thing to be out of place in a house of cards, for the whole lot to come tumbling down.

Lucius caught his eye for a moment, and Severus let the corner of his mouth twitch in approval, just to let him know he knew he had held firm for them, to let him know it was nearly over and give him an extra bit of strength to see it through, as he heard footsteps on the stairs. He felt his wand in his hand; softly, softly, nearly there. Regulus was on the point of standing, hauling Lucius to his feet, and Barty was watching them as Sirius and Lupin came silently into the room.

'Watch out, Black,' Vernon Dursley squeaked from the settee as Snape raised his wand. But Barty had turned at Dursley's warning and blocked his aim, and his Cruciatus Curse shot off Crouch instead of Regulus, as he heard the words, and the world stopped for just a moment.

'AVADA KEDAVRA.'

He could still see them, through the reddish mist that had descended on his vision: Regulus's wand hand slowly dropping to his side, the remains of the green light seeming to follow the tip like a reluctant halo, the shock on the faces.

He wanted to tell them things, things he had always wanted to say, but had never taken the time nor found the words. He wanted to tell them not to blame themselves, and that it had been his own fault; he should have known better, he had known better. He wanted to tell them to look after one another, to be kinder than they ever needed to be, because everyone was fighting some sort of battle. He wanted to tell Lupin not to look across the room that way, that it was all right, and that he could handle this in his own way. But he hadn't the time to say everything he needed to say, and now he couldn't seem to concentrate to regret all the time he had wasted.

And he needed to concentrate now, on the tightrope he had walked for so long, but he seemed to be faltering, losing his balance, his feet slipping from below him. It was a long, long fall; but then again, it didn't really matter anymore ... Lucius Malfoy was already dead.

It was carnage after that; a slaughter that left no one alive in the house except for Sirius, Severus and Lupin downstairs, and Finnegan hauling the blubbing Vernon upstairs to sit with his wife and son, once he had freed him from the stranglehold that Snape had on his fat throat, and Kingsley patrolling outside and Sturgis Apparating for Dumbledore.

Lupin alone of the three downstairs had killed no one; he had dived to Lucius's side, mindless of his own safety, and still sat on the floor with Malfoy's head on his lap, as inconsolable as he would be for many days to come.

Sirius stood against the wall, shaking all over in shock and remorse, and Merlin alone knew what other emotions. He had shed Andromeda's robe to the tight trousers and sweater he had worn below them, before he had come back down the stairs, before what happened, when everything was different and Lucius was still alive. He couldn't take it in. He looked across to where Snape sat with his head in his hands in the seat Barty Crouch had dozed in. Sirius wondered if this were how Severus had felt when James had died; he supposed so. He wondered how he had ever managed to think again, walk or talk or eat or sleep, far less begin to put his life back together. Lucius was dead, and Sirius just couldn't grasp it.

He heard the door and braced himself for the fury; it didn't matter anyway. Nothing mattered now; Lucius was dead, and nothing would bring him back, not even Dumbledore's wrath.

It was worse than Dumbledore had feared. The dead bodies didn't matter, except for one, of course; they didn't matter any more than the dead bodies of any other mortal enemy. And he would deal with the Ministry; this would not be a problem. There would be no trials; he knew that. It was the living who worried Dumbledore. There was not a scratch on any of them, except for what Lupin had got earlier from Bellatrix and Rabastan, but he shuddered at their deeper wounds.

He crossed the room to Lupin first; he was going to give him his hand to help him to his feet, but he did not feel like letting Lucius Malfoy's head lie on the ground. He creaked down to sit with him instead, nodding across the room to where Sirius stood at the opposite wall and Snape sat on the chair.

'Sirius, Severus,' he said quietly, quite unable to stifle the passion in his voice. 'I want you to come and sit with us, with Remus and Lucius and me. What has happened here today has hurt you all very, very deeply. Do not think for a moment that I cannot feel the pain in this room.'

He watched Sirius look away; he knew his emotions had got the better of him, perhaps that was no bad thing. 'Sirius,' he said softly. 'Do not turn away from me, boy. Please, Sirius, let an old man at least try to offer what comfort he has.'

Kingsley came back into the room and called over to where the four men sat on the floor against the wall, with Lucius's head still on Lupin's lap. 'The squad is here, Dumbledore,' he said softly, avoiding looking at any of the others in some kind of respect for their grief. He nodded to where Regulus's body lay next to Barty Crouch's. 'We'll just move them away in two seconds, and then clean up upstairs.'

Dumbledore nodded his thanks.

'Andromeda's here, too,' Kingsley went on. 'She'd like to come in. Is that okay?'

'Yes, of course it is,' Dumbledore replied.

The clean-up squad moved the two bodies quickly and silently and left the room. Andromeda passed them on their second trip as they dragged Barty Crouch out; her face was tear-streaked, and white with shock and sorrow. Dumbledore moved up a little towards Lupin so that she could squeeze in between Severus and Sirius. Women were so much better at grief than men were; they had no awkwardness, they were not bound by stilted convention, they could touch and cry and say words of nothing that could mean so much.

Dumbledore wondered at this painful peace they had endured when they had thought Voldemort fled, and at the toll the death of this most complex of men had taken on the lives in this room. He knew Sirius had loved Lucius Malfoy since he had been a schoolboy, and of course, he had felt the emotion coming from Lucius himself when he had told him of how Severus had brought his brother's body to his care; he knew how deeply Severus must have cared for Lucius and trusted him to do that. And then there was Lupin, a newer different kind of love, but one just as profound; one that had surprised Dumbledore when he had recognised it on his visits to the Manor. And yet the only thing that mattered just now was that Lucius Malfoy was dead, and they had all let it happen.

It had been building up steadily during the week since Lucius's death, Lucius's cold-blooded murder, Severus snarled to himself, and something had to give. He found no peace, no outlet for his rage. He had to get away from there for a while, away from Lupin's desolation, from Black's still stunned shock, even from the two little boys who had automatically turned to him, mistakenly recognising him as being the only one of the three men capable of offering them the attention little boys needed.

Severus left the drawing room, taking Draco and Harry with him; neither of the other two even watched him go. He took them to the charmed room they had made to protect them from Regulus, and found he was joined by the fairies. He had to stifle his emotion as they ran up his arms and nestled in neck. He could feel them nuzzling their sympathy, and found himself struggling to maintain his outward calm, as it threatened to fray at the edges and spill his outrage and pain and guilt, until there was nothing left of him.

How many times was he to suffer the knowledge that he had failed to protect the one he loved? Alexis, James ... and now Lucius. How many more would die because Severus Snape could not protect them? He did not hear the fairies take the little boys and place them in the playpen, or remember when it became dark, or notice that he had not eaten for two days. He was so steeped in despondency that he did not even realise someone else had come into the room, until he felt the hands on his shoulders, and came so near to letting the flood barrier break that he shuddered with the effort of holding it back.

'We'll go now,' Black said into his hair from behind his seat, in that way he had of knowing Severus did not like to be watched when he felt the way he felt then: vulnerable, at a loss as to where to turn, how to move from today to whatever tomorrow there was. 'Lupin is asleep, but he knows where we're going. And the fairies will watch the boys,' he added.

Snape felt himself nod, angry with himself. He had not had the grace to offer Black any comfort, and he knew he should have. Sirius's loss was greater perhaps than his own was, and he was the one to make amends first ... as he always had been. 'Black ...' he began, but he just didn't know how to go on.

'It's all right, Severus,' Sirius said and squeezed his shoulders, just a tiny increase of pressure. 'Just let's go one step at a time. We've something to do, you and I, a door to close.'

It was only half an hour later that they Apparated to Surrey. This time Severus wasn't in disguise, nor was Sirius; they had no need to hide.

'Shall we knock?' Sirius asked. 'Or perhaps we should just show ourselves in?'

'Ever the maverick, Black,' Snape replied, with his hand poised to rap the door. 'I'm sure we shall have to revert to your way of doing things soon enough.'

'What are we actually going to do, Severus? Just so I know; we forgot to discuss it.'

'You would not have listened anyway,' Snape said dryly, admitting to himself that he felt better somehow already. He let his hand fall on the door.

There was the same twitch of the curtain and flood of light on the doorstep, but this time no one came to the door. In fact nothing happened, until a few minutes later they saw a blue flashing light, and a Muggle motor vehicle emitting a horrendous noise.

'Apparate now,' Sirius hissed. 'Diagon Alley, see you there.'

'We've checked the grounds, Mr Dursley, and asked the neighbours. Nobody saw anything. There aren't even wet footprints on the doorstep, and it's pouring.' The policeman scratched his head under his cap. 'Not much more we can do, I'm afraid.'

'They were there, I tell you,' Vernon hissed, his face purple with rage and fear and ominously high blood pressure. 'Weren't they, Petunia?'

'I didn't actually see them,' she simpered to the younger of the two officers. 'I did hear a sound like a knock though, just like Vernon said.'

'Perhaps it was a cat?' the first policeman offered.

'A ruddy cat doesn't dress up like a weirdo,' Vernon spluttered, and then stopped himself.

'What kind of weirdo?' the policeman asked with a frown. He looked around, and caught sight of the brandy bottle Vernon had taken out to pour a snifter to calm his nerves, and seemed to give his partner a sidelong look. 'Just call us back if you get worried again, Mr Dursley,' he said, cocking his head to his mate, and turning to leave.

Vernon was about to call them back and tell them he'd have a word with the Chief Constable, when he caught Petunia's anxious look and remembered that he really just wanted this all over forever. He listened to the click of the front door as the two policemen showed themselves out, and heard the soft clunk as the doors closed on their squad car, and it drove back up Privet Drive, without its blue light flashing.

He saw Petunia mouthing soundlessly, and assumed the old girl had eventually gone gaga, bad breeding, as his sister would say, and turned to find she wasn't gawping at the wall after all. Two men were standing in the middle of the room, as though they had materialised from thin air.

'Now, look here,' Vernon said, puffing out his chest in terror more than anything else, 'the police will be back in a minute or two. You two had better make yourselves scarce.'

'He doesn't look much, but then, I don't suppose they ever do,' the one who wasn't Tobias's son said. 'I suppose that's why they can't get one of their own.'

'I doubt it was anything to do with ugliness of anything but the heart,' Snape said in what Vernon thought was a very snifty, pompous way, considering what he knew about his upbringing, stuck up little poof.

'I wonder if his wife knows?' the other one asked.

'Knows what?' Vernon asked, his voice sounding a bit squeakier than he would have liked.

'Knows what?' Petunia asked at the same time, and Vernon wished she'd shut her stupid horse face up.

'Why don't you go and check Dudders, my dear?' he said with a horrible grin. 'Let me deal with these two gents.'

'Gents,' the one with the blue eyes said. 'That's what they call public toilets in the Muggle world, Severus. Did you know that?'

'Why don't they just call them public toilets, Black?' Snape asked. 'Sit down, Petunia,' he added smoothly, without even looking at her.

'Maybe they think it's not polite?' the one called Black said.

'Isn't that where Lucius told you they rape little boys?' Snape asked with a puzzled frown. 'That's not polite.'

Vernon made an involuntary noise that sounded halfway between a gasp and a squeal. He thought he might have a heart attack, almost wished he would; perhaps he could pretend to have one. He wondered if the man called Black was related to the other Black, the dead one; he thought he might be.

'Do you think we should tell the neighbours as well?' Black asked.

'I think it's only fair. This is a decent neighbourhood. The people here have paid a lot of money to live next to ...' Snape trailed off for a moment, nodding his head vaguely in Vernon's direction. '...That.'

'Tell them what?' Petunia asked, her voice sounding brittle and hysterical.

'It's all lies,' Vernon roared. 'A pack of filthy lies.'

'Vernon?' Petunia asked, giving her husband a look that was part puzzlement and part suspicion.

'Lies, I tell you.' Vernon puffed his chest out again, reaching for the brandy glass that shattered just before his hand reached it.

'What are you all talking about?' Petunia asked.

'You tell her, Black,' Snape said quietly and looked away.

Vernon had heard it; he heard the edges of what sounded like defeat in Snape's voice: pathetic, no guts at all, just the way he'd always been, just the way he had been that night, so long ago. He found to his alarm that his prick had begun to stiffen at the thought; it had been a while since it had done that. 'You're a liar, Snape,' he said in his panic. 'It's all lies.'

'What is? Who is that man?' Petunia asked, and Vernon noticed she was addressing him now, and not the two men who had invaded his living room. 'No one has said anything, Vernon, so how can you say it's lies?'

'Shut up, you shrew,' he said viciously, losing the place for a moment. 'No one asked for your input.' He stood up from his chair and froze. The two men and Petunia were looking to his crotch, to where the beige trousers, which were stretched tightly over his bulk, were slightly tighter than usual, just where a damp patch had appeared, at about the tip of his swollen prick.

'Vernon,' Petunia said in horror, 'sit down.' She eyed his crotch meaningfully again, in distaste. 'I demand to know what is going on,' she said, dragging her eyes away to Snape. 'Please.'

It was Black who spoke. He did it so quickly and fluidly that Vernon didn't have a chance to voice his indignation until it was over. He had been seized by a wheezing fit of some sort, and by the time he could breathe properly again, it was too late; the front door had closed on the two men, and Petunia had already left the room to pack her suitcases.

'Better?' Sirius asked quietly, as they Disapparated beside the kitchen garden.

Snape was surprised; he had expected to feel hollow, dissatisfied, regretful of what they had done. He didn't feel good, he couldn't say that, but he did feel better.

It was almost a month later when Draco walked into the dining room. Both boys had become quite steady on their feet by then, much to the chagrin of the elves. Draco

looked up at Lupin, with his father's pale grey eyes. 'Dad, Dada,' he said.

'Not me,' Lupin said with the best he did with his smile these days, and pointed to the portrait of Lucius that was above the fire. He had thought it would have come alive by now, but it had been too long; it wasn't going to happen. 'That's Dad,' he said.

Sirius sat at the top of the table, and Snape sat at his side, with Harry in a highchair between them, playing with his breakfast.

'Dada,' Draco insisted.

'That's your dad,' Lupin said and pointed again.

'Dada,' Draco said in satisfaction, as the temperature in the room dropped a telltale few degrees, and Lupin's jaw dropped along with it.

'That's my seat, Black, I believe,' Lucius said from right behind him, causing Sirius to actually jump, so that he spilt his coffee right across the table. But for the fact that Sirius could see right through him, he would have thought Lucius had truly returned from the dead.

The three men looked at him in a mixture of bewilderment and shock. He looked exactly as he had when he had died, white-blond hair just slightly dishevelled, almost hiding the ugly swelling on his forehead, and streaked with a little blood from the thin trickle at the side of his mouth. Ever the one to put his best side on view, he held his mutilated hand behind his back.

'I would have thought you would have remembered me,' he said archly. 'Or perhaps none of you has ever seen a ghost before.' He raised his eyebrow, in his Slytherin way. 'And get off my seat, Black. I do not intend to stand all through breakfast.'

'You can't sit,' Sirius mouthed stupidly. 'You'll fall through on your arse.'

Malfoy gave him a superior look. 'I can sit on that seat, and I shall do so whether you are in it or not.'

Sirius moved along and watched carefully to see if Lucius simply assumed the position of sitting, but surely a ghost couldn't even manage that for long. 'How did you do that?' he asked; he seemed to be the only one who was doing any talking.

'What's the point of having fairies in one's home, if one can't get them to do little chores every now and again?' Lucius replied smugly, crossing his legs elegantly as though to prove he was quite comfortable.

There was something fitting about him sitting there; not that he could eat, and sometimes he seemed to wander off into his other world, but the few remarks he made seemed to have been deliberately chosen, as though he had been thinking about them during his month-long absence. Sirius knew why he had joined them; he knew he'd come to tell them to move on, to start living again.

Lucius surprised him by turning first to Lupin. 'Has my will been read yet?' he asked.

'No, it's tomorrow in fact, at Imperius et Libris,' Lupin replied. 'Dumbledore invited me along, but I don't think I'll go; I'd have to cancel a class.'

'They can't do it without you, Lupin,' Lucius replied. 'Has Dumbledore not told you?'

'Told me what?'

'You're the main beneficiary, with the proviso that you leave the residue after your death to Draco,' Lucius delivered with evident satisfaction. 'And, of course, I prefer you not to allow Severus to starve.'

'I hope that's a joke,' Lupin spluttered, and forgot to close his mouth.

'Not at all,' Lucius replied with his expensive smile, just the same as it always had been. 'Look at Severus and Sirius; they know. Shame on both of you for not telling him.'

'You can't do that,' Lupin whispered.

'I certainly can't change it now.' Lucius smiled again and spoke as though the other two were not there. 'I owed you more than money could ever repay you, Lupin. You were the brother I never had, the friend I never deserved. You never judged me, even when I know you must have had doubts. I cannot tell you how you enriched the time we had here,' he said, looking fondly to where Draco was watching him. 'It was the most precious of my life.'

Malfoy seemed to finish with Lupin all of a sudden, content to leave the misty-eyed, somewhat bemused werewolf to his own thoughts, and turned to where Severus sat watching him, his lip twisted in grudging affectionate amusement. 'Now, Severus. I want you to put it away. I know, perhaps better than anyone, the pain you've endured, when you were young, and then with James. You've got a lot to do. You've got to protect Harry until he is old enough for what you know he has to do in the future.'

'Voldemort isn't dead, is he?' Severus asked.

Lucius shook his head. 'No, not all of him at any rate. That task falls to Harry; your task is to get him there and bring him back.'

Sirius looked at Snape; he had funny feeling he'd already guessed that.

'James ... and Alexus ... have you ...' Severus began, and seemed unable to voice his question.

'Yes,' Lucius replied as Snape looked at him sharply. 'Your pain hurts both of them, Severus. You must let them rest.'

'Alexus ... he remembers me?' he asked.

'You are the only thing he remembers of his life on earth. Did you know that it is only love that can bind a ghost to a person or a place?'

'What's the Bloody Baron doing in Hogwarts then?' Sirius asked.

But Lucius just laughed. 'There is a certain code of honour that does not allow me to disclose that.' He turned once more to Snape and Lupin, and surprised Sirius again. 'I would like to speak to Black alone now for a few minutes. I'm sure the breakfast can wait. Leave Harry here with us.' He waited until both men had left with the little blond boy, waving as Draco waved back, before turning at last to Sirius.

'It was to see you that I came back, Sirius,' he said.

Sirius couldn't remember if he'd ever heard Lucius call him anything but "Black"; he didn't think so. 'I see,' he said, but he didn't.

'I wanted to tell you some things which I should have told you a long time ago.' He paused for a moment, holding Sirius's eyes. 'I have always loved you, ever since we were boys, but ... I simply loved Severus more ... and I would not have you take second best where I would not take it myself. Does that make sense?'

'No,' Sirius replied. 'But I understand.'

'No, I don't think you do. You missed the first and most important point, and that was that I always loved you. But he needed me, Sirius; even though he did not love me as

he loves you. As Severus said himself, it was a very uncomfortable triangle.' He heaved a sigh. 'I'm not explaining this very well.'

But he was; Sirius understood him now, understood Lucius's craving to be needed ... perhaps that had been something that had drawn him to Lupin too. Lucius had needed to give; not his money or his body or his possessions ... he had needed to give his love to the very few people who could see below the dazzling glossy exterior to the man below. Sirius felt somehow more at peace.

Lucius smiled in satisfaction. 'You do understand. In a way it was my selfishness that did not allow us to be together, and if I had the chance ... I would do the same again, except for one thing.'

'What?' Sirius whispered.

'I would tell you how much I loved you, and I would never have let you doubt, but I would not have let you harbour the false hopes you may have had either. That was greed on my part; I wanted you both, and ended up with neither.'

He let the smile through again, and Sirius could see he was beginning to fade; perhaps he was tired. He knew that very soon he and Harry would be left in an empty room, bereft of everything but the dust of his dreams and the ache in his heart. He had just one more thing to ask Lucius anyway; one thing that had bothered him for a long time, since shortly after he'd left school.

'Were you having an affair with James Potter, Lucius?' he asked, quite sure of the answer.

'Off and on, yes, but I think you always knew that. Which one of us wasn't? Except for Lupin, of course,' Malfoy asked with his knowing smile. 'James was everyone's prize. It is only a wonder no one ever told Severus. Go to him, Sirius, go to Severus; he deserves better than he has ever had, and so do you.'

'Makes me wonder how James managed to spare time to father the boy,' Sirius said with a guilty grin; it felt good on his face, something familiar that had been absent for too long. He looked to where Harry was still sitting in his high chair, with his expectant chick look on his face, as though he knew the bit about him had still to come.

Lucius arched his eyebrow. 'I think we both know better than that,' he said as he smiled a mysterious knowing smile.

'Me?' Sirius breathed, shaking his head; it couldn't be, the timing wasn't right. 'Lupin?'

'Not Lupin either.'

'You?' Sirius asked incredulously.

'Hardly,' Lucius replied. 'I tried it once and didn't like it, thank you.'

'It can't be Severus,' Sirius said. 'He's never lain with a woman.'

'True,' Lucius admitted. 'But I had a long chat with Lily the other day. She seemed even more content than James that Severus had Harry in his protection.' He looked across to the door, as though checking they were still alone. 'She found a scroll from Severus one day, arranging a meeting with James, and ... well, Lily was an expert Potions maker, every bit as good as Severus, and she did so want a child ... and what with James seeming to be more interested in other things.' He sighed theatrically and nodded to Harry.

Sirius had begun to laugh; it felt so fucking good. 'Are you telling me she took Polyjuice and went to meet Severus, pretending she was James?'

Lucius shook his head in mock disapproval. 'Terribly devious creatures, women are.'

He began to fade again, and Sirius felt the emotion well up in him as though it would overflow without his permission. 'Will you come to see us? You won't leave us completely will you? Please, Lucius.'

'I'll be here forever; when you are long gone,' Lucius said with the first regret Sirius had heard. 'Go to him now. It's hardly fair that he's all on his own, left holding the baby.'
