

You Don't Know Me

by scaranda

When a young Severus Snape goes to Malfoy Manor with hope in his heart for the woman he loves, he finds his life is changed forever. Of course, nothing turns out the way it is supposed to, but then, it never does. When Severus finds his Andromeda betrothed to another, he feels he has little left in his heart to resist the call of Darkness.

Chapter One

Chapter 1 of 48

When a young Severus Snape goes to Malfoy Manor with hope in his heart for the woman he loves, he finds his life is changed forever. Of course, nothing turns out the way it is supposed to, but then, it never does. When Severus finds his Andromeda betrothed to another, he feels he has little left in his heart to resist the call of Darkness.

I had only gone to the manor that night to see her, that night of nights that changed my life forever, from following an aimless course to racing down a road to damnation of my own making. I had only set aside my distaste for everything Black and Malfoy for her, only resolved to untie my tongue as I had tried to do for so long, because that night was the night I had decided to try to make her mine. And I went not without hopes; I knew at least that much. We had always been friends, more than friends, more kindred spirits if such a fanciful state should exist. I was barely twenty-three, and she twenty-eight, but age difference apart, only five years after all was said and done, we were the same.

'Ah, Severus,' Lucius said, smiling his blandly insincere smile, the disinterested one, as he held out his hand, and I wondered for a ridiculous moment whether I should kiss it or shake it, although neither option really appealed more than the other. His silver-blond hair gleamed in the light from the vast candel chandelier above his head, and if I had not picked the spot, I would have assumed him to have stood there to show himself off, this Adonis of the Malfoy line, this epitome of purebred folly. His pale grey eyes flitted to the door and then back to me. They were as devoid of colour as his hair, and indeed his skin, as though the enthusiastic washing of the Malfoy blood had not only purged the impurities and humanity from him, but the colour too.

'Lucius.' I took the offered hand, resisting the urge to squeeze hard, if only to deny him the chance to show that he was in any way human.

'So glad you could come,' he said, looking over my shoulder, losing interest already as someone more worthy, or perhaps I should say to his mind more wealthy, crossed into the hallowed hallway of Malfoy Manor. And yet he had taken the trouble to come to where I was, broken away from where his father and some of his cronies stood in an expensive cluster of fascinating men and dazzling women, displayed at the bottom of the grand staircase for those not of their inner circle to envy. I was puzzled that Lucius had made that small effort to welcome me, and wondered why.

He let the limp, somewhat clammy hand drop from mine, and I stifled the impulse to wipe my palm on my trouser leg, as I'm sure he did too, but for different reason. It occurred to me only absently that Lucius was nervous, as I watched him move back to Abraxas. He and Abraxas shared a couple of hurried words, apart from the others who stood with them, and then Lucius nodded to the door. I looked behind me, and my heart stopped for a moment as I watched the group of Blacks cross the vast wood-panelled reception hall, with its vaulted ceiling and minstrels' gallery, to be greeted by their hosts, and portraits of generations of weak-chinned, white-blond Malfoys sneering down their aristocratic noses. Sirius, Regulus, Bellatrix, and even young Narcissa, barely eighteen years old, had arrived. It had been whispered that the Blacks had done a deal with the Malfoys, and that the families would shortly announce the betrothal of Lucius and Narcissa: a powerful dangerous match if ever there were, this cementing of two of the most hysterically pure-blooded families to survive. Lucius always did like his flesh young and sweet, but I suspected he would find this little apple had a rancid core, and I was gratified by at least that much.

I watched Narcissa curtsy, first to Abraxas and then to Lucius, a pretty little dip of her knees, just enough to rustle the dark green taffeta she wore, a curtsy that conveyed with what looked like practiced ease that this slip of a girl was only going through the niceties of polite society, and that she bowed to no man. Another sham, another layer of good manners slapped onto noble bloodlines, making some pitiful attempt to conceal the seething inbred megalomania.

Narcissa turned to her sister, cold blue eyes glittering contempt and superiority; she smiled at her, a twist of her discontented pout, and nodded in my direction, and Bellatrix turned too. I looked away, confused and somehow embittered that they witnessed me watching them, angry with myself that they would see that watching as admiration or envy, or anything other than the disgust it was. I didn't want to see any more anyway; Andromeda wasn't with them. Perhaps she had decided that this night was not to her taste. I should have checked more closely when Lucius said all the Blacks were coming, before accepting his grudging invitation; I should have known that Andromeda would not be party to this façade of a social gathering, this thinly disguised political rally.

'Snape,' the cultured voice said from behind me, interrupting my reverie.

I didn't really need to turn to know it was Sirius Black; there are certain voices one never forgets: James Potter, Sirius Black, the vile snuffling Pettigrew, my father, each one able to unleash such a surge of hate within me that I can almost taste it. And yet I found myself disappointed in Sirius Black, let down that he had succumbed to the Dark Lord's preaching in a way that Potter had not. As I turned I saw that for the mistake it was; Sirius Black was not there to bend his knee to any man either.

'What do you want, Black?' I asked.

He put his hand on my arm, and I was surprised that I didn't feel the revulsion I had felt at Lucius's touch a few minutes before; nevertheless, I pulled away. 'What do you want?' I repeated.

'I have a message for you,' Black replied, just as a hush dropped over the reception hall, and the tinkling false laughter and phony guffaws died to nothing but a few nervous coughs, and a sigh of reverence swept the hall like a mass genuflection. Only Black seemed as indifferent as I was to Tom Riddle's arrival, and I reluctantly admitted to myself that I admired at least that in him, if only for the fact that I didn't feel quite so alone.

'A message from whom?' I asked, hoping I hadn't dropped too much of the hostility from my voice, as the buzz of conversation picked up again, and Riddle was swept away by Abraxas.

'From Andromeda,' Sirius replied. 'Look, Snape, is there anywhere here we won't be overheard?'

'I doubt it,' I muttered. 'The walls, as they say, have ears; only, in this case, I suspect that is literally true. Just give me the message, Black.' I wanted to be alone so I could savour the swell of hope that had risen within me.

Black looked around again, and I took the time to take stock of him in a detached way, detached from the hate I had borne him for so long. He was a handsome man, even to my disinterested way of seeing things. He was dressed in a long ruby-coloured velvet smoking jacket with satin lapels, a white silk and lace ruffled shirt below it, and a red cravat tucked with artful carelessness into the open neck. He was a picture of sartorial decadence, and I wondered at his less formal attire when everyone else was in dinner dress. Even I had taken no small effort that evening, although my motives for such had been entirely selfish. I, too, sought to impress, but not Tom Riddle. Black had left his long brown wavy hair loose so that it hung over his shoulders, to appear even more casual, I supposed. I caught his clear greyish-blue eyes, and his strong classical features, with the small beard and moustache which did nothing to belie what I realised for the first time was true. The whispered rumours to which I had paid no attention were based on fact, the reason why this most eligible of wizarding bachelors, Lucius Malfoy aside, was never seen with a glittering woman on his arm. Sirius Black was homosexual. To the new order's way of thinking, that was an atrocity equal to Muggle blood, unless, of course, you happened to be Tom Riddle, or one of his favourites. We lived in dangerous times; no wonder Black had seen fit to hide the fact.

'You and Andromeda are friends, Snape, aren't you?' he said. 'I mean she looked after you when you first went to Hogwarts, kept you away from Lucius, didn't she?'

Yes, Andromeda had protected me. She had been in her fifth year when I got to Hogwarts, the year above Lucius, and she had watched out for me so well that I managed to get to my third year before Lucius and his cronies introduced me to the age old art of buggery. She had been the only Slytherin with whom I had identified, and I could never understand what had been in it for her, not until I had found out quite by accident that fifth-year girls who aspired to become head girl, had to demonstrate their worthiness by looking after those who were less than able to look after themselves. At first I'd felt oddly betrayed by her, as though her friendship had had a price tag, and yet she had continued it, long after it became apparent that she would no sooner be head girl than I would. I'd looked back then, wondering what I had been when I first arrived at Hogwarts: a substandard specimen, perhaps, or a frightened little mouse who bristled with hostility in some vain attempt at self-preservation.

Of course, I had been both of these things; I had arrived at Hogwarts with 'target' emblazoned on my forehead and 'martyr' stamped on my heart. No words of encouragement had been called to me as the Hogwarts Express rolled away from Kings Cross that first day, no mother waved the handkerchief which had wiped away her tears of proud joy, just the slammed front door of the house my parents had lived in in Spinner's End before they had shuffled off their miserable mortal coils and left it to me, quite probably out of spite, and my father's words, '*good riddance to bad rubbish; don't bother coming back for the holidays*', echoing in my terrified wake.

I had taken the train from Newcastle to Kings Cross, and I suspect it was then that I had begun to realise just what it felt like to be an outcast, and though the admission is a tortuous one, I also know that, even that early, in some twisted way I encouraged it, welcomed it as though it were something of my own, something I had achieved on my own merits. I was different, different from the other people on that train, in fact on both trains, in their comfortable clothes with their well-fed faces and their silly smiles, and I resolved to stay that way.

I remember the first time I saw Hogwarts. I had never seen or imagined anything so beautiful as we crossed that vast dark lake: candlelight dancing in what seemed to be a million tiny windows; the ancient stone crenulated terraces, broken here and there by age and harsh weather; and the towering spires, jostling with one another as though they were each one trying to see which would be first to reach the starry night-time sky. I knew I would never see anything more breathtaking again in my life ... until I saw Andromeda Black.

Of course, I was only a child, barely eleven, and the youngest and smallest of my year, and to me, then as indeed now, Andromeda was a goddess in human form, an unearthly being who radiated love and peace and all the kindnesses I had never known. For three precious years she was there for me in a way that no other living soul had ever been, and then she had left, and then my life became a living nightmare, thanks in no small measure to the man who now stood beside me.

'Get on with it, Black,' I said, not at all sure where he was leading me.

'She's coming here tonight to see you. She told me to tell you that,' he said, raising a glass to his lips. 'Give her a fair hearing, Snape. That's all I'm asking.'

'Why should I do otherwise?' I replied. 'She is, as you say, my friend.'

Black turned to look around the hall again. The crowd was thinning slightly towards great gothic pile's banqueting room, to where the Malfoys would display their vulgar excesses, mistaking them as always for good taste.

'I'm only saying give her a chance, Severus,' he said. 'I know what you can be like ... dismissing people without giving them the chance to explain themselves, always assuming the insult, always expecting the worst of people.'

'Quite,' I replied, wanting to be rid of him, to take stock of what delicious hints he had dropped my way. 'In that way I find I am seldom disappointed.'

'Fuck you, Snape,' he said, reverting to his more accustomed address and way of speaking to me. 'You're one intractable bastard, and if it weren't for Andromeda I wouldn't piss on you if you were on fire. By the way, while we're talking about my cousins, I'd beware of being in a confined space with Bellatrix if I were you; she seems quite taken with you. It's not only Andromeda who has marriage on her mind.'

He was about to move off as my spirits soared yet again, only to be doused a moment later by my host.

'Well, well, Sirius,' Lucius said, after giving me little more than a cursory look, as though reminding himself who I was. 'I confess I am surprised that you are here. I hadn't wanted to say as much in front of the ladies.'

'Don't flatter yourself, Lucius,' Black returned coolly. 'Reggie and I have come to escort our cousins, not for the cabaret.' He nodded to the door behind which Abraxas and Riddle had disappeared.

'You would do well to watch that smart mouth of yours, Black,' Lucius replied. 'Who knows when it will get you into trouble?'

'Trouble?' Black snorted. 'I've been in trouble before. I'm quite good at it.'

Lucius drew me another brief glance and then looked back to Sirius. 'Just be careful, Black, or I may have to let certain people know certain things about you.' Lucius looked at me yet again, as though trying to work something out. 'By the way, Severus,' he said, 'Tom has asked that you join him alone for brandy after dinner.'

I could see that discomfited Lucius; I could also see why he kept drawing me what I now recognised as speculative looks, whilst hinting at Black's sexuality. One of few things Lucius excelled at was adding two and two and coming to anything but four. I sincerely hoped Tom Riddle hadn't drawn the same conclusion about my predilections as Lucius seemed to have, and wondered what else he wanted to see me for.

'Did you want something in particular, Lucius?' Black asked. 'Or have you come to show us that you have managed to pick up what you think might pass for social graces?'

I wondered why Black was being so openly hostile, what point there was to it. I knew Lucius to be ignorant and arrogant, but had to confess that they weren't Black's failings.

'Us?' Lucius repeated suggestively, raising his eyebrow in his insufferably snobbish way, and giving me what I can only assume he took for a knowing look. 'I hadn't realised. I'll just leave you two alone then, shall I? My, my, Bellatrix will be disappointed, if I'm reading things correctly.'

'You can't read at all, Lucius, if I recall,' I replied, quite anxious now to extricate myself from what had become a ridiculous conclusion on Lucius's part, and to distance myself from Black. 'If you two ... gentlemen, will excuse me,' I said, with as insulting a pause as I dared, 'I'd like to speak to Rosier.' I walked away, unsure if Evan Rosier had even been invited, just as the dinner gong was beaten by an over enthusiastic house-elf. Not that dinner or Rosier mattered, not that anything mattered ... Andromeda Black had arrived.

I didn't notice how Sirius managed to detach himself from Lucius; quite probably he just moved from his side and allowed Lucius to go about his favourite pastime, that of talking to himself, no one else really being of the predisposition to listen for long if any other option were available. As I was about to move forward, Andromeda was engulfed on all sides by Blacks. Narcissa and Bellatrix, both of whom kissed her cheek and moved away as quickly as they had joined her and, although I didn't really think about it then, it was as if they were trying to stay apart from her.

Bellatrix was often compared in looks to Andromeda, but apart from the raven black hair, I could never fathom out why. Narcissa and Bella didn't even appear to be the same species as their sister, their hard blue eyes really unworthy of being called the same colour as her iridescent blue, their pale skin a poor shade of her glowing porcelain. Regulus was next to leave her side, and it was only when Andromeda began to cross the hall that I realised three things: she wasn't alone, not that that concerned me, one such as she would not be expected to travel alone; Sirius was the only one of the Blacks who seemed easy in her company; and I was still rooted to the spot I had occupied since she had arrived.

And then they were crossing the space between us, and it was all I could do to contain myself, all I could do not to cross the space too and take her in my arms.

'Severus,' she said in that throaty breathless way she had of stopping my heart. She held each of my hands in each of hers and kissed me first on one cheek and then the other, as I tried not to drown in her scent, a scent like wild roses on a summer breeze after the rain has fallen.

Some part of me spared a tiny bit of attention for Sirius, who stood at her side with the man who had accompanied her, and I wondered at the concerned look that crossed his face, just for a second, and then we were five. Lucius had decided to gatecrash the proceedings.

'Andromeda,' Lucius said, and gave what seemed like a pause for a second, as he glanced to the man at Sirius's side, '... and ... well, well. Come now, the elves have the seating plan. Dinner is about to be served.'

'Only Lucius could deliver such a welcome,' Andromeda murmured as Lucius stalked off, presumably expecting us to be hurrying in his wake, and I wondered why she addressed Sirius and not me.

'You're sitting with us, Andromeda,' Sirius replied. 'I've already checked. Don't worry, I'll sit between you and Bella, and that'll save you stabbing her with your fork and getting your dress messed up.' He looked to me, and the frown crossed his face again. 'It seems Severus is higher up the pecking order than us Blacks,' he said. 'Tom Riddle's right hand, Severus. The only good thing about that is how put out Lucius will be.'

I wondered if Lucius had told him the seating arrangements, or if he had checked them out himself; either way, I hadn't known myself and wondered what it meant. 'I can live with that knowledge,' I said, turning to Andromeda. I just wanted to be alone with her now, but that wasn't going to happen; she had already begun to move off towards the banqueting hall.

'Severus,' she said, over a shoulder clad in hand-knotted Pixie lace. 'Can we speak after dinner? ... In private.'

'Of course,' I replied, not at all sure where I found my voice. 'We could leave here now if you like. I seem to have lost my appetite anyway.'

I should have noticed Sirius's frown again, and Andromeda's oddly quizzical look, but I didn't. Andromeda wanted to speak to me alone, and that was all that mattered to me, fool that I was.

Chapter Two

Chapter 2 of 48

Severus finds he has more people paying him court than he had hoped for.

The banqueting hall was set out in a series of round tables to give the impression, I supposed, of intimacy, whilst affording the guests the opportunity of comparing their

own finery to those around them. There were ten tables of eight people at each one, excluding the high table, and I noticed that the purer the blood the nearer the high table they sat. The Blacks, unsurprisingly, were seated right in front of where the Malfoys, the Dark Lord, and I, Severus Snape, looked over everyone. To say I was uncomfortable with the seating plan was an understatement; I was also still mystified and not a little unsettled. I knew I had talents and indeed powers that the Dark Lord needed and wanted to tap, but I had thus far managed to remain neutral enough in my allegiances to neither take the Dark Mark, nor incur Riddle's admirable wrath; perhaps that alone should have alerted me that he needed more from me than I would be willing to give. I had been walking a tightrope, but I had an uneasy feeling that the time for procrastination was over, and longed for an ally I could trust in whom to confess my fears, and perhaps even plan my way forward. This time in our history was not one for staying out of politics; they chased you around and harried you into a corner, until you either came out fighting for them, or bleeding. I had thought a great deal about how to avoid either option, but I was running out of time.

I knew it was Tom Riddle who had sat me at his side. Abraxas Malfoy might have fancied he was the host at this soiree, but if he believed that, he had fooled only himself, and few would fail to notice that whilst Abraxas sat on Riddle's left, with Lucius next to him, it was Severus Snape who sat on his right. That aside, whatever happened that night, I intended to stay as my own master and make sure everyone knew as much. I didn't care to be tarred by anyone else's brush, especially Tom Riddle's. I speculated about what would have happened had I declined, as I had originally intended, what I considered to be a summons; of course, that was before Lucius had let it slip that all of the Blacks had accepted their invitations.

I watched Sirius look over to me and then lean across the table and say something to Andromeda. She shook her head and smiled at him and then glanced across at me in a way that made me understand I was being discussed. I couldn't eat, not the truffles and foie gras, or whatever the soup was, or the rack of rare Welsh lamb, or the ludicrous concoction of a dessert that was placed in front of me, and each dish was removed by an uncaring house-elf, no doubt to be fed to the pigs. I was trapped between watching Andromeda whenever I could, and paying attention to Riddle's carefully prepared manifesto, worrying about just why he was taking such pains to pay me this court. By the time the pudding was removed and the elves brought around the cheese and grapes, Lucius had asked me four times, across the expanse of his father's well-fed gut, if I were feeling quite well. I was unmoved that he cared, but I was beginning to suspect that he was finding he had to inveigle his way into Riddle's favour, and it concerned me greatly that he should see fit to use me as a springboard, and why he should even consider me to be such.

As the coffee and petit fours were at last served, Abraxas stood from between Riddle and Lucius, and the assembled guests charged their already amply charged glasses and stood too. Only Riddle remained seated ... and Sirius Black, until Andromeda leant down to whisper urgently to him, and he hauled himself rather reluctantly to his feet. I watched him nod cynically to Riddle and thought he was playing a very dangerous and somewhat unnecessary game.

Riddle stood as the guests sat down from Abraxas's expansive and flowery toast to him. Even I have to admit that Tom cut a finely impressive figure. He was taller than me, but only just, perhaps six feet one or two, and whilst he was slim, his frame promised taut muscles. He had shoulder-length dark auburn hair, and the pale skin of a redhead without the pastiness that often accompanies it. His features were fine, but firm and masculine, and with the exception of the coldest, most power-hungry eyes I have ever seen, he was a handsome man. Instead of the hypnotic rallying call to the faithful that I had expected, he was modest in his thanks and effusive in his praise for the Malfoys. He sat down to prolonged polite applause, and as he lit a cigar it was as though that were a signal for the guests to move. Suddenly chairs were scraping and people were rising from their seats, mostly heading in the direction of the high table to fawn over Riddle like the sycophantic sheep they were. I stood up too, not wanting to be part of the charade anymore. Riddle caught my sleeve, and I know I didn't imagine the shiver that ran down my spine as his icy fingers brushed on mine, whether by accident or design I didn't know.

'Don't forget that I want to see you later, Severus,' he said, and then smiled his coldly un-amused smile. 'Go and enjoy yourself,' he added, and nodded to where the Blacks had risen from their table. 'I believe a certain raven-haired beauty is anxious to see you too. Don't get so involved with Bella's ample charms that you forget why you are here.'

I drew back in what I suspect he took for embarrassment. 'I shall try my best,' I concurred, and left him to make what he would of it and made my way out into the hall, to where men had already begun to light cigars, and ladies smoked coloured cocktail cigarettes and laughed their wine-soaked neighing laughs at nothing.

The Blacks had left the room before me and were just splitting up, Narcissa and Bellatrix heading, I supposed, to powder whatever ladies powdered. Sirius bent and kissed his hag of a mother's cheek, then followed Andromeda and the man who still seemed to patiently tag along behind them. I suspected he was a Muggle, and it surprised me somewhat that he had waited around that long. Surely Andromeda was safe enough with Sirius watching out for her the way he obviously was. Mrs Black watched them go, her sour features twisted in venom; the years hadn't been kind to her, and her bitterness wrinkled her face with furrows of hate. I knew she and her firstborn son barely spoke, and although Regulus was the younger son, he was the more favoured. I wondered which of Sirius's admirable string of shortcomings displeased her most, probably having been selected for Gryffindor when he was eleven.

I found myself thinking about my own mother for a moment, and what she would have thought of the circles in which I was moving. My mother, downtrodden and mean-spirited, which had been the result of the other, I couldn't tell for sure. I hadn't much cared until then, although I found myself pondering now. She had had a rotten life, tied to the pedantic bully who had been my father, and I wondered if she had ever been a young girl with hope in her heart for love, like I had on that night.

'Can we talk somewhere, Severus?' Andromeda asked as she reached me. She turned slightly to Black. 'Watch out for Ted, Sirius,' she said, absently laying her hand on his arm, and I felt a stab of unreasonable jealousy that she had spared another man, especially Sirius Black, that small touch. 'Don't let Bella anywhere near him,' she added, wasting one of the smiles I now considered mine on Black too.

I thought nothing of her remark as Sirius and the man called Ted headed towards the bar which had been set up along the wall of the ballroom, except for the fact that the two men obviously knew one another quite well.

'Let's go onto the terrace,' I suggested, as Andromeda and I followed into the ballroom. 'It should be quiet out there, and even if it's not, we can walk across the lawns. Do you want your cloak?' I asked.

'No,' she replied, and she looked at me in a way that made my breath catch in my chest. I don't think she had ever looked more beautiful; she seemed to glow from inside. 'We won't take long,' she added as I opened one of the doors leading from the quickly filling ballroom.

'Andromeda,' I said, needing to begin immediately before my courage fled. 'You know I love you dearly, don't you?' I was already lifting my hands to put them on her shoulders, and to this day I thank Merlin that a door opened behind us, and I dropped my hands and was spared at least that humiliation.

The terrace cleared again of the two older couples, Evan Rosier's parents and another man and woman I didn't know, as they strolled down the pathway between the illuminated rose beds. Andromeda had sat on one of the wicker chairs that overlooked the torch-lit rose garden, and I was about to sit opposite her, so I could watch her face, when she raised her hand.

'Of course I do, Severus, and I love you dearly too,' she said. 'It's the reason I have come here to speak to you.'

I must have frowned my misunderstanding, or perhaps my brain was beginning to catch up with what my heart was trying to deny.

'Let me speak first, Severus,' she said. 'This is too important.'

I felt something cold slide in my guts as I at last recognised something in her tone that wasn't that of a lover. 'What is too important?' I ventured in little more than a whisper.

'You must see what is happening, Severus,' she said urgently. 'Come away from this,' she said, nodding to the manor. 'You can stay with us if you like, but leave this ... this abhorrence.'

'Us?' I asked, as the cold thing writhed again. Maybe she meant Sirius and the rest of the Blacks, I tried to tell myself, clutching at whatever straws I could find.

'Didn't Sirius say?' she asked in an oddly girlish way for one as sophisticated as she usually was. 'Ted and I are getting married.' I must have paled, or drawn back, or showed my shock in some way because she added, 'I ... I thought you knew.'

'No,' I said, without knowing where I dragged the word from, whether it was answer to her remark, or denial of what I had heard.

She smiled up at me, and at last I saw it as a sisterly smile, one that turned my blood to ice and my heart to stone. 'You know,' she said, 'I always used to hope that one day you would ask me, before I met Ted, of course ... when I was younger, before things changed the way they have,' she added, glancing to where the strains of the orchestra beginning the first dance were issuing from the grand ballroom. 'But you never did.'

'No,' I said quietly, wondering if she had given me an invitation to try to salvage something, but she went on, and any attempt I might have made turned to ashes in my mouth.

'Actually,' she said, 'Ted and I are going to have a baby.'

'How nice,' I replied, only going through the motions now. I felt sick, sickened, and I wanted to lash out without restraint as I had done to Lily Evans once before on another day of wretched humiliation. 'Is it the Muggle you brought with you tonight?' I heard myself ask.

'Yes, yes it is,' she said, somewhat coolly now. 'His name is Ted, Severus.'

'A Muggle,' I repeated in a snarl, before I could stop the outrage overflowing at what I had allowed to happen. 'Is that the best you can do?'

'Definitely,' she said, standing and pushing past me. 'Especially when I see what else is around.' She spun back to me, furious now. 'I came here to see you, to try to make you see that there are better ways than what is happening here.' She seemed to try to moderate her tirade and turned to me again. 'Come to stay with us, Severus, for a while ... to let you distance yourself from this,' she asked, almost pleading with me.

'To watch you bring up a squalling Mudblood brat?' I asked, as the rage boiled inside me. I was beyond reason, beyond even noticing that her child would have the type of mixed blood as I had in my own veins.

She drew back as though I had struck her, which in a way I had, and I remembered again delivering the same insult to Lily a few years before, and how I had burned with shame for weeks later, and lost her friendship for a long time. What was it about me that when I finally set my reluctant tongue free, I delivered with such venom?

Andromeda began to walk away towards the door. 'I came here tonight to let you know that we thought you were a better man than those in there. I was wrong, Severus,' she snapped. 'I didn't know you at all.'

'No,' I replied. 'You didn't know me at all.' I drew myself up as the last vestiges of warmth seeped from me, and I pulled a black cloak of hostility around my shoulders as she opened the door to the ballroom. 'So why don't you go back to your cosy little Muggle and raise your Mudblood brats and see where that gets you?' I called after her, ranting now, bereft of any sensible thought.

'You bandy that type of remark around quite a lot, Snape,' a voice said from quite a bit further along the terrace.

I didn't know how long Sirius Black had been standing there or just what he had heard, but the last of my sanity fled, and I turned from Andromeda and stalked across to him and grabbed his lapels. 'Eavesdropping, you snivelling little nancy boy?' I snapped, and kned him in the balls. 'You would be better employed looking after your little Ted Muggle, as you were told to do, than criticising your betters.'

As he fell gasping to the ground, another of the dozen or so doors from the ballroom opened behind us.

'Severus,' Lucius called from the doorway, and only when he had done so did I begin to calm down. 'Bellatrix wants to know if she should wait until after you've spoken to Tom. What shall I tell her?'

'Tell her anything you want,' I hissed, 'but keep the hideous harpy away from me. Tell her I'm homosexual for all I care. She ought to know what that means; it runs in her family.'

'Really, Severus, you could do a lot worse than a Black you know,' Lucius replied. He had stepped onto the terrace, and it was only then that he noticed Black, where he had sat upright, wincing in pain, with Andromeda's arm across his shoulders. 'Some Blacks at any rate,' Lucius added. 'Anyway, are you ready?' he asked, showing no interest in why Sirius was sitting on the stone floor, clutching his balls. 'Tom Riddle does not care to be kept waiting.' Lucius gave me a grudging up and down look, as though attempting to fathom out why the Dark Lord should want me at his side anyway. 'Are you joining us or not, Severus?' he asked.

'Of course I am, Lucius,' I replied, without looking back at the Blacks. 'What better offer could I possibly have for the rest of my life?'

Chapter Three

Chapter 3 of 48

Severus leaves Malfoy Manor with something he didn't want, and leaves behind something that he did.

I should have taken the time to compose myself properly before meeting Riddle, I know that, perhaps even feigned illness and craved a later audience, but I wasn't thinking clearly. Lucius had stridden ahead of me across the polished floor, as the dancing couples rested during a break in the music. I was so angry, and probably shocked, that I don't know how I kept whatever outward calm I feigned, or even if I did. I was almost manic in my rage and confusion: with Andromeda, and Black, and although I did not realise it then, with myself most of all. Somewhere in the back of my mind I knew the bitterness would take over when the fury burnt itself out, that indignant self-pity of one who sees himself bested by a lesser man, that sour outrage. I didn't want to be there when that happened.

Riddle steepled his long fingers in front of him as I entered the library of Malfoy Manor that night, where it was set one floor above the ballroom, just off the minstrels' gallery. No strains of music or partying reached beyond the oak door once it had closed behind me, just the quiet calm of old books, and the menace of Riddle's presence, seeping into my mind and stifling all other thoughts.

'We are the same, Severus,' he said without preamble, as I crossed the room and took a seat at the other side of the fire, without waiting for an invitation to do so.

'Indeed?' I asked. 'I am not sure that I follow you.'

'And I am not sure that you follow me either,' he replied, the double-entendre quite clearly intended. 'Am I wrong in placing such faith in you?'

'Look, Tom ... I do not know why you have asked to see me, or what it is you want from me ... but I think you know that.'

His mood changed so quickly that he really did startle me. He stood and pointed at me, two red spots of fury appearing high on his pale cheeks. 'You would do well not to underestimate me, Severus ... nor to overestimate your own importance.'

'Perhaps if you were to come to the point,' I said solicitously, warning myself to be a little more cautious. It wouldn't be the first time Tom Riddle had been heard arguing with someone who didn't leave the room alive.

He breathed deeply through his nose, composing himself. 'Of course, of course,' he said. 'That was unfair of me.'

'Why am I here, Tom?' I asked, at once relieved that I had placated him and concerned that I had done so so easily. 'Why did you sit me at your right hand? I know that it was for better reason than to clip Lucius's wings. I don't take you for a man relishing so petty a victory.'

'Lucius needs to learn his place in the hierarchy, Severus,' Riddle said. He was well named; he never said anything that you didn't have to think about very carefully before committing your answer to words. 'That is something you can attend to later. But for now,' he added, sitting back down and smiling the cold smile again, 'you and I are going to chat about what we can do for one another.'

'What do you want, Tom?' I asked yet again, sensing I had something specific that he needed, something no one else could give him. It gave me a confidence I shouldn't really have had, and whilst not quite misplaced, I should perhaps have been more guarded. I knew that whatever he thought he had to offer in return would be as unwelcome as ... as knowing that Andromeda Black was about to wed the father of the child she carried.

'You and I are the same, Severus,' he said, repeating his opening gambit. 'And because of that, you are going to be my closest confidant.' He raised his hand, pre-empting my reply. 'Don't,' he said sharply, 'don't ask me again why I have asked to see you. Allow me the courtesy of finishing; then, perhaps I shall invite your questions.'

I felt rebuked and didn't care for the feeling, but I bit my tongue anyway.

'It has long been apparent to me that the Philosopher's Stone may be out of my reach,' he said, and I didn't think I liked that turn of the conversation. I had no defence prepared for an attack I didn't understand.

'How can I help you there?' I asked.

'You cannot,' he replied. 'But there is more than one path to immortality, my Severus, and you and I are amongst the few who truly know that.'

'I don't know what you mean,' I said, and I didn't.

'Don't be coy with me, Severus. And don't expect me to accept you for the fool I know you are not,' he said, his voice rising almost in accusation. 'You and I share the same type of ... heritage, the same background, and although you seem to attempt to conceal yours as conveniently as I disregard mine, we are the same.' He had stood up again and paced the floor in front of the fire, before spinning to me. 'I know what you are capable of. I know you are probably the only man alive who can make what I need. You know the conditions between us, the very similarities I speak of, make it possible.' He gave me a speculative look, and favoured me with another of his cold smiles.

My stunned brain had caught up at last. Perhaps if I hadn't still been feeling the residual hurt bewilderment I had thought stifled, quashed the moment I got into his presence, I might have seen it earlier. Either way, it didn't really matter.

'I can't do that,' I gasped. 'To prepare that would be ...'

'Illegal?' he offered with the same smile.

'Impossible,' I retorted. 'I have no idea how to go about it.'

'In that case you will learn,' Riddle said reasonably.

'There is nothing to learn from,' I objected. 'Aqua Vitae is nothing but a legend.' There was no point in pretending ignorance; I knew what he was referring to, and he knew that I knew.

'So was Rome,' he replied, as though that made any sense at all.

He had just sat back down when the library door opened and Lucius came in. I could see Riddle's unspoken fury at the interruption and decided to steal the moment for myself.

'How dare you enter a room when we are talking,' I snarled.

Malfoy was so surprised that he drew back for a moment, before realising just who was presuming to reprimand him in his own home. 'I beg your pardon,' he expostulated. 'I think you forget yourself,' he said as he strode into the room. He looked down to where Riddle was staring into the flames of the fire, as though he hadn't even come over the threshold, and I could see Lucius had become less sure of himself. If he hadn't been Lucius Malfoy, I might have felt sorry for him.

'Tom,' he said, almost tentatively. 'Would you care for me to have an elf freshen your glass?'

'No, Lucius,' Riddle replied quietly. 'I would care for you to leave the room when Severus and I are talking,' he said, 'or perhaps I shall avail myself of some of the other hospitality I have been offered elsewhere.'

Lucius drew back again, in what looked like a mixture of fear and humiliation; I knew that to be a dangerous cocktail, but savoured it nonetheless. He left the room without even giving me the look of loathing he must have been desperate to give me. That aside, I was grateful for the interruption; it had given me time to think a little, and I hated everything I thought about.

Aqua Vitae could only be brewed, if such a thing could be brewed at all, by someone of the same type of bloodlines, and using a host body of the same bloodlines, as the eventual recipient. There were, of course, no records of it ever having been made, although there was a witch in northern Italy who had died as recently a hundred years before, claiming to have been almost a thousand years old. If I recalled correctly, at that time her claim had been dismissed as unfounded, as all of her descendants had been dead for little short of a millennium, and there was no one to back up her story. Personally, I thought Riddle had a better chance of finding the Philosopher's Stone than having me successfully brew Aqua Vitae, especially when I was one of only four people alive who knew exactly where the Stone was, and the other three didn't know that I knew. I was just pondering what would be the lesser of two evils, if it came to it, when Riddle started me from my reverie and changed direction again.

'We shall talk about this again, Severus, another time,' he said, glancing to the door, as though no longer sure of being uninterrupted, and I once again thanked Lucius for his timely intrusion. 'There are two things I want from you first of all, one which I want done right now, and the other as soon as possible,' he said.

'What would that be?' I asked. If I were forward in my address it was only because I understood now just how valuable he thought me, and I had even then decided not to make pretence of bowing to him; he could deal with me with some respect, or not at all.

'I would like you to take a suitable wife,' he said. 'In fact, I should like you to take Bellatrix Black as your wife. The union would allow you to live in more fitting fashion than the way you live just now. I do not care to have you eat or starve at the whim of Abraxas Malfoy. I have already discussed this with the Blacks, and they are in agreement.'

What he said was only partly true. A niggardly endowment on my mother's side still trickled into my Gringotts vault, the result of one of my antecedents having had the

audacity to marry a half crazy Malfoy niece when the family found themselves unable to foist her upon anyone more deserving. If nothing else, at least I understood now why Bellatrix had suddenly appeared on the shopping list Lucius seemed to have prepared for me.

'No, thank you,' I replied with some vehemence. 'Harpy is not my favoured species.'

Riddle raised his eyebrow, and for the first time he seemed genuinely amused, and I suspect he found that refreshing. 'You refuse me?' he asked, bringing the tips of the index fingers of his steepled hands to his lips.

'I refuse Bella,' I replied, raising my own eyebrow, in some pathetic attempt to show we were equals. 'And if you are the one offering, I refuse you. I would rather share my bed with a mountain troll than Bellatrix Black.'

He gave me a look. 'Narcissa then?' he said magnanimously, as though the cream of wizarding virgins were his to offer. 'Although I suspect Lucius would be disappointed.'

'I don't want any Black hag, thank you, Tom,' I said, surer of my ground, but not without a wince of pain at the lie, as the aching loss I thought I had suffocated, flooded back to me. 'If I marry, which I very much doubt, it will be to someone I love.'

He threw back his head and laughed. 'Oh, my Severus,' he said. 'Such principles. I wonder how you ever got picked for Slytherin. By the way,' he said, as he stood up to dismiss me, 'remember this. You can push me for as long as it amuses me to allow you to do so, but one thing I advise you never to do is to thwart me. Do we understand one another?'

I know it was foolish, but I also knew I had to set out my own stall, so to speak, and I had to get out of that room. I was no longer thinking clearly enough to be in his presence, and I knew that was because I hadn't let myself deal with the shock and pain of what had happened earlier, and now the dark images his suggestion had conjured up were chasing their way through my troubled mind too. I turned in the doorway and gave him a level look.

'I understand you, Tom,' I said. 'Do you understand me?' I didn't intend to wait for an answer.

'Oh, Severus,' he said quietly, more menace lacing that smooth voice than I had ever heard. 'There were two things. The other one will be done before you leave this room.'

He was in front of me, translocated between me and the door. I knew what the other thing was, and maybe if I had felt less wretched, if I had thought life had anything else to offer me I would not have accepted his ultimate gift. Perhaps I flatter myself, flatter myself that resistance to him didn't only hold firm when I was not in his presence, or when it didn't really matter. I held out my left arm, unsurprised to see that the sleeves of both my shirt and my tailcoat had already been turned back to expose my skin. He had a large flat shiny black stone in the palm of his hand, the surface of which seemed to writhe with a life of its own, and he pressed it to the underside of my arm. At first I felt nothing, and wonder to this day if I could have drawn away, although I doubt it, and then I felt something crawl under my skin, as though the flesh of my arm were rising to break through the skin, and something was creeping in to replace it, which in a way was exactly what happened. I became part of Mordestone that night, as it became part of me.

'It is done,' he said quietly, not failing to hide the exaltation in his voice. 'We are part of one another now, my Severus, and you are truly my Severus, as I am your Tom. Never before has Mordestone risen to give a part of herself the way she has done this night.'

I felt myself sway as I looked down and saw indeed that my Dark Mark was different to those of the other Death Eaters. The black snake undulated under my skin, through the skull's eyes and out of its mouth, much in the same way as it did on Lucius's arm, but instead of leaving empty eye sockets as the serpent completed its journey, the eyes of my skull filled with a hateful glowing red, the colour of tainted blood, the colour of death. I looked across the room to where he sat on his chair beside the fire, and wondered if he had risen from his place at all, and such was his power that I doubted then that any corner could hide me from him.

Chapter Four

Chapter 4 of 48

Severus is alone to reflect on the madness of the night at Malfoy Manor

As I stepped into the minstrels' gallery, the sounds of the orchestra, striking up yet another tedious waltz, wafted up from what seemed to be another world. Which, I wondered, was reality? I made my way to where the grand staircase led down to the reception hall, pausing for a moment to look over the balcony, coward that I am, but I didn't feel up to seeing any Blacks as I made my escape from the manor that night. Lucius seemed to have made himself scarce, and I knew it would be a day or two before he managed to un-ruffle his remarkable feathers and seek me out; I knew he would not let the insult lie for too long though. I fretted as I waited for an elf to bring my cloak, and it was only as I was helped into it, that I caught sight of Sirius Black. He was standing behind one of the huge Spanish mahogany uprights at the end of the banister, and I got the feeling he had been waiting for me coming down the stairs and had been watching me. He knew I had seen him and made no effort to conceal himself further, and I don't know why, but I felt less alone for some reason, as though somewhere on that most wretched of nights, someone else was out there, someone else cast adrift in a maelstrom of their own making. I know it is just fanciful to say that he was there for me, but I knew one thing more than I thought he did; I knew we were on the same side.

I Apparated to the disused warehouse at the bottom of the street next to Spinner's End that I always used for such a purpose. It wouldn't have done, after all, to appear from nowhere in the middle of a Muggle street, even one as mean and cheap as the one I lived in. I had only been seen Disapparating once, and that time by such a pitiful scrap of a teenage boy, under the influence of some miserable substance, that I didn't even bother to modify his memory; he wouldn't have had one worth speaking about anyway. It was late by then, well past midnight, and though it had been only one night, enough had happened since the early evening to cause me nightmares for a lifetime. Every time my scattered wits tried to rest on one thing, they were dragged away by another. I was desperate to be home, to try to put what had happened into some type of perspective, and yet terrified to let the fractured images coalesce into the larger picture.

I walked quickly along Cottontrader Row and into my own street, not bothering to conceal the clicks of my boot heels, as they followed me along like some ubiquitous doppelganger. I liked Spinner's End: shabby and uncared for, tired and dispirited, it suited the martyr in my soul; perhaps in some perverse way I wore it as a hair shirt. I identified with every cracked grey pavement slab, and weed-choked garden, and every barking mongrel dog. The charm I always cast on leaving hadn't been disturbed, but then it never had been, not in the five years since I had left Hogwarts. The house swam into only my view as I passed from the light of the Muggle street lamp into darkness so deep that, even knowing my own territory as I did, I always had to resist the urge to light my wand for the few steps to the unwelcoming door to the only thing of value, material or otherwise, that I had inherited from my parents.

My parents had both died the summer I left school, my mother from a lung affliction from which she had suffered for years, and my father two months later, when he fell

down the stairs drunk, having forgotten to buy food as well as drink that week. I did some transformations on the house not long after I buried him. The main one was the living room the rest of world saw, not that they cared to look, but it was what they would have expected had they taken the effort: tatty old books lining the walls, and a rickety table and a couple of horrible chairs, just enough to maintain a front of disinterested neglect. What was hidden from view, the room in which I really lived, but charmed away for myself, was similar in only the oddest way. Books still lined the walls, but these had been culled from the finest antiquarian bookshops of Europe, and even a few from the Orient and the lands of the Arab peoples and the Jews. Many of them were imported for me by a small Chinese wizard in Knockturn Alley. Few of the books were written in English, and most were banned as being unsuitable for various reasons, not least amongst them being the Dark Magic ones. The old seats were still old seats, but were settees of comfortably worn and shiny hide, and the rickety table was replaced by a desk made of solid polished ebony; it was where I sat most of the time. The biggest concession I made to my vanity, and one of which I was fittingly proud, was that I had enhanced the space to that which could not possibly exist in so small a house. I didn't bother with two kitchens; I cooked quickly on what had been my mother's stove, mainly by magic, and ate at my desk.

My parents hadn't been the only relatives of mine to die that year though; an ancient aunt on my mother's side, whom she hadn't ever mentioned, died too. As her only living relative, I inherited a former mill owner's mansion in Northumberland, every bit as splendid as Malfoy Manor and considerably more tasteful, and a sizable working olive grove in Tuscany, which she herself had inherited some years previously, but led me to believe she had never visited. She had left me a letter too, with her solicitor, which surprised me greatly as I had not even known of her existence, although I learnt quite soon that she had known of me. Inside the letter was a photograph of her, in an old-fashioned sunhat, with a wicker trug of herbs over her arm. I confess that I listened to little of what the solicitor told me, as he droned on about arranging probate for what seemed to be a sizable estate, and what funds of my aunt's he had available to pay the crippling inheritance tax that had been incurred on her death. It didn't matter to me; the residual fortune which was just about to be dumped in my lap was more than I had ever expected to earn in a lifetime. Quite apart from that, I could hardly contain myself with the odd feeling of anticipation which had overtaken me, one which had nothing at all to do with money. Just as I had been about to slip the photograph back into the envelope, the wrinkled old smiling face had winked at me.

When I left the solicitor's office in Chancery Lane in London, a very much richer man in the worldly way of things, I slipped the still unread letter from my pocket and picked out the photograph again. I would have been unreasonably disappointed if I had been mistaken, but I hadn't been. The woman in the picture had taken on quite a different pose this time. The sunhat was gone, to leave a mass of feathery white hair above twinkling pale blue eyes, not that faded watery blue of old ladies, but the colour of forget-me-nots and summer sky. I looked into the envelope again to check that there weren't in fact two pictures, but as I did so the wrinkled old face winked again.

'There's just the one, Severus,' she said. 'You don't know me yet, but I know all about you. I'm your Auntie Ethel.'

The letter was long and flowery and seemed to imitate the styles of several authors, one moment as though she had been reading Thackeray, and the next Dickens. It informed me that she had taken a personal interest in my Hogwarts days, hinting of having information passed on to her by what she mysteriously referred to as inside sources. I was sceptical of course, and when she failed to make any attempt to converse with me again, I put her photograph into the envelope and stuck it in my desk drawer. About a week later I was sitting trying to translate an Ancient Macedonian text, when I heard an odd tapping sound, much like an owl requesting entry at the window, but coming instead from the fireplace. At first I couldn't think what it was and eventually tried to ignore it. It became out of kilter and extremely annoying, and I found I was unable to concentrate until I found its source. Ethel's picture had appeared on the horrible tiled mantelpiece, and she was knocking on the glass of a photograph frame I had never seen in my life, as though she were behind a window and trying to get my attention.

'I didn't leave you all that money for you to stick me in a drawer and ignore me,' she said. 'And either sell up this place or do it up nicely, Severus, but I'm not staying here the way it is.'

I sold the mansion in Northumberland eventually, instead of Spinner's End; Ethel said she hadn't cared much for it and had found the ghosts aloof and somewhat wanting in intelligence. I could have lived in the big house I suppose, displayed my wealth with a vulgarity equal to that of the Malfoys, I certainly had the funds to do so, and Ethel and I had had more than one amusing conversation about how Lucius would handle being so rudely upstaged. It never occurred to me to wonder how she knew so much of my world and the people in it, although I know now why that was. I think it was she who convinced me to stay in Spinner's End, saying that it was a good house, and only the memories were bad, and that as I had been born in the house it owed me the debt of protection, and somehow I understood what she was trying to say. Whatever it was, it seemed that just as I thought I had decided otherwise, I changed my mind and stayed put.

Ethel didn't say much most of the time, only commenting occasionally as I made my home improvements, berating me for drinking too much or not eating properly, but her odd charm quite knocked me for six, and it wasn't long before I found her almost to be a confidant. I think she genuinely enjoyed funding what I had always secretly wanted as my lifestyle, and I kept my lifestyle secret; I didn't really want anyone to know anything about me, and let them quietly assume I was the impoverished Snape they had hitherto taken me for.

There was one exception to that, one person who knew most things about me, and that was Lily Evans, although there were possibly two by then, if the rumours about her romance with James Potter were true. I hadn't spoken to Lily for some time after I left school, maybe two years or so; relations between us had soured to the extent that when we met we weren't even civil to one another. That had saddened me deeply, even though I knew the blame lay entirely with me. I had been very fond of Lily, as fond of her as I was of Andromeda, although in a different way. It's odd I suppose, but I viewed Lily in much the same way as it now seemed that Andromeda viewed me. What goes around, as they say, comes around. A couple of years before, Lily had come to me in desperation, thinking herself to be pregnant. Just what she had expected me to do about that, I'm not sure; she was every bit as good a potions maker as I was, but on reflection I think she just needed a friend at that time, someone who would neither be judgmental nor try to talk her into doing anything she didn't want to do. It turned out to be a false alarm though, although the weeks she spent at Spinner's End taught me a few things. The first was that no matter how hard one tries, no man can isolate himself completely, and the second one was that I am fool for women's charms.

The next alarm she had wasn't false, and I confess it is a bitter regret to me that I didn't insist that we marry right away to at least give the child what I rather pompously considered to be a decent moral start in life. That didn't happen of course; she went back to stay with her parents, promising me that she would bear the child. She lost it in the tenth week of her pregnancy, and I lost count of the times I wondered if she would have borne the baby if she had stayed with me, or if she had moved away to rid herself of it, or if any amount of prayer can ever undo what the gods have already ordained. Whatever it was, I was alone.

That night, the night I came home from Malfoy Manor a fully-fledged Death Eater and single man with no prospect of change, I was tempted to wallow in the version of the living room that I walked into; cold and unwelcoming, it would at least afford me the opportunity of my first success of the night, that of becoming monumentally drunk. I hoped Ethel was asleep. I had turned her picture to the wall before I left, tired of her harking on at me not to go to the manor that night. I left the picture the way it was; I didn't want her to know what I had allowed to happen to me, as though somehow I had betrayed her as much as I had betrayed myself. I sat on the lumpy armchair, and uncorked a bottle of single malt I had brought through from the kitchen.

'Fuck it all,' I snarled out loud to myself and raised my wand, letting the Concealment Charm drop. If I were going to get rat-arsed and maudlin, I might as well do it in comfort.

I drank quickly at first, almost panicked that I wasn't becoming as drunk as I wanted to be. I had to become anaesthetised before I allowed myself to think properly, a contradiction in terms I know, but that way maybe one thing wouldn't hurt so badly, or another frighten me so much. My demons wouldn't be chased away so easily though, they floated from the corners of my mind, demanding attention. At last I stood up, half the bottle lining my otherwise empty stomach. I took off my tailcoat, loosened my white bow tie and pulled aside the sleeve of my high-necked evening shirt. I only realised I had closed my eyes when I summoned up the dregs of my courage to open them, to look at the atrocity I had permitted to befall me.

I felt the bile rise in my throat at the motionless black tattoo with its red eyes. And then it writhed, and it was all I could do to keep the whisky I had drunk in its current place of residence. I was trembling and sweating, hoping against hope that my vision was swimming, or that I was just imagining it, but even as I tried, I felt something move under my skin, something alive, and I only just made it to the kitchen to throw the first lot of whisky up into the sink. It was going to be a long night.

'Oh, Severus,' Ethel's picture said, still turned to wall, as I staggered back to the living room. 'Turn me round, boy. I am afraid to do it myself.'

I shook my head in denial of everything, without saying anything. I had nothing to say, neither in my defence nor in explanation.

That was the first night she left the picture, but I was too drunk to really realise it had happened.

Chapter Five

Chapter 5 of 48

Severus receives a visitor, as unwelcome as he is unexpected, at first

I don't remember much about the next few days, passing as they did in a merciful blur of intoxication. I do recall some things though, whether figments of my troubled imagination or reality, I cannot say to this day. I know that Ethel spent a great deal of time out of her picture, and it seemed that she and I talked for long hours whilst I watched on. I know that makes no sense, that I was drinking myself into some sort of oblivion, and yet watching myself having fiercely debated discussions with an old lady who seemed to walk in and of a photograph at whatever whim possessed her. Of the conversations, if there really were any, I remember little, and yet even that is not entirely true. For many days, and indeed months afterwards, I found that I already knew fresh knowledge imparted to me, already understood anything about to be explained, and although I am somewhat vain in my own depth of knowledge, I am honest enough, at least with myself, to admit to what I don't know. One thread seemed to weave its way through these phantom talks; that was Ethel's, and latterly my own, concern for Andromeda's unborn child, the unborn child who would have the bloodlines required for me to embark on the task I had, the task I had in some way begun to accept when I took the Dark Mark. I had stooped to take the gauntlet in allowing Riddle to bestow his gift, and the moment I made any attempt, actual or mental, to begin to prepare Aqua Vitae, I would have picked it from the floor, and any half-blooded wizard born thereafter would be fair game.

On what turned out to be the fourth morning I had run out of the admirable supply of whisky I hadn't realised I had, and it seemed Ethel had run out of things to say; I didn't think then to wonder why the two events dovetailed so neatly. Whatever it was, as the fog in my mind began to be replaced by something altogether more vicious, Ethel retired to her picture. I tried to make sense of the last few days, but my head was becoming so sore that I could barely think at all. I swallowed what must have been an almost fatal dose of hangover cure, and waited until I felt I could continue my own quest, that of avoiding sobriety at all costs. But all that was left was Ogden's, which I didn't much care for, and the flask of finest elf-made wine that I didn't really want to think about.

I had had the elf wine for almost a year by then, having had to wait for a month for it to be illegally imported into Knockturn Alley for me; all that time I had spent rehearsing my useless lines, and waiting for the moment that would never arrive now. The wine came, of course, from Transylvania, with a provenance written in elfish, to the effect that the grapes were imported from Tuscany, and had been squeezed by the hands of pre-pubescent female elves, directly descended from those brought from Italy when Transylvania had been under the rule of the Roman Empire. All in all it involved quite an amount of clandestine travelling of one sort or another, and I had considered it a fittingly expensive gift, the very best that money could buy, with which I had intended to toast my engagement to Andromeda. I lifted it from the shelf next to where Ethel's picture faced the wall again, and deliberately smashed it on the stone hearth, watching the blood red wine spill over the stone to creep into the spaces in the floorboards, filling the knotty parts in a way that reminded me of the eyes of the Dark Mark. I had just reached for the Ogden's, when a loud demanding knock sounded on my front door.

There weren't that many people who knew where to find me, and apart from Muggles selling raffle tickets on the odd occasion I left the charms down, I had few visitors. It is a suitable testament to how drunk I still was that I didn't realise the state I must have been in when I threw open the front door in a rage at being so intruded upon.

'I had thought that if you were going to get drunk that you would have sobered up by now,' Sirius Black said, as he pushed past me and closed the door.

'Go away,' I said, in what sounded like an incredulous whine, even to me.

He had reached the living room, looking around himself, as though stepping from the miserable little hall to the luxury of the living room had been as surprising as jumping into a hot bath only to find it was cold instead. Despite my drunkenness, nothing apart from the smashed wine flask and a couple of the empty whisky bottles was really in a state of disarray. I'd been too busy drinking and either having or imagining long talks to make a mess, and I'd just slept where I fell down, usually on the floor. I could see Black was quite taken aback though; it hadn't been at all what he'd expected, and I felt no small satisfaction at having so effortlessly robbed him of his preconceptions.

'If you have come for a return bout, Black, either kick me in the balls and be done with it, or come back another day,' I said. 'I really do not care either way.'

'Yeah,' he said, wincing as though he had monetarily forgotten about my assault, and some phantom stab of pain had reminded him again. 'That was bloody sore. Remind me to thank you properly some time.'

'Why are you here?' I asked, without the thought even crossing what then passed for my mind to question how he had found the house at all.

He didn't reply, not directly anyway. He had sat himself on one of my leather settees, my favourite as it happens, the one I fancied I had worn a comfortable groove in, and he had spelled away the smashed glass and the spilt wine with a negligent flick of his wand. 'You wouldn't want to stain that rug, would you?' he said, and I could see he knew the value of the Afghan Dune Pixie weave. He turned to me with a frown, and I suspect the bald frankness of his own question somehow appealed to me. 'How do you pay for this?' he asked, looking around the room, with its exquisitely expensive books and its ebony desk and the other trappings of self-indulgence few could afford. 'Lucius?'

'Hardly,' I retorted. 'I am fortunate enough not to have to beg the Malfoys for scraps, not that it is any of your business.'

'Of course it isn't. Sorry,' he said offhandedly. 'For some reason I thought you were ... well ... poor. You always appeared so.'

'I always was,' I replied tartly. 'Until recently.'

'I see,' he said, and gave the little frown again.

I wanted him to believe me. I don't really know why, but I didn't want him to think my fortune stemmed from anything to do with Tom Riddle, or Dark Magic, or Lucius Malfoy. I didn't realise it, not then, but I needed someone apart from the photograph of a dead old lady to believe in me, and still unknown to me I had already cast Sirius Black in the role. Perhaps because we were such opposites that we were almost equals, or perhaps Ethel and I had discussed such a thing in the past four days, or maybe I just hated him enough to trust him.

'What do you want, Black?' I asked again, through the dull confusing ache of what, despite the potion I had swallowed, felt like it were working up to being a towering hangover, one I wasn't at all sure I had the courage to endure. 'I'm sure you didn't come to gloat over whatever poverty you might have hoped to find.'

'No,' he said, and looked away, towards where Ethel's picture was still facing the wall. 'I came for a few reasons.'

'Just one will do for now,' I said. My head was becoming so sore that I was finding it difficult even to maintain my hostility.

'Why don't you sober up and I'll tell you?' he suggested, looking back at me and then to Ethel's picture again, as though drawn either by curiosity, or something I didn't

understand.

'Why don't you just tell me and go?' I countered, tiring of the spat, as a wave of nausea swept over me and left me sweating, trembling and as wretched as I ever hope to feel again. I only had time to wish I had the strength to blast the look of sympathetic empathy from Black's face when my eyes were drawn to the picture too. I wasn't at all surprised to see that it had turned itself around and now faced into the room. I knew I hadn't done that; I'm embarrassed to say that I didn't even know where my wand was at that moment in time, and I certainly didn't have the mental capacity at that point to do any magic without it.

'Why don't I go and make a nice cup of tea for you, Severus? Then you can go and get yourself tidied up,' Ethel suggested. 'I have standards to maintain, you know, dear, and you've really had enough whisky now anyway. I'll just put a little something into the tea to help you along, shall I?' she murmured as she disappeared from the picture.

I heard her pottering about in the kitchen and was pleased to notice that Black was every bit as intrigued as I pretended not to be. I wanted to open the kitchen door which led from the room we were in, just to see how she was going about her task, but I didn't want Black to know that I was as mystified as he was. After a moment, and it hadn't even been long enough for either of us to make attempt at conversation or for the lack of one to seem awkward, the kitchen door opened itself and Ethel came out, wearing a long lavender dress with a bustle that must surely have gone out of fashion a hundred years before she was born. She was a ghost, of course, but one who appeared to have the facility to function in the real world, yet not a poltergeist. It relieved me and frightened me and confused me, all at the same time, to realise that I, or some part of me, had indeed been conversing deeply with her, whilst the other part of me drank to insensibility.

'Fascinating,' Black said with what I'm sure he thought was a fetching, very Gryffindor smile, as she handed him a delicate looking cup and saucer I had never seen, and placed a plate of hot scones on the small table beside his seat, my seat. 'What are you, madam, if I may ask?'

'I'm Auntie Ethel,' she replied, and then turned to me, winked the wink that charmed me to my very soul, and handed me a cup and saucer too, one that she couldn't possibly have been carrying a moment before. She watched me until I sipped at the odd-tasting brew, before turning back to Black. 'And you, young handsome beau that you are, must be Sirius Black.'

'Amazing,' he replied. 'How did you know that?' he asked her, and shot me a suspicious look.

It was only then that I realised I wasn't drunk anymore; I didn't have a headache, I wasn't tired, I didn't even feel nauseous. 'Ethel knows everything worth knowing,' I replied dryly in her stead. 'And a few things that aren't. Don't you, Ethel?'

She had conjured a rather strange looking chair from somewhere. It was spindly and looked able to bear the weight of nothing heavier than she was, but it had a very deep seat, and it was only when she sat down, carefully arranging her voluminous skirts, that I understood it had to accommodate both the bustle and her bottom, and whatever other apparatus held her and her ensemble together.

'Of course I know everything, dear,' she said, patting my hand like the grandmother I had never had. 'Just as I know you are going to listen to Sirius Black, and he is going to listen to you, and then we are going to work out how we are going to get you all out of the terrible fix you are in. But for now, I shall rest a little, and you will have a bath and tidy yourself up, Severus.'

I dared a look at Black, but he was looking at the black and white photograph of an old lady in a sunhat with a wicker trug of herbs over her arm, and when I turned back to Ethel there wasn't even a space where her chair had been. I wondered if I were still drunk after all.

I had stood up, quite at a loss as to whether to go for the now much longed for bath and leave Black alone with Ethel, or just to get rid of him. Now I was sober the questions had begun to seep into my awareness, demanding attention and answers, and I needed to speak to her alone, while I was in the full possession of what passed for my mental faculties. Ethel had turned herself to the wall though, and I took that to mean that she did not care to be disturbed. Black glanced quickly at the back of the picture and turned to me.

'I'll assume she isn't listening,' he said, nodding to the picture frame.

I shrugged noncommittally; in truth I didn't have the vaguest idea, but I wasn't about to let him know that.

'I should have told her, Severus,' Black went on. 'I'm sorry for that much. I'm sorry I didn't tell her; perhaps it might have prepared her in some way.'

'Prepared whom? Ethel?' I asked, totally perplexed. 'What are you talking about, Black?'

'Andromeda, of course. I should have told her ... but when we sat down to dinner Bellatrix told me that both you and Lucius were announcing your engagements to her and Narcissa at the end of the evening, and I just assumed I'd been mistaken.'

'Mistaken in what?' I asked, smarting at the reference to Andromeda, and not caring much for Bellatrix's misconception either. I didn't feel like admitting to Black that I had intended to be engaged to one of his cousins, but I had an uncomfortable feeling that he might have guessed something along those lines, and wondered again at just what he had overheard.

'I knew you were in love with Andromeda ... while we were talking, I realised it, and then when she arrived ... I'm sorry.' He trailed off somewhat lamely, having confirmed my worst fears.

'I don't know what you're talking about,' I snarled, furious at him and Andromeda afresh, furious that he had come here to rake about in my ruins to offer some patronising platitudes to satisfy his own pathetic ego. I crossed the room and grabbed him by the lapels of the long black leather coat he wore, much the same way as I had grabbed him a few nights before, but he was ready this time, and his hands dropped to cover the Black family jewels.

'Not another knee in the balls, Severus, please,' he groaned. 'Why don't you knock out a couple of teeth instead?'

I shoved him away, disgusted with us both equally. 'Why don't you just go, Black? I don't want to hear anything you have to say, and I'm sure you heard enough with your little eavesdropping exercise to satisfy even you.'

'I wasn't eavesdropping,' he objected so quickly as he sat back down that I was tempted to believe him. 'I was making sure no one hostile came onto the terrace. Fuck sake, I thought you were going to be talking about the Order of ... something else anyway.'

'The Order of what?' I asked, not at all sure that he hadn't deliberately hung a carrot in front of me.

'Nothing,' he snapped, standing again and beginning to make for the door. 'Have another vat of whisky and forget I even came.'

Even though I knew he was playing a little game of brinkmanship, and he knew that I knew, I almost let him go. Now I was sober, whatever I had managed to forget, along with what Ethel had imparted to me, was crowding in on me. I followed him to the door, wondering how to back down without seeming to, wondering why I should bother, yet knowing that I was turning away some sort of chance to right the wrongs of that night. I didn't have any idea of how that could be, but I knew I had to try, or wear my damnation around my neck for the rest of my life.

'What were the other things?' I asked, swallowing whatever of my pride was left to me.

'What do you mean?'

'You said you came to tell me a few things,' I said. 'What were the others?'

He gave me a level look, one I saw the relief through. 'Go and have a bath; you're a mess,' he said, nodding to where the stairs rose from almost the front door of the mean little hallway. 'I promise not to make free with your whisky or steal the silverware.'

'There's no whisky left worth speaking of,' I replied. 'Being of unsound mind, I drank the lot. You may help yourself to any silverware you find.' It was the best I could do at short notice, and I turned and began to climb the stairs.

Chapter Six

Chapter 6 of 48

Severus gets yet another visitor.

I hadn't looked at the Dark Mark since that first night, hadn't been undressed, I'm ashamed to say. It was still there though, a black and red accusation, and I knew then that I could have resisted. If I had waited, gone to him on another night, I could have resisted him. I'll never forget the shock I felt when I eased myself into the warm bathwater and let my arms drop, the way the mark hissed like hot iron if it comes into contact with cold water, as though a blacksmith had plunged a red hot horseshoe into a bucket of water. I felt sickened and shamed anew, and I didn't know where I would find the courage to tell Black what I had done, even as I knew I had to. If I didn't then, and in some way events overtook me and no one knew about me, I would burn in hellfire of my own making. At least that way, those not of Riddle's calling could be forewarned if necessary; Andromeda could be warned. I felt my heart lurch and my stomach flood with unpleasant warmth at the thought of her child, the child I had called a squalling Mudblood brat. Perhaps she would lose the baby during the early stages of her pregnancy, I thought with a guilty pang, as Lily had lost mine, whilst the selfish part of me explained that would be the lesser of two possible evils, and the part I kept hidden from even myself longed for a second chance, however slim, to take her as my own. If there were no baby, would that also mean there was no Ted? I had no answer to that, and was honest enough with myself to admit that I deserved none.

I'm quite sure that shaving four days growth off in the bath, without the benefit of a mirror, was a risky business the way my hands were shaking, whether as an aftermath of the alcohol I had consumed, or the fact that no matter where I laid my left arm the Dark Mark either watched me or sizzled angrily in the water, I couldn't tell. I didn't know how to bear its presence for much longer, far less the rest of my life, and found myself panicked again.

I dressed quickly, in black trousers and a long-sleeved white silk shirt, almost surprised that when the mark was covered it seemed to still my terror, as though something as simple as putting it out of sight would also put it out of my mind. I towelled my still wet hair again, tied my cravat and pulled on my frock coat, buttoning it up with a flick of my wrist, confident enough of my spell not to check that the right buttons were in the right holes. I squared my shoulders, tried to quell the flood of trepidation that ran through me, and walked down the stairs, absently promising myself to listen to Ethel's bidding and do something about the insipid green threadbare carpeting in the ugly little hall. Of course, it hadn't occurred to me at that time that she shouldn't have ever seen the hall carpet. My mind's rambling didn't help me to forget that I had to face things though, and it was just as well Black was there, because I wasn't doing that on my own.

I'm not sure what I expected when I pushed the door open, perhaps Ethel and Black having a cosy chat over tea and crumpets about secrets I didn't know I had, or perhaps her picture still turned to the wall so that Black could rifle through my desk. What I didn't expect was for him to be fast asleep with his legs drawn up onto one of my rather expensive old leather settees, my favourite of course, with his head thrown back so that his hair almost reached the floor. His mouth was wide open, and he was snoring his head off. I was only disappointed that he couldn't see himself.

'Did you do that?' I asked Ethel, to where her picture was again facing into the room. She was pretending to prune some yellow roses.

'Yes, dear, I didn't think you wanted him poking around too much for now.'

I remember giving her a long look which she seemed to choose to ignore, finding something much more interesting in her roses.

'If it is of any help, dear, I suspect he knows much more than you think. I suspect that is why he has come here,' she said eventually, laying her secateurs into the trug she carried over her arm. 'Now remember, Severus, when you are arguing and losing your temper and being difficult, that you need allies too.' See seemed to have a large wardrobe at her disposal, and she dusted her hands off on the long brown skirt she then wore, and gave me another of her looks. 'Shall I wake him?' she asked.

I felt some kind of relief flood through me, not even knowing from what it stemmed. 'No,' I replied. 'Allow me.'

I crossed the room and put my hand over the open mouth, and watched with the first amusement I had felt for some while as the greyish-blue eyes flew open in momentary panic, and Black's limbs thrashed in what seemed to be more directions than physically possible. Then he bit my hand.

'You could have given me a fucking heart attack,' he accused as he sat upright and drew a hand across his face.

'I know,' I replied. 'A petty revenge, but satisfying none the less.'

I don't know how we slipped into talking about what we needed to talk about, or perhaps I do, but every time I glared at Ethel she was either taking the seeds off lavender, or arranging flowers, or doing anything but catching my eye. Whatever it was, I felt a weight somehow shift off my chest when Black asked about the Dark Mark, as though he knew he had to broach it and that I couldn't do that alone.

I shoved my shirtsleeve back, feigning irritation. 'Happy now?' I snarled. 'This what you wanted to see?'

I watched him frown; he seemed to do that quite a lot. 'It looks different from Reggie's,' he said.

'It is different,' I muttered, pulling my sleeve back down, as though to shut the thing from my life. 'Who told you about it anyway?'

'Riddle announced it, not long after you left actually. He seemed extremely pleased with himself, almost as pleased as Bella was with herself.'

'What's that supposed to mean?' I asked, bridling again.

'Your engagement was the second announcement of the evening; in fact I was surprised to find you alone today,' Black replied.

'My engagement?' I snarled through gritted teeth, Black's stifled amusement more irritating to me than his outright ridicule would have been. 'What engagement?'

'To Bellatrix, of course. She and Tom Riddle made it quite clear that you and she were to be married.'

'Where the fuck did they think I was?' I gaped at Black, quite at a loss as to how to explain the obvious to him. 'Don't they think I would have hung around for the rest of the evening?'

'So you're not engaged?' Black said with some degree of open amusement. 'I confess I was a little puzzled at her insistence. Although it does seem that Tom is quite keen on the union, and as Bella is one of his favourites it might be difficult for you to back out, Severus.'

'Back out? What on earth are you talking about? I don't require to back out of anything I'm not in,' I snapped. 'And if Bellatrix is such a favourite of Riddle's, let me be the first to assure him that I, for one, shall not stand in his way.'

'You're going to have to do something about it, Snape,' Black reasoned. 'In fact Reggie said that Riddle was furious with Lucius for not being able to find you this last couple of days.'

'Lucius knows where I live,' I remarked, and found myself glancing to where Ethel was fussing with a lilac bush which didn't need fussed with. 'Have you been hiding this house from people who know how to find it?' I asked her, as suspicion crept belatedly over me.

'I'm sure the house can hide itself when it wants to, without any help from me, dear,' she replied. 'Anyway, you weren't really in a fit state to see Lucius or the awful women he brought with him.'

'Women?' I asked, rather more faintly than I would have liked.

'Yes, a fair-haired shrew and black-haired harridan who thinks she is far more beautiful than she actually is,' Ethel replied. 'Actually, she's a bit like Sirius Black here, but without the beard and moustache, and with darker hair. They both sounded a touch shrill with Lucius when he couldn't find you.'

'And it just slipped your mind to mention this?' I asked. 'When did they call?'

'Oh, several times,' she replied with her usual air of unconcern. 'In fact three times with the women, and once Lucius came on his own, just a half hour ago, while you were bathing.'

'Has anyone else called?' I asked her coolly.

'Apart from Sirius here, no, dear. Were you expecting anyone else?' she replied.

'Why did you let him in?' I asked, refusing to be sidetracked by any of her nonsense about the house hiding itself, and nodding to where Black sat with another of his confused frowns on his face. I had to keep reminding myself that Ethel was a mistress at giving indirect answers.

'Oh, don't be tedious, Severus dear,' she chided me. 'You've all but lost the thread of what you were talking about with inconsequentialities. It's a failing of yours to try to cover the more important issues with minor ones.' She turned to Sirius, and it was only then that I noticed she was no longer in the picture and had joined us in the room again. I was finding her changing planes of existence rather disconcerting.

'Now, Sirius dear,' she said, sitting herself down in the spindly chair which had reappeared too. 'Don't you think you should get on with it? You're every bit as bad as Severus when it comes to procrastination.'

'I'm trying to get around to it,' he replied.

'Around to what?' I asked.

'The bee, Severus dear,' Ethel replied for him. 'He really came here because the bee wants to speak to you.' She looked towards the window, to where a large bumblebee was tapping gently against it, as though being wafted into the glass every now and again by a summer breeze.

I know I groaned. I suppose when one associates a word with someone or something for a long time that it loses its other meanings, and it took me a moment to remember that Dumbledore was Old English for bumblebee, and all the connotations that thought brought with it. Of course he would be Animagus; aren't they all, the damn Gryffindors? That apart, he was one of the last people I wanted to see, if I discounted Tom Riddle, Lucius, and the awful Bellatrix Black. But Sirius had stood up, and was opening the window, and the man himself materialised in my living room, all dusty grey robes, and grey velvet slippers, and smelling of sherbet ruddy lemons. I had never seen him looking so grave.

He nodded to Black, gave me a long look, and surprised me by turning to Ethel, who had removed herself to her picture. 'And just where do you fit in here, Emeline?' he asked.

'Ethel, dear,' she replied, giving him a hard look, one I hadn't seen before.

'Hmm,' Dumbledore remarked. 'What happened to Emeline Thoracity Helewys Elizabeatha Lavinia? Did you lose a bit somewhere along the line?'

'I shortened it to the initials, Albus,' she replied, as though it shouldn't matter any more to him than it mattered to her. 'I had thought that you were going to be a bright boy, an interfering busybody, but a bright one. Seems I was only partly right.'

'Do you two know one another?' It was Black who asked the obvious question that I hadn't wanted to ask.

'Yes, of course we do,' Dumbledore replied.

I was standing back at that point, as though I were just the audience in a play that was being acted out on my behalf. I certainly didn't want to venture any remark that would make me appear to be as foolish as I felt. I had had an uneasy relationship with Dumbledore as a schoolboy, often feeling that he had some sort of expectation of me that I didn't understand, and yet he was as unmistakably Gryffindor as James Potter, and of course, Black, who now stood between us like some sort of hesitant referee. I remember sensing disappointment in Dumbledore, the older I got, as the Dark Forces gathered strength around us, and news and politics seeped into even our cloistered world, poisoning those of a naturally evil bent, and sweeping along those too weak to resist. As I reached my fifth year I turned to the dubious friendships of boys like Avery and Mulciber, small-minded fools that they were, in an attempt to gain whatever knowledge I could of what was happening around me; after all, the news coming out of Spinner's End only centred around my parents' wishes that I find somewhere else to stay over summer. Of course, those around me took that to mean that I was fascinated by the Dark Forces for entirely different reasons than educating myself about what I considered to be, not only my enemy, but the enemy of the few things I held dear: the two things I held dear to be precise, Lily Evans and Andromeda Black.

But I was alone, I had no real friends; Andromeda had left Hogwarts, my relationship with Lily had soured at that time, and even Lucius had moved on, and I was left with powerful enemies who should not have been, and ill-chosen friends who weren't. In some sort of self-defence, against I knew not what, I tightened the cloak of hostility I had taken to wearing, and let them all make of me what they would. However, even I was surprised at being offered to a werewolf by none other than Sirius Black, and in some way that jolted me to the understanding that I had cast my own role in the eyes of others, and although even now I was reluctant to admit it, they were those who mattered.

'But ... she's Severus's aunt,' Black said to Dumbledore, clearly as bemused as I felt. 'She said so,' he added, turning to me in what looked like mild accusation. 'He did too.'

'She's everyone's aunt,' Dumbledore replied, addressing me more than Black, 'in a vague sort of way. When you've been around as long as she has, there's a good chance your blood runs in everyone's veins. But I find myself wondering, Severus, why you have a photograph of Emeline Thoracity Helewys Elizabeatha Lavinia Gryffindor, considering she died when photography, even in the Muggle world, was in its infancy.'

'Gryffindor?' I echoed, ignoring the difficult question, and turning to the picture. 'Are you a true descendant of Godric Gryffindor?' I asked, without making the leap to realising that I would also be such a descendant if that were true.

'Not quite, dear,' Ethel replied vaguely.

'But you are a Gryffindor?' Black put in, and though laying claim to some part of her.

'I married a Gryffindor,' she replied.

I'm not sure how I made the leap to understanding, but I thought then the look Dumbledore exchanged with the photograph might have had something to do with it, more likely it was one of the things Ethel and I had discussed, the first of many facts that I couldn't have known, but found that I did. 'What was your maiden name?' I asked in a voice I didn't really recognise as my own, then suddenly wished I hadn't, because I had already become aware that whilst she was confirming she had been Godric Gryffindor's wife, she was also Salazar Slytherin's sister. And something else occurred to me too: something menacing, ugly, a memory of Tom Riddle saying, 'We are the same.'

Chapter Seven

Chapter 7 of 48

Severus begins to understand the importance of his roots, and the roots of others of importance.

Dumbledore had made himself comfortable on my favourite settee, the one Black had occupied, and seemed to feel it behoved him to direct the conversation, something that, whilst it annoyed me a little, also drew some of the more reluctant admissions from me, the ones I had even denied to myself. He pretended not to notice that Ethel had slipped out of her picture again.

I was uncomfortable, in quite a different way to the unease I had felt at Malfoy Manor, but every bit as troubled, as my muddled brain unfolded difficult truths to me, just keeping abreast as the talk became deeper and deeper. Black said little, seemingly content to sit back and listen to the conversation between Dumbledore and me, peppered by the occasional remark from Ethel. I didn't resent Black's presence, surprising to me as that was, in fact if anything, I welcomed it, sensing him to be less judgemental than the old man who was questioning me so intently that it felt more like an interrogation, which, of course, it was.

Dumbledore moved forward in his seat, his blue eyes as unreadable as they always were. 'Let me see the Mark, Severus,' he said at length, having got me to the end of my story, to when I was about to leave Riddle in the library of Malfoy Manor, as a Death Eater.

I drew back at that point; I wasn't ready for that. When I had shown it to Black I had done so proactively, on my own terms, so to speak.

'What's the big deal, Albus?' Black put in quickly, as if he sensed my discomfort. 'It's just a Dark Mark.'

'Hush, Sirius,' Dumbledore chided him, as though he were still a favoured Gryffindor schoolboy, before turning again to me, to where I had rearranged my mental defences and come to terms with showing him the accursed Mark anyway. 'You said Riddle said Mordestone rose, Severus. I need to see that Mark.' He paused for a moment. 'Unless there is some other reason why you do not want to show it to me?'

'Such as?' I asked, bridling at the veiled suggestion.

'I have to know, Severus,' he replied. 'I have to know if your true allegiance lies with Riddle.' He held up his hand to stifle both my and Black's expostulations.

I noticed that Ethel was the one who sat back now, watching me carefully, and it took me a moment to realise that she had not spoken aloud when her words slipped softly into my mind. *"Show him, Severus. We need him to trust us the way Sirius Black already does. Only he has the power over the white stone."*

That brought me up short, yet another play on the old man's name, Albus, the white stone, and some sort of hope flooded through me that he had indeed the power. I rolled back the sleeve of the white silk shirt, wincing as the Dark Mark reminded me of its physical presence with an angry sting, like a wasp that has been suddenly freed to wreak its vengeance.

Dumbledore just nodded and turned away. 'Cover it up,' he said shortly, failing to disguise what I took then as disgust.

I can't remember ever feeling so ashamed, so small and worthless and weak, and I didn't care for the feeling. Nor did I care for the fact that I wasn't even alone, so that I could crawl into a corner and lick my self-inflicted wounds. At least when I had so upset Lily Evans, and latterly Andromeda, I had had that righteous indignation of one who sees himself slighted to back me up; but now I had nothing but my own weakness, my own folly, and my own vanity at having assumed myself able to withstand Riddle's power. I found I had nothing to say, no defence to what I had brought upon myself, and perhaps those who deserved it least.

I took my time rolling my shirtsleeve back down, and forewent buttoning it with the quick spell I usually used, going through the painstaking ritual of closing the six tiny buttons by hand instead. It took much longer than it should have, as my fingers fumbled clumsily on the fastenings, and I was grateful for the time I had given myself. When I looked up at last I found that all three of them were watching me, but instead of the reproach I had assumed in the old man's demeanour, I saw challenge, and welcomed at least that much as something I could grasp. All I needed was the courage, and perhaps a reason, to reach out for it.

'I am going to ask you again, Severus, in front of Sirius and ... Ethel,' Dumbledore said, as though trying out an unfamiliar name for the first time. 'But not where your allegiance lies, this time,' he said, holding up his hand to stifle any reply I might have had. 'Loyalties can change, they can be forced and coerced and purchased, and even tricked out the unwary; I have seen that much in my years on this earth. What I need to know, Severus, is where your heart lies.'

My heart, that leaden weight in my chest, that traitor to me, and yet, had I but known it before then, it would have served me better than my head had done thus far. 'Not with Tom Riddle anyway,' I replied. It was the only honest answer I had, and it seemed to satisfy Dumbledore more than any false declarations of fealty to the Order of the Phoenix. I almost gasped as I realised that Black had pulled himself up when he had spoken earlier, had only said, "the Order of ... something else", and that Ethel was watching me even more intently than usual, almost warningly.

'Has the Order of the Phoenix something more to offer wizardkind than more of the same under a more benevolent master?' I asked, deciding to play my own game. I saw Ethel give me a shrewd look that I ignored; if she were intent on messing about in my head, I intended to give her her money's worth, after all, she had paid for it so far.

Dumbledore seemed to assume that Black had told me about the Order, and Black just gave another of his little frowns and appeared to be content to let the matter pass.

'The Order does not brand its followers like cattle, nor expect them to follow like sheep,' the old man said firmly, nodding to where I found I was holding my left arm behind my back. 'It is called freedom of choice, Severus. Not the "think as I think, and do as I say" politics of Tom Riddle.'

He was harder than I remembered him to be, I saw that then, maybe as a result of the intervening years since I had left Hogwarts being so politically turbulent; or perhaps that was the real Albus Dumbledore, and the façade was the benign Headmaster. I couldn't tell which. He wanted an answer from me, not a smart retort, or a carefully contrived barb. I saw the expectancy again, the same speculative look he had drawn me several times in my later student days; it seemed to be the only trace of the man who had tried to mentor the progeny of the wizarding world. Maybe it was then that I realised that he had done just that, slipping in the back door of my mind, like a thief in the night, but leaving his valuables behind, and stealing nothing, and I found myself wanting to prove that I had cherished what he had left.

'What do you suppose I have to offer your cause?' I asked, swallowing my pride, where it stuck in my throat with the knot of humility which was trying to pass it. 'I am neither your meat, nor Tom Riddle's poison.'

'My point precisely,' Dumbledore countered. 'And as Tom Riddle does not know that much, you are all the more valuable to us.'

I almost laughed. For someone as worthless as I had felt myself to be over the last few days, I wondered why everyone suddenly wanted a piece of me ... except for Andromeda, I thought, with a pang of self-pity. 'You want me to act as your spy?' I asked. 'Why should you have faith in a man who has taken the Dark Mark, when I am sure there are many more worthy of your trust?' I looked towards where Black was sitting back and watching us, wondering why he had not been offered the position, or whether he had turned it down. He was a Black, after all, a likely candidate for Riddle's cause, and yet perhaps his sexual proclivities and his Gryffindor heritage had already excluded him.

'But none better equipped for this particular challenge, Severus,' Dumbledore replied.

I thought about that for a moment, about just what he was asking of me: to don Riddle's cloak and all that brought with it, accept the glitter and pretend I didn't see it was fool's gold, all the time remaining faithful to my own ideals, just realising then what they were. The old man was asking me to be a voluntary pariah, to accept being the outcast I had always pretended I wanted to be. And he was right; I could think of no one better fitted for the position, no one with the practice I had had; after all, I had been rehearsing since I was eleven years old. I found I was nodding, as though he were offering me some sort of unexpected salvation, which in fact he was; perhaps I should have checked the price was one I could afford to pay.

He sat back, looking pleased with himself, and on reflection I know he had expected no less of me, and I had only confirmed to him what he thought he already knew: that in some way, whatever happened in the future, I was his man and always would be.

'Who will know?' I asked, instead of all of the other questions I should have thought of.

'Sirius, obviously,' Dumbledore replied. 'Ethel, me ... one or two others as I see fit. However, Severus, the fewer people who know, the less likelihood there is of your cover being broken, and apart from we three,' he said, nodding to Ethel and Sirius, 'and perhaps Andromeda Black, I prefer no one else was in this particular confidence for now.'

I felt something shift in my chest, and I didn't even bother to attempt to fool myself that it was anything but relief that, if I went to Riddle, she would know I was not what I purported to be.

'Why Andromeda?' Black asked, breaking his silence for the first time. 'Is that not putting Severus in unnecessary danger?'

Dumbledore said nothing for a few long moments, and I fancied he was rehearsing his lines, as though what he was about to say was so important that it should be said only once, and thereafter engraved on the hearts of his listeners.

'There are certain bloodlines that run back to Ethel,' he said, inclining his head to where she sat smiling to herself, and it was as though his previous remarks to and about her had meant nothing, and the greater truth was about to unfold. Whatever it was, he had dropped any show he might have had of disregard for her, and nodded to her in what I now recognised as something deeper than respect. 'Oh, I know I said we all went back to Ethel, but there are a few of our families that run in such a straight line that they are indeed Ethel and Godric's direct descendants. There are very few people who know this,' he said. 'Phineas Black was one, Ethel, of course, and myself. These straight lines, for want of better description, run through the Dumbledores, the Blacks, the Princes, and the Potters. But for all that, it is a little known fact that every Gryffindor is in some way a descendent of Godric Gryffindor.'

'Even the Muggle-borns?' Black scoffed.

'There are no such thing as Muggle-borns, Sirius, in our world; half-bloods, yes, but no truly Muggle-borns,' Dumbledore replied, making me rather glad that Black had beaten me to that particular punch. 'All witches and wizards have magical blood somewhere in their veins,' he went on. 'Just because witches and wizards in the middle ages, and other times of crisis for our people, were driven to deny their roots, doesn't mean that their blood was diluted,' he said, as though that were something every self-respecting wizard should know as a fact.

'So how come I was put in Gryffindor and Reggie was put in Slytherin?' Black asked.

'Because every Slytherin is a descendent of Salazar Slytherin,' I replied, quite pleased with myself for having bided my time until I understood what I found I knew. Ethel's doing again, I supposed. 'It just depends on which is the more dominant streak. Really, Black,' I added unkindly, failing to notice I had cast myself in the other camp again. 'What did you think the Sorting Hat was thinking about when it went through all its babble?'

'Are you telling me it traces everyone's bloodlines back to the founders?' he asked.

'Of course it does,' I replied, making no attempt to take the superior tone from my voice; it was a short lived victory though. I saw Ethel glance to the window and then turn to Dumbledore, and my blood seemed to freeze in my veins.

'Albus,' she said urgently, 'get on with it. Time is drawing short. The Dark One is approaching, and it would be wise if he is not denied entry.'

Dumbledore seemed to push his mind outside and satisfy himself it was still safe. 'As I said,' he went on quickly, 'the bloodlines of the Blacks, the Potters, the Princes, and the Dumbledores mean that the children of all of these families would be ideal candidates for the task Riddle has set you, Severus, and they must be protected. Now we have an advantage over Tom Riddle here; he believes, of course, that the Gaunts, his mother's family, were descended directly from Salazar Slytherin, but what he does not know is that his father, Tom Riddle senior, the very Muggle he despised, was also descended from Godric Gryffindor, although neither man knew that truth ... but the Sorting Hat knew.' And then Dumbledore nodded to the woman who had called herself my aunt. 'And so did Ethel. But Riddle would not have looked at his father's background, feeling it beneath him. He does not realise the importance of these children of that particular mixture, Severus, whoever they will be, and probably thinks any half-blooded child will satisfy the demands of the preparation of Aqua Vitae.'

'You're wrong, Dumbledore,' I said, shaking my head, remembering again Riddle's chilling "we are the same". 'I think he does know; in fact, I know he does.'

I started and glanced around the room, not understanding what I was seeing, or wasn't seeing as the case was, because there was no Dumbledore, no Sirius Black, and no Ethel, just a faded photograph of an old woman talking to two men; all three had their backs to the photographer's lens. The old woman turned once to me and gave me an anxious nod.

And someone was knocking on my front door.

Chapter Eight

Chapter 8 of 48

Severus has his third visitors of the day.

I took a moment to cast my charms, and another to regret the loss of the luxury, and even the company of Dumbledore and Black, before squaring my shoulders and answering the knock. It had not been repeated; Tom Riddle was not a man accustomed to having to ask twice.

'Tom,' I said, feigning what he would take as surprise, before even glancing at Lucius Malfoy, who stood at his side.

Neither man spoke as they crossed the threshold into the tiny hall and thence to the shabby living room. There were only two armchairs, and Riddle sat in one, and as I was nearest to the other, Lucius was too slow on his feet to beat me to it. He was left to stand awkwardly at the fireplace, almost hiding the picture of Ethel from view with his impressive bulk. I should have Summoned a chair from the kitchen; it was bad-mannered and childish of me, I know, and I suspect he was ready to let me know just that, but his attention was diverted to where his master was about to speak. I think it was then that I realised just how much Lucius resented being under any man's control, especially a half-blooded beggar-on-horseback as powerful as Riddle had become; and yet, had it not been for rich and influential men like Abraxas Malfoy, Riddle would never have had the funds or the initial political clout to embark on his whirlwind campaign of hate. I filed it all carefully away for another time; for then I needed my wits about me in a way I had rarely needed them before.

'Why is it, Severus, that Lucius has been unable to reach you these last few days?' Riddle asked as an opener, as he lit a slim black cheroot and rolled it from one side of his lips to the other.

'Perhaps you should ask Lucius,' I replied, nodding to where Malfoy stood with a look of indignant fury on his pale sculpted features. 'I cannot be held responsible for his inadequacies.'

Riddle smiled his cold smile and looked at Malfoy too. 'Did you bother to come here at all, Lucius?' he asked, and I could see his malicious delight. 'I find myself wondering, in view of the fact that the house, such as it is, was quite clearly here for the finding.'

'Of course I did,' Malfoy snapped, glaring at me. 'Drunk, were you, Severus?' he asked, twisting his mouth in his own imitation of a smile.

I didn't reply, but I confess I was grateful at least that Ethel had hidden the excesses of my intemperance from the view of everyone but the more sympathetic, or at least empathic, Black. I didn't see the point of what could turn out to be a senseless spat though, and apart from my opening barb, which was really only self-defence, I wasn't quite sure whom among the Death Eaters I would be better paying court to, and just whether I should really be incensing Lucius Malfoy any more than I had already done, both that day and the night at the manor. For now, I wanted to hear them out and be rid of them, and I didn't even offer them refreshments; already the house seemed too full of Tom Riddle's presence, stifling the atmosphere with its venom.

Riddle wasn't fooled, of course. 'You would not be thinking of playing games with me, Severus, would you?' he asked, flicking the ash off the end of the cheroot, to where it disappeared before reaching the floor. 'I have neither the time nor the inclination to have to come looking for you myself when you hide yourself from my messengers.'

I had to put an end to it; Lucius's further humiliation would not serve me well at that point. Riddle would need a convincing answer as to why Malfoy had failed to find the house though, and I almost smiled as I thought of how gratified Bellatrix would be that she had some use in my eyes.

'And I had thought that I had made it clear that I had no inclination to see Bellatrix Black, either with or without her sister and Lucius,' I replied, nodding to Malfoy. 'I'm not interested, Tom, not now, and not ever. If Bellatrix Black calls again, she will not find me or this house. Use someone else, please,' I said, in some sort of attempt to mollify Lucius, to show that I, at least, was unaware that he, and not Bellatrix, was the lowly messenger. It seemed to work, partly at any rate; Riddle appeared not to know that Lucius had called alone once, and Lucius didn't see fit to enlighten him, more anxious to have his dignity restored at that point, I supposed, than score the dangerous point over me that surely would have been.

'You refuse Bella outright, Severus?' Riddle asked, looking around the room again. 'And yet you see fit to surround yourself in the way you do, when she could provide more fitting accommodation for you. Just think, Severus, you would never have to come into this squalid little hole again, and for such a small price,' he said, letting his eyebrow rise in invitation.

I don't know what madness possessed me, perhaps vanity, perhaps indignation that they thought me a pauper who might be willing to prostitute myself for material gain, or maybe I just wanted to show Riddle and Lucius that I already wanted for nothing that Bellatrix's huge dowry could provide. Whatever it was, I stood from the chair, glanced once to Ethel's picture, finding her watching me back with what looked like a smile of mischievous approval on her face, and dropped the charms cast on the room.

'As I said, Tom,' I said in way of reply, 'I have neither the need nor desire for anything Bellatrix Black would bring into my life.'

He laughed his mirthless laugh, at first pretending not to even notice the changes, and then looking around the room in open appreciation. 'Perhaps I shall stay here, Lucius, instead of the manor,' he said to where Malfoy stood with a bitter twist on his lips, trying to digest what was happening. 'It is altogether more ... shall we say, tasteful.'

Despite his outward display resentment towards me, I sensed Lucius was as relieved as I felt horrified at that suggestion, and I was just beginning to wonder if I had slipped on my own wand, when Riddle laughed again and turned to Malfoy. 'I jest, Lucius,' he said. 'I enjoy the vulgar opulence of Malfoy Manor, affording me as it does the opportunity to check that you and your father do not have pokers in any fires I have not lit myself. It would not do, after all, to have Abraxas's delusions of greater things to be any more than delusions, would it?' He didn't wait for an answer, instead lifting his hand and gesturing casually at Lucius, who was left standing at the fireplace like so much statuary, neither hearing nor seeing any more of what went on.

'What did you want me for, Tom?' I asked, before he could state his demands. 'I'm sure you have not come here simply to humiliate Lucius in front of me.'

'No, that was just an interesting diversion,' he replied, flicking the remains of the cheroot into the fire. 'How do you afford this, Severus?' he asked, unknowingly repeating the very question Black had asked a few hours before, and I found myself wondering if indeed it had only been one day.

'I was left a sizeable legacy many years ago,' I lied, the words slipping into my mind just before I spoke them. 'A childless Muggle uncle on my father's side. Very wealthy, and totally mad,' I added, just wanting to make up a bit that Ethel didn't have anything to do with; after all, it had been something along the lines of what I was going to say anyway. "Stop improvising, Severus," she chided me, so reproachfully that I had to stifle my smile.

Riddle seemed to swallow that for the moment. 'Ever the enigma, Severus,' he said blandly, as though he had no further interest, but I knew I would have to get a solid

foundation on which to build my lie, in case he investigated in the future; but for now he had weightier matters on his mind. 'I wanted to talk to you about several things. One was Bellatrix,' he said ruefully. 'However, I am willing to let that matter pass, and acknowledge the bachelor in your soul. I shall let Lucius deal with her from now on; he is about to become her brother-in-law, after all, and it is a family matter.'

'I think that satisfies the demands of propriety,' I concurred, joining him in whatever little game he thought he was playing. It cost me nothing, and maintained the feigned level of mutual respect I hoped to keep between us. 'What were the other things?' I asked, as though I didn't already know.

'How much thought have you given to the little talk we had the other night, Severus?' he asked, and I didn't miss the cool undertone in his voice, the one that would rise if he thought that I had dismissed his request as easily as I had dismissed his offers of Bellatrix Black.

'Quite a lot actually,' I replied, finding I had another excuse for refusing to see Malfoy. 'In fact one of the reasons I saw fit not to be sidetracked by Lucius and Bellatrix was that I was attempting to translate and decipher some rather obscure texts,' I said, nodding vaguely to where several books written in long-forgotten tongues lay open on the ebony desk. They were mainly about potions and poisons, but I was confident he would not know that, and could bluff my way out of it if he did.

That pleased him; I could tell that much. I was a skilled Legilimens, a secret I had kept from everyone, and one I rarely used; in fact I had spent whatever time I had spent with my parents, honing those very skills, so that I didn't approach like a Bludger on my subject's brain. My parents seemed not to notice, although delving through the cesspool of my father's mind perhaps goes some way to explaining why I hated him so much. I drew my mind back at that thought; hate is such an ugly word, and I had to keep my mind carefully neutral whilst talking with Riddle. He also was a competent Legilimens, although not as good as I fancied myself to be, and even then I felt him trying to push softly to see if I had left anything worth knowing lying around for him.

'And?' he asked, drawing back himself. 'Or do I have to drag each word from you by other means?'

'And ... very little, Tom,' I replied. 'There are a few vague references to immortality, which turned out to be nothing more than legends about various alchemists, mainly in the lands of the nomads and camel-riding peoples. Wizards like Abu al-Jaffrif and Babu Hammza,' I said, plucking the names from midair, as though they should mean as much to him as I pretended they meant to me. "*Be careful, Severus,*" Ethel chided me again. "*He has almost total memory recall, and may well throw these very names at you in the future.*" She was right, of course, and I cautioned myself not to think of him as the fool he clearly wasn't.

'Keep searching, Severus,' he said. 'I have faith in you. It is not misplaced is it?' he asked. The change in his demeanour was subtle, and yet pronounced. He looked oddly vulnerable, almost weak, and had I not known him for the consummate master of deceit that he was, I would have taken that at face value.

He deserved the performance of my life too, and I stated my case and my terms to him, weighing each word with the precision of a Knockturn Alley drug dealer. 'No, Tom, it is not misplaced,' I said quietly, rolling back my shirtsleeve to where the Dark Mark shone on my arm like the malignance it was. 'I need to know something too,' I went on, looking at the creeping vileness as though fascinated that such an honour had been bestowed on me. 'Is my faith in you misplaced?' I had let my voice drop to a whisper, in what I hoped he would take for some sort of reverence. 'Because I think I am about to give of myself completely ... and I need to know.'

He stood up. I had caught him unawares, perhaps for the first time. 'I am your Tom,' he said, leaning forward to kiss first one of my cheeks, and then its neighbour, 'as you truly are my Severus. Between us, Severus, one day we shall rule the world. We are the only two fit to do so.'

I glanced to the picture, to where Ethel was watching me; even Dumbledore and Black had turned slightly, but I fancy that is not what Riddle would have seen anyway. He must have mistaken my gesture as looking to where Malfoy was still standing, unaware of our conversation.

'Don't trouble yourself about Lucius,' he said. 'He has enough to do with the Blacks. He will not be under your feet. None of them will be. I shall see to it that you are not disturbed unnecessarily. Your work here is as vital as it is secret. You alone are apart from the others, you and I alone have been chosen, and Mordestone cannot be mistaken. She cannot lie.'

'What has Lucius to do with the Blacks?' I asked, uncomfortable with the subject of Mordestone, almost nauseated by the writhing recognition I had felt under the skin of my left arm when he had mentioned the black stone's name. I pulled my sleeve back down, slowly, as though reluctantly shutting away its presence. 'Surely marrying Narcissa is enough for even him,' I added, without knowing why I asked that in particular, or whether Ethel had planted the question in my mind, but it was as well that I did.

'He has to find Sirius Black,' Riddle replied, quite himself again. 'He seems to have dropped from sight this last day or two. He has not been at the family home, and that concerns me.'

'Why bother?' I asked. 'I got the impression he was not anxious to join us.'

'Oh, he's not,' Riddle admitted. 'I want him out of the way. He is altogether too close to Dumbledore and others of his persuasion. He is also too protective of his cousin Andromeda, and I believe she is with child,' Tom said, and I hardly heard the rest of his words above the thunder beat of my heart. 'And that child could well be very important to us. I do not want Sirius Black to spirit him away the moment he is born.'

'Let us walk before we run, Tom,' I said, keeping my voice low and controlled to hide the panic. 'It could be months, or even years, before I have any sort of understanding of what I need to do.'

'Just make sure it's not too long, Severus,' he said, standing to look at himself in the mirror over the fireplace. 'This body does not have too many years.'

I nodded my understanding. I wanted him to leave then, enough was enough, and any more might well be too much. I knew what I had to do; somehow I had to protect Andromeda too, and whatever package she came along with, and if I had to lay down my last breath, I swore to myself that I would not be her undoing. I couldn't afford to make any mistakes now, however small, until I was much more sure of my place in his pecking order.

'I have much to do, Tom,' I ventured. 'Perhaps hundreds of books to translate and read. Is there anything else for tonight?' I asked, glancing to where Malfoy still stood. 'And perhaps it would be a kindness to wake Lucius before he catches fire. I suspect even you might find it difficult to explain to Abraxas just how his only son melted.'

Riddle smiled, and I fancied there was more warmth in that smile, and that both terrified and thrilled me in a way I cannot explain, as though I had ducked under his defences in some way, and he had welcomed the intrusion. But I cautioned myself again; perhaps I was just becoming accustomed to the cold. I felt the gentle pressure of his mind, and I wondered if he knew that I had had closed my own down, but I dared not probe too deeply. He turned again to Lucius, flicked his wrist again, and Malfoy woke.

As I closed the door on Riddle, Lucius, and the crispness of the autumn evening, I found I was trembling. It shocked me that I had not realised I had been under such strain, and that his presence, as benign as it had seemed by his standards, could take such a toll on me. And now I had to face three people whom I knew would be waiting in the living room for me; I felt as though I were about to have sentence passed upon me by a jury of my peers. I took a moment to compose myself, pretending I couldn't hear their voices, and that I wasn't filled with trepidation at what they would have made of the last hour, whether they had believed me faithful to them, or bending my knee to Riddle. When I thought I was ready to face them, I stepped into the living room, but I wasn't ready, not for what I found.

Dumbledore, gravely concerned, yet not accusatory, stood at the fireplace where Lucius had stood; Ethel had brought her odd little chair, and sat gazing thoughtfully into the fire; and Sirius sat on my favourite settee. I didn't really see any of them though; my heart seemed to have stopped in its tracks at the sight of the woman sitting opposite her cousin. It was Andromeda Black.

Chapter Nine

Chapter 9 of 48

Severus finds some things become clearer, whilst others become more complex.

I found myself at a loss; there was so much I needed to say, and yet I could not find the words. Of course, the fact that I had an audience of three people more than I would have liked, did not help me. Andromeda had risen from her seat, and she took my two hands in hers, in that way of hers, and kissed me in an exquisite parody of the way Riddle had kissed me just minutes before, and I took it to mean forgiveness, if nothing else. I was too slow to stop myself thinking that it was not the way she would have kissed her Ted, too intoxicated by her presence not to take the moment to regret again that we were not alone, to see if I, too, could kiss her the way I had yearned to for so long that it had just become an aching part of me. It gave me the perfect excuse to sit down beside her though when she went back to her settee, and I was almost surprised to find that one of her hands was still in mine, and I never wanted to let it go, and then it was gone, leaving a void where it had been.

I felt Black watching me, and I wasn't fool enough not to realise what was going through his mind, and I suspected, despite his telling me he had not said anything to Andromeda before dinner, that he had said something after I had left. I felt a ridiculous kind of outrage welling up inside me that I had to stem quickly; it was something to do with it being my place to tell the woman I loved that I loved her. Yet I had not bothered to do that; I had left it to one man to take her from under my nose, and another to tell her I had loved her.

But thoughts of Black gave my scattered wits an opening, and I was grateful for at least that much. 'It seems you are wanted by Riddle almost as much as I am,' I said to him, pretending to myself that I didn't notice Andromeda's very warmth crossing the tiny space between us, pretending not to think how I could close that space without seeming to.

Black said nothing, and I began to wonder just how much they had been able to see or hear from the other side of that photograph frame. I suddenly wanted to know what it had been like; if it had been three-dimensional, or a flat black and white place, as devoid of depth as it was of colour, but Dumbledore had begun to speak.

'He seems to trust you, Severus,' he said, moving from the fireside to sit beside Sirius on the opposite settee, and for once I didn't begrudge either man the fact that they had picked my favourite seat. 'I thought at first that he didn't, but you handled the question of Lucius being unable to find the house very well, indeed, in a way that makes me suspect Lucius will be loath to come back for another failure.'

'Do not underestimate Malfoy, Dumbledore,' I replied, 'nor overestimate his loyalties. I sensed veiled dissent in him, and I am beginning to suspect he may have an agenda of his own tucked away somewhere. Riddle certainly hinted as much. Could you hear everything of what was said?' I asked, changing direction.

The old man nodded. 'Yes, in fact in an odd way we could even feel the atmosphere, the tension. That was one of the things that drew me to send for Andromeda when he mentioned her. She is not safe in the outside world. She will have to be hidden.'

'What about Ted?' I asked, grasping the excuse to turn to face Andromeda, and managing not to choke on the man's ridiculous name. 'Will he be safe?'

'Oh, yes,' Andromeda replied quickly. 'He works in the Muggle world, Severus, and he can hide himself there.'

'How did you do it all so quickly?' I asked. 'Riddle was not here for long, a bare hour at the most.'

'You were hours,' Sirius replied, with his frown in place. 'In fact, I'm starving. I've been here all day and I haven't had a thing to eat.'

'Rubbish,' I remarked. 'I quite clearly remember you eating a scone.'

'Was that today?' Black snapped back. 'It doesn't feel like it,' he muttered, and I could see his point.

'Ethel has a talent for stretching time and dimensions,' Dumbledore said. 'It did feel like quite some time, Severus, although I know what you are saying is true. I summoned Fawkes to go for Andromeda,' he said, as though that explained everything, 'and Ethel kindly allowed her permission to enter through her picture. Anyway, for tonight we are secure; Andromeda is safe, and she will remain so until her child is born, and for however long afterwards as needs be.'

'At Hogwarts?' I queried, I could think of nowhere else really safe.

'With the children of Death Eaters?' Dumbledore scoffed. 'I hardly think so, Severus.'

'Where then?' I asked, mentally going through the safest places I knew, like the Longbottoms' home, and the Burrow, and the few other staunchly anti-Riddle campaigners I could think of.

'We thought of the Potters' family home,' he replied. 'It is protected by a Fidelius Charm, I believe, and the Potters are totally dedicated to our cause.'

'Too dangerous,' I replied, dismissing the reasonable option out of hand, as though it were my place to do so, as I thought of an alternative I wondered I had not thought of before. 'Too obvious. I have a far better idea.'

'And would you care to enlighten us?' the old man asked. 'Or were you thinking of spiriting her away yourself?'

'I shan't need to do that,' I replied. 'Where better to hide than under your enemy's nose?' I said, enjoying my moment for more reasons than I hoped they would guess. 'She must stay here.'

'Has your talk with Riddle softened your brains?' Dumbledore asked. 'He has just shown us he can call here at any time ... he has just done so.'

'I think he's right,' Black put in. 'This is the last place Riddle will think of looking ... and he has the safety of Ethel's picture if anyone unexpected calls.'

Dumbledore began to nod slowly, trying it this way and that, his head beginning to move more vigorously as he satisfied himself. 'You are right,' he agreed at last. 'This is the safest place.' He turned to Ethel, who had said nothing at all since Riddle had left, but just sat nodding to herself as she stared into the flames of the fire. 'Can you hide them both, if needs be?'

'Of course I can, dear. Did you doubt that?' she replied, after a tiny hesitation that I doubted the others noticed, apart from Dumbledore, of course. She turned to face the room, and I fancied for a moment she had conversed with someone else, someone unknown, before she replied, and wondered, unlikely as it seemed, if she too had a master.

'Has anyone thought to ask me?' Andromeda spoke up from my side, interrupting my thoughts, a faint trace of something not quite hostile, but clearly indignant, lacing her voice. 'I think I should like a say in this matter.'

'Of course, my dear,' Dumbledore replied. 'Is there somewhere safer ... perhaps somewhere you would prefer to stay?' he asked.

I felt the scald of disappointment, the all too familiar taste of rejection, as she eyed Dumbledore coolly across the room. 'No, not really,' she replied. 'I merely said that I should have liked a say. As it happens, I agree with Sirius,' she said, and turned to me, and I wondered just how often my emotions could stand being turned upside-down in the space of day. 'And Severus,' she added. 'I think the choice is wise, and I have more than myself to think of.' She glanced down to the still imperceptible swell of her unborn child, and it took me no little effort to stem the hot rush of envy that threatened to rise and choke me.

'That's settled then,' Black replied with some evident relief. 'We'll stay here. I'm okay with that.'

'We?' I asked, noticing the strangled tone in my own voice. When Dumbledore had asked if Ethel could hide them both, I had assumed he meant Andromeda and her child.

'That was another of the things I came to see you about in the first place,' Black admitted. 'I'll have to stay too. I'm not sleeping in the rain beside a dustbin with Lupin again. I've had enough of that for the last two days,' he concluded, with his annoyingly easy Gryffindor grin, the one that I had heard was reputed to melt the hearts of all and sundry; well, not mine, not today, thank you very much, I thought, rather more viciously than was appropriate.

'You're certainly not bringing him here,' I snapped, totally at a loss as to how my scheme had managed to come to fruition and fall apart in the space of a few moments. 'You can stay at the Leaky Cauldron, or some dive in Knockturn Alley, if the werewolf is with you.'

Black laughed. 'Get over yourself, Severus,' he said, in that cultured drawl of his, the one which suited him so well that I had no doubt it was no longer feigned; after all, he'd been practising it since his third year at Hogwarts. 'If you promise not to notice I'm untidy ... just sometimes, of course,' he added quickly, grinning again, as though he were already quite at home. 'I'll promise not to notice you spend much of your time drunk.'

'I do not,' I snapped back, even though I did; if the true were told, my ability to read and work whilst I had a goodly part of a bottle of malt whisky lining my stomach impressed even me. Then my thoughts stopped short again as Andromeda laid her hand on my arm, and I turned to her, feeling the frisson of even that small touch flooding the pit of my stomach in warmth that reached further than it really should have.

'He is only teasing you, Severus,' she said. 'We shall all get along just fine. I shall make sure he behaves,' she said, throwing Black an affectionately amused look that I grudged him more than was reasonable. 'You do have guest bedrooms here?' she asked me, her eyebrow rising in what looked vaguely like challenge.

'Of course,' I replied, a split second before Ethel enlightened me, although bedroom wasn't really a term I wanted to deal with in front of anyone else, not where Andromeda was concerned. Then I found myself doing something I hadn't done before. I reached out to Ethel's mind, the way she had reached out to mine so often of late, and suggested that perhaps it might be an idea if these phantom bedrooms became some sort of reality.

"Just this once, dear," she retorted back to me. "I'm more accustomed to making the suggestions though."

Ethel stood from her little chair and left the room, not before throwing me a reproving look. I watched her go, and found Dumbledore following her progress too, frowning after her. He waited for few moments, seeming to cast his mind out towards the hall, as though checking we were not being eavesdropped upon.

'How closely linked is she to your mind, Severus?' he asked.

'I ... I'm not sure,' I admitted, puzzled by his concern. 'Why?'

I felt the oddest sensation, as though he were speaking to only one part of my consciousness, and then realising that was exactly what he was doing. I wasn't sure then just how I did it, but I found I too was able to slip my thoughts aside, as though compartmentalising them from the rest of mind, but not in the same way I could close my mind down through Occlumency, and something quite different from the way Ethel and I communicated. This was something infinitely more subtle that I intended to explore later. *"You don't trust her?"* I asked.

"It's not a matter of trust, Severus," he replied, and it was only then that I noticed that neither Black nor Andromeda seemed aware that the old man and I were even having a conversation. *"I just want you fully remember that whilst she was indeed Godric's wife, she was also Salazar's sister."*

I nodded my understanding; he was telling me that Tom Riddle had almost the same relationship to her as I had, and that he was afraid she may be playing our two sides against some middle ground. And I remembered the thought that Andromeda had interrupted, that Ethel's staring into the fire had disturbed me in some way, and I found that unknown frightened me. It frightened me that if I had to hide Andromeda in a hurry that I could be putting my trust in the very person who could betray her when we most needed loyalty; perhaps putting up with Sirius Black's presence would be a price worth paying after all.

"Are you saying Andromeda, and Black for that matter, are unsafe here?" I asked, not bothering to outline my specific concerns, it was enough that he had his own doubts for now.

"I confess I do not know, Severus," he replied. *"Let me think about it at Hogwarts. I shall speak to Fawkes and the Sorting Hat, and perhaps Nicolas Flamel; he knew her well. Between them I'm confident I shall find the answer."*

I knew no time at all had passed, and that for all Dumbledore's assertion that Ethel could stretch time and dimensions, he was also able to do the same thing. I could hear Ethel's footsteps still climbing the stairs, as the old man began to slip from my mind, and I pulled away from his. He nodded to me once, in a kind of parting thought. *"A very rare and useful talent, Severus,"* he said. *"I was unsure that you had mastered that. Unusual in one so young"*.

I was unaware myself, but I wasn't about to tell him that, although on reflection I'm fairly sure he knew. He stood to leave shortly after that. Ethel had come back downstairs, and I was confident that she didn't know that we had talked about her behind her back.

"She doesn't know." Dumbledore's thought slipped into my mind as he made his way into the hall, and I pretended not to notice that the green carpet, which had admittedly been the colour of the Leaky Cauldron's infamous pea soup, had been replaced by polished Spanish mahogany.

"We shall keep this between us then." I sent the thought back, not that there was really any need to reply, but I wanted to check that I hadn't overestimated whatever new skill I had found. Ethel made no show at all of knowing that she was being discussed when I returned to the living room. It would have to do for now; I had no way of knowing whether she chose to ignore the fact for her own ends, and just found I had something else to worry about.

I hadn't been into the kitchen since Ethel had made her tea, what seemed like days ago, but had in fact only been that morning. I managed not to make any show of surprise at the huge area it had become, pushing back the childish resentment that she seemed to be taking over Spinner's End rather more thoroughly than I would have liked. The floor was flag-stoned and scrubbed looking, and the mullioned windows looked out onto a torch-lit garden I didn't have. The crossed overhead beams were hung with gleaming copper pots and pans, and utensils upon whose use I wouldn't have ventured opinion. All around the walls ancient oak dressers were stuffed with jars and bottles and brown papers bags of I knew not what, and the smell of roasting meat issued from a large iron cooking range. In the middle of the floor was a round table of what looked like burred walnut; it was already set for four people.

Black had sat down, shedding the long leather coat he still wore to the back of his chair, revealing a confection of dark reds and purples which, whilst seeming overdressed and somewhat overdone, also suited him in an odd way.

'Oh, you've been busy ... good,' he said to Ethel, as though with relief that the imagined onset of starvation wasn't about to manifest itself into the real thing.

'Hasn't she just?' I commented, refusing to look in her direction as she began to ladle soup from a black cauldron.

Andromeda had sat down opposite her cousin again, and I wondered if she enjoyed looking at him. I resisted the urge to compare his dashing debonair Gryffindor charm, however effeminate that might have been, to my more staid way of dressing, and I wondered just what message one's attire really sent out to others. Did my myriad of tiny buttons, marching as they did along the cuffs and up the front of the frock coat I often wore, and even the white silk shirt I favoured that day, warn would-be invaders that there were obstacles in the way? Or perhaps the message was even stronger, more forbidding: stay away from me; I am closed.

Ethel had laid a plate of soup at each of the places, and sat down at Sirius's side where a variation of her odd little chair had appeared, leaving me my preferred option of being close enough to touch Andromeda. I wasn't sure what to expect, or how to conduct myself. Ludicrous, I know, for someone as sophisticated as I pretended to be, but the social graces I had always prided myself upon had deserted me, and I was left to either make up some ridiculously painful monologue, or make some pretence of eating my soup. Fuck it, I thought sourly, lifting my spoon, wondering why it was that no one else seemed to be uncomfortable; then again, it had been a long day, and they were probably hungry.

At last Black pushed away his pudding plate, having eaten more than I would have thought possible for one human being, and stood up. 'I shan't be back tonight,' he announced. 'It's full moon, and I want to spend the rest of the night with Lupin.'

I thought about that for a moment, thought about how our low opinions of other people tend to make us feel they have not a shred of pity in their souls, and yet this was obviously a longstanding ritual, one which made me somehow ashamed of my judgement, reminding me of the way I so often felt misjudged by others. 'The moon will be up,' I said. 'Will he not already be secured?'

'I know where to find him,' he replied, pulling on the leather coat again to hide his sartorial excesses. He glanced once at Andromeda, and then gave me a long level look I didn't want to attempt to translate.

I knew where he would find Lupin too, the same place I had found him some eight years before. I nodded my understanding; he would go to the Shrieking Shack as his alter ego, he would be safe enough. And then another quite terrifying thought struck me somewhere around the middle of my stomach, and it was all I could do not to ask Black to take Ethel with him, so that Andromeda and I could be truly alone together.

I felt Andromeda watching me as Black left the kitchen, but I didn't turn to her, suddenly feeling self-conscious and gauche. All the small talk, such as it had been over dinner, had really come from Black, and it hadn't been much of an effort for me to make pretence of conversation, but now I was left without either props or script to make some type of endeavour of my own. It took me a moment to understand that Ethel seemed to have disappeared, Black wasn't hiding eavesdropping somewhere, and I was indeed completely alone with Andromeda ... for the first time in my adult life.

I tried to quell the flood of apprehension that I would make a mess of what I had so unexpectedly been given the opportunity to say. I still hadn't looked to where she sat at my side, not directly, and the longer I took, the more painfully obvious it would be, but I needed to compose myself, just to steal a few seconds to make sure I did it properly this time. As it happens, it didn't matter.

'You never came for me, Severus,' she said quietly, and I could feel her turn to me, and I had to turn to her now. 'I waited for so long, but you never came ... and then I just thought that you were in love with Lily ...' She trailed off for a moment, her blue eyes holding mine, flashing angrily. 'Why ... why did I have to find out from someone else? Why did I have to learn from Sirius that if I had waited longer still...?' She broke off again.

I shook my head in confusion, stunned by the implication of what she had said. I had no answer to the question I had asked myself a thousand times since I had come back from Malfoy Manor. I found I was watching her stand, and begin to move away from me towards the door to the living room, and I knew then that if I let her go that it would not matter if she lived under my roof for another ten years, she would be lost to me from that moment, and forever.

I have no idea how I forced the words from where they threatened to explode in unspoken fragments in my chest, but I did; they were just two, after all. But they had to hold so much: my peace proposal, my hopes and aspirations, and my castles in the air. This was no rehearsal, and I would be judged on this performance alone. If I failed there would be no encore, just a curtain falling on an empty stage.

'Andromeda, wait.'

Chapter Ten

Chapter 10 of 48

Severus finds something, but loses another.

It seemed to take forever, countless overloud beats of my heart; and just when I thought it was too late, and I felt the dull thud of defeat and the bitter taste of rejection, she turned to me. Her blue eyes were questioning, demanding that I untie my reluctant tongue, and for one as eloquent as I fancied I was, I found again, that when it mattered, I had nothing to say. I wanted to get past that bit; I wanted to get to the bit where I could hold her in my arms. I had never had that problem with other women, not that there had been that many, but I had always managed a fairly smooth transition from one stage in that particular minuet to the next; it was a dance, after all, the intricate steps of which led to intimacy and were engraved on the hearts, not to mention the loins, of most young men of whatever persuasion.

'Damn it, Severus,' she said, crossing the kitchen to where I stood, lost in the whirlpool of my feelings and my mind's more inane ramblings. 'My heart is not a toy to be played with or broken at your whim.'

'Yes, I know,' I replied; I was up to five words. I looked to the floor for some type of inspiration, and found none, or maybe I did. It reminded me of looking at the floor in the next-door room that very morning, at the spilt elf wine seeping into the floorboards, at my dreams trickling away in little rivers of red. It reminded me of the aching emptiness I had tried to fill with whisky, and what a fickle friend that had shown itself to be, and how I had felt then. It reminded me of how I had longed for a second chance, and how I had sworn to myself that I would not squander it as I done the first; and at last it reminded me that this was that chance, and that there would not be another.

She had sat back down at the table, and I didn't even know when that had happened. I drew in a deep breath, cursing myself. Damn it, I had just faced Tom Riddle with a pack of lies about my loyalty, and yet could not find it within myself to tell the truth to the woman I loved; what kind of man, I wondered, was I?

I don't know what drew me to look at the window, to where a French door led to the torch-lit garden, and if I weren't mistaken, which I then knew I wasn't, I could see there

was a little veranda just outside the door. 'Let's go onto the terrace,' I suggested, using the same words I had used at Malfoy Manor. 'It should be quiet out there, and if it's not, we can walk across the lawns. Do you want your cloak?'

She smiled ... her breathtaking smile, and I could see then that her earlier ones, to Sirius and whomsoever she had bestowed them upon, had been but a parody of the one that belonged to me, and I could see that she also was thinking of another night not long before, and that perhaps that night at the manor had been a rehearsal after all.

As she stepped outside into the crisp evening, I raised my arms to put a hand on each of her shoulders. And this time no one else came out, and no one listened to me tell her that I loved her with all my heart, and that for me there would be no other; and no one saw the tears of regret that welled up in her beautiful eyes, because she loved me too, and had promised herself to someone else.

As I drew away from her, just far enough to watch her face, I saw the moon over her shoulder, where it rode high in the night-time sky. I almost laughed aloud as I realised what I was looking at. She was not full, just a hearty waxing gibbous, and I could tell it would be another two nights, or maybe even three, before she lay directly opposite her ultimate master. I understood Black's glance at Andromeda as he had left, and the long look he had drawn me, and Ethel's torch-lit garden, and wondered if even Andromeda had been party to manoeuvring me to this pass. I didn't ask though, content to leave it as a mystery, and quietly wonder.

I tried to remember what the next step in the dance was, but I seemed to have left the instruction manual elsewhere, and I was just beginning to panic that I had reached another impasse when she leaned towards me.

'These bedrooms, Severus ... the guest ones,' she purred into my chest, and I knew she could hear the beat of my heart. 'Do you suppose they will be warm enough for me? It is such a cold night.'

'And you such a delicate little thing,' I murmured into her hair, joining her game willingly, the fact that she stood very nearly as tall I did, and was as beautifully built as any mere mortal had a right to be, notwithstanding. 'I know my own is warm. Perhaps you should not risk the others.'

They weren't the most subtle remarks either of us had ever made, but it didn't matter to me, nor I suspect to her. They were just a means of moving on to where we wanted to go.

I watched her undress with the slow seductive moves of a Knockturn Alley stripper; of course, that was her intention, to an audience of one. At last she pulled her second stocking from a long shapely leg and tossed it over her shoulder to land I knew not where. She began to cross the short space to where I sat barefooted but otherwise dressed on the edge of the night stand, watching the look of challenge in her blue eyes as she brushed her long black hair back over her shoulder from where it had had the audacity to hide one of her breasts from my view. I drank in the vision of my goddess in human form, her pearly-white skin glowing in the moonlight where it caught the ripeness of her breasts, and the tiny telltale swell of the other life within her, and shone a path of silver across her raven hair.

This was not going to be some melancholy coupling, tinged with guilty regret and thoughts of what might have been; somewhere on the stumbling way up the stairs Andromeda had decided that this was going to be fun. Fun, I had heard of the word, of course, assuming it to mean something to do with laughing, but had experienced little of either. I felt her fingers, slow and assured, begin to unbutton the row of tiny fastenings on my shirt. I took her hands in mine, kissing the back of each one before letting them fall to her side, and ripped the shirt apart to send the buttons skittering hither and thither to hide until morning, joining again whatever game she was playing. I pulled my trousers apart the same way, gasping as they dropped to the floor and my cock sprang free from its only confinement. I groaned as I pulled her to me, feeling our bodies meet at last, as any lingering doubts I might have had about terrified flaccidity became quite the opposite problem.

We tumbled onto the bed, our mouths meeting in their first kiss of unfettered passion, tongues snaking to explore each other. I wanted it to last forever, and knew that if Merlin called me that very night I could go without regret. She was as ready for me as I was for her, and as I entered her for the first time I felt an ecstasy well up inside me that I had never dreamed possible. She slowed me down, pushing back on my shoulders, which was just as well, as I was in danger of losing what little control I had, and I gasped as I felt myself slip from her warmth as she moved over a little below me.

She moved until we lay facing one another in the moonlight, and I groaned as she took my cock in her two hands and bent to kiss the glistening tip, then ran her tongue across her lips as though to catch every taste of me. And I needed to taste her now, and slid down the bed a little to drown myself in the scent of the woman I adored, urged ever onward by her moans of pleasure. I made to mount her again, my own needs becoming desperation, but she pushed me aside until I lay on my back, and she bent her head again to let the heavenly warmth of her mouth surround my cock.

She must have sensed how dangerously close she had pushed me to falling over the edge. 'I wouldn't want you to leave me behind,' she murmured, her voice throaty and breathless. Then she raised herself up to straddle me, letting me slide into her depths again, grinding herself down on me as I toyed with her breasts, teasing her nipples until I was so lost in her that I would have willingly died of it. She reached one hand behind her and began to play with the balls that would surely explode in another moment if she didn't stop, but the moonlight cast across her face, and her low keening moans told me she too had almost reached that point from which there is no return. I watched her face contort in that magnificent agony of sexual climax and felt the somehow different warmth of her contractions, my own breath ever shortening. I was nearly there as I eased from her and turned her onto her back, before plunging into her with a reckless abandon I had not known could exist, and I felt my balls draw up, and slammed into her, eliciting a gasp of pleasure-pain from her, and whatever primal groan came from me as my seed flowed home, like something racing to an unimagined shore.

And as I lay with her in that delicious sleepy post-coital repose, sated and at peace, I felt such a deep contentment within me that I quite forgot she was not mine.

I didn't really concern myself much that Black had not returned for breakfast, taking it for some sort of tact on his part. I suspected he and Lupin were lovers, and it was hardly my business to pass judgement on how any other man saw fit to enjoy himself, or anyone he saw fit to enjoy. Perhaps a few days before I would have been disinterestedly disapproving, but I had developed rather a liking for Black, due in no small way, of course, to the part he had played the previous night; sort of keeping my newfound affections in the Black family, one part of it at any rate.

Ethel had potted about in the kitchen and then flitted in and out of her picture, without once stooping to cast a meaningful look in our direction. Andromeda and I sat at the table, drinking coffee, and reading whatever parts of the "Daily Prophet" the other wasn't reading at the time, and just enjoying one another's company without the need for conversation. We had gone through to the living room a little later, where I at last got the opportunity to sit on my favourite seat, and it was only when Dumbledore returned unexpectedly, just before lunchtime, that any small concern I was beginning to have turned to alarm.

'I have heard a rather disturbing rumour,' he said, materialising in the middle of the room once I opened the window to let the bee in. 'It seems that Sirius Black and Remus Lupin were arrested last night in a certain establishment in Knockturn Alley. I take it that, as Sirius is not in this room, that in turn confirms that he is not here.'

I felt a slam of guilt as I shook my head dumbly. He had only left the safety of Spinner's End to afford me the opportunity to be alone with Andromeda. 'Azkaban?' I whispered. I knew that there were already one or two wizards who were in Azkaban for no greater sin than being homosexual, whatever other spurious charges had been laid at their doors. I turned for a moment to glance to where Ethel watched from her picture, but she only shook her head doubtfully, as though mystified.

'Not that I can tell,' Dumbledore murmured. 'Arthur Weasley seems not to think so.'

'Do you know who arrested him?' Andromeda asked, her face already pale and worried.

'My source says one of the men was Lucius Malfoy,' Dumbledore replied. 'He wasn't sure about the other, which concerns me, as he knows all of the known Death Eaters.'

'Another spy?' I asked, somehow put out that I was not as unique as I had assumed.

'No,' the old man replied. 'A homosexual wizard who gives me information from time to time about who frequents where, so I, in turn, can warn him who is a danger to

them.'

'This is my fault,' I hissed, not failing to notice that whilst I had appointed myself Andromeda's protector, Dumbledore's remit was far wider. 'I should never have let him leave.'

'That is a foolish notion, Severus, and well you know it,' he replied. 'You can hardly hold yourself responsible for a grown man who leaves this house of his own volition. That apart, he knew what dangers lurked, and he has another identity available to him,' he reasoned. 'What possessed him to leave anyway?' he asked. 'I rather thought it was he who wanted to stay here in the first place.'

'How do we find out where he is being held?' Andromeda asked anxiously, ignoring his question.

'We wait and listen,' Dumbledore replied, 'and we hope that they are indeed being held somewhere; the alternative is not one I want to consider.'

'We cannot wait, Dumbledore; the moon is almost full,' I said, before turning to Andromeda. 'Are there catacombs in the Black family home?' I asked her. I had only been to Grimmauld Place once, and knew little of it except that it reeked of hate and anger and something ominous that I didn't want to place.

'Not that I know of, but it's a horrible place, so anything is possible,' she replied.

I thought about that for a moment, and found myself remembering the venomous look Sirius's mother had cast him that night at Malfoy Manor, and wondered if, even then, some plot were afoot to remove him from what Riddle must have regarded as dangerous circulation. But something else occurred to me too, something even more recent. Riddle had told me he was going to delegate the Blacks to Lucius, and I began to suspect he had already done so, for other reasons than Dumbledore's confirmation that he had been present at the arrest.

'It must be the manor then,' I said, and told them of my reasoning. 'The Malfoys have extensive cellars. In fact they are larger than the floor area of the house itself; they stretch right under the front lawns. I don't know them terribly well,' I confessed, 'although I had reason to go down there once, quite a few years ago.'

I remembered the occasion quite clearly; I had been in my fourth year at Hogwarts, and Lucius was in his first attempt at his final year, the one before Abraxas paid a large endowment to the school, and Lucius, at last, miraculously scraped through his N.E.W.T.s. Lucius had been enjoying some notoriety at Hogwarts at the time, more than even his fair share. He had been left to cool his heels at school over the Yuletide break that year, as I always was, and he had become bored and had invited three of his cronies, Evan Rosier, Walden Macnair and Rabastan Lestrangle to Malfoy Manor, presumably to show off his wealth and power in a way that he had now brought to some sort of dubious art form. I had not been invited, too low as I was in what he saw as his hierarchy at that time, or so I thought then, but Evan Rosier was frightened of Lucius and had recognised enough of my power to ask me to tag along with him. I remember Lucius drawing me a somewhat apprehensive look when he saw me, and it made me think that he actually saw me as some sort of threat to what he regarded as his supremacy, and I had wondered why that was.

We had been given the grand tour, stifflingly boring as it was, as though any one of us would be interested in which slack-mouthed aristocrat had buggered which other at some obscure point in antiquity, when Macnair came up with the idea of exploring the catacombs. At first Lucius was reluctant, probably having been forbidden by Abraxas, of whom he was at that point suitably terrified, to take anyone down there. But Abraxas was away in Romania on a business holiday, whatever that was supposed to mean, and had taken his wife, the woman I had wrongly assumed was Lucius's mother, with him, and Lucius didn't want to lose face in front of the boys who would become his toadies.

At first I found it almost as tedious as the public rooms had been, having no interest in Abraxas's wine cellar, nor the evidence of his more questionable sexual deviances, but the deeper we went, the more nervous the other boys seemed to become, and the more I began to understand just why that was. I had some limited Legilimency skills at that point, and I found Lucius to be anxious too; I also realised that he had never been this deep into the cellars, and only his vanity was pushing him onward. It was Rabastan who suggested that it was becoming boring and that he was hungry. I knew that to be a lie, sensing, as I had just done, the furtive glances the rest were casting at two small but ancient sarcophagi that we had just passed; they were slightly hidden by two bookcases stuffed full of what looked like ancient texts, ones my fingers itched to reach out and touch. Lucius had not remarked on the coffins; in fact he had become very quiet, and I suspected that he did not know what they were. He agreed readily with Lestrangle that it was indeed time for lunch, and he and the other three boys turned with what I sensed was relief, and saw quite clearly was panic on Evan Rosier's part.

I hung back. I had felt something that I doubted the rest had fully understood. Something was alive, or at least aware of our presence, in those small stone coffins, but there was something else I sensed too. They were not there as merely a means to some end of their own; they had a purpose, they were guarding something else, something very much alive, and I wondered just what that was.

Lucius turned and looked back at me, urging me to keep up with the others on the way back. He was afraid; I could tell that, even in the sooty glow of the small torch I carried. He was casting frightened looks along the dusty corridor we had come back down, and it was only then that I noticed that the air of neglect in that part of the cellars was not what it seemed. Cobwebs and dust indeed gave testament to the illusion that that part of the cellar was never frequented, but the floor, whilst having an accumulation of dust and debris of ages piled at the edges, was clean in the middle, as though trodden by more than our own few footsteps that morning. Someone came down here often, and I wondered why. Lucius saw me frowning at the floor in thought, but he had never been over-burdened with intelligence, and failed to see what I had seen.

It was some three weeks later, we had already been back at Hogwarts for almost two weeks, that Abraxas paid an unexpected visit to Hogwarts, and Lucius was summoned to his presence. He missed dinner, something I had never known him to do, and he was very quiet when he came to the common room that night. Lucius waited until we were alone for a few minutes, and surprised me by asking me to meet him in the Library later, after the rest of the Slytherins had gone to bed. I could see he was trying to hide some pain, both mental and physical, and wondered what summary justice Abraxas had meted out to him, but his thoughts were a welter of confusion I could make no sense of, and I agreed to meet him. It was the first time I ever felt truly sorry for Lucius Malfoy, as he confided to me that his father had somehow been informed that we had been down to the cellars, and Abraxas had actually used a Cruciatus Curse on his own son to remind him of the price of defiance. That wasn't what had caused my bout of compassion though, it was that Lucius had just learned that the twin sarcophagi guarded his own twin sister, a sister he had never known existed. He said that Abraxas had told him that she suffered from a family affliction that necessitated she be kept in a safe quiet place; I took that to mean she was mad.

Lucius was called away from school just before the end of term to attend a mysterious family funeral. He drew away from me after that, seeming to want to put some distance between us, but not before attempting an Obliviation Spell on the part of my memory relating to the cellars and his sister, the fool announcing his intentions as he raised his wand. By the time he left Hogwarts at the end of his repeated seventh year, he had become as aloof to me as he thought he remained to that day. In some way, I suppose I still felt sorry for him, that he had needed a confessor, and yet was so afraid of incurring his father's wrath by having one. I found myself wondering if Abraxas Malfoy had wanted to be rid of the only other fruit of his loins now that Lucius knew of her existence, or if Lucretia Malfoy had simply died. Whatever the truth was, I realised I knew for certain where Black and Lupin were being held.

'I must go to the manor,' I said, as I finished telling Dumbledore the story. 'It is only two days, by my calculation, to the full moon. We cannot leave Lupin there, any more than we can leave Black.'

'On what pretext?' he asked.

I shook my head, trying to think. 'I do not know yet, but I must get down to the catacombs.' I plucked a maple wand from my desk drawer and slipped it into the pocket on my thigh beside my own wand, and turned to leave; there was no time to waste. "*You will wait here?*" I asked that other side of Dumbledore's awareness.

"*Of course. Remember, Severus, do not risk your cover. There is no value to me if the price of Sirius and Lupin's freedom is the loss of yours.*" He held out his hand in an unfamiliar gesture, as though expecting me to shake it the way one would shake the hand of a relative stranger in greeting, and it was only when my own hand clasped his that I realised he had passed me something, two things to be precise. "*Use the white one only if you are in extremis, my boy, lest her Dark Sister feels her touch. You will understand how to, if the need arises,*" he said. "*The other is one of Fawkes's feathers; it is the only Portkey that can lead to my office.*"

His thought slipped out of my mind, leaving behind a strange warmth and sense of belonging I had never felt before.

Andromeda walked me to the front door, her blue eyes unreadable but for some obscure pain. 'Be safe, Severus,' she said, leaning forward to kiss me in a way that made my resolve falter, and made me want to stay just where I was. 'Do not shorten whatever little time we have together.'

I knew what she meant; I knew that one day, whenever this danger had passed, she would leave my life, but for now I would content myself in the knowledge that even a fool's paradise is a paradise of sorts.

Chapter Eleven

Chapter 11 of 48

When Severus visits Malfoy Manor, he finds nothing is quite what he expects.

I had Apparated from the warehouse in Cottontrader Row to the Apparition Point to the west of Malfoy Manor, and spent the walk to the great house going over the reason I had made up for calling. It was not an unreasonable one, but one I was confident could not be fulfilled, and on the off chance that it was, I would only own an unexpected treasure; all in all I was quite pleased with my efforts. What it didn't guarantee to do was to get me into the catacombs, and I suspected I would have to play that game once the dice were shaken.

As I picked my way along the path through the front rose garden, towards the elm-lined carriageway, I became aware of being watched. I knew it wasn't Riddle; I had not sensed his presence, and I thought I was near enough the house to detect his own particular brand of menace. That apart, Riddle would surely have come tapping on my mind by then, hoping to catch me unawares.

There was an elaborate snakehead knocker on the great double front doors, and at the left was a ring pull, the handle of which was fashioned like a cobra with its hood flared. I tugged it once, and deep within the manor a bell chimed in response ... and nothing else happened. I smiled wryly to myself at the show of indifference; after all, someone had known I was arriving for quite some time, and I suspected that whatever lowly elf had stood behind that door since I had first been spotted had orders to make sure any caller waited a suitable time before being permitted entry.

At last the door opened, and an elf looked up at me with baleful green eyes. 'Are you expected, sir?' it asked.

I was about to speak when a voice issued from inside; it was one I knew all too well, but its tone was one I was quite unfamiliar with.

'Severus, come in, come in,' Lucius exclaimed in what sounded oddly like genuine welcome. 'What a pleasant surprise,' he said, appearing not to have noticed the elf's yelp as he trod on one of its long skinny feet.

I wasn't sure why Lucius should even bother to pretend he was pleased to see me, and the fact that I could not detect any deceit made me quite sure that, whatever it was, it wouldn't be a pleasure to me. I allowed myself to be ushered into the wood-panelled hallway and divested of my cloak.

'Is Tom here?' I asked as I followed Lucius up the grand staircase and along the minstrels' gallery to where the drawing room looked over the front gardens.

He looked back over his shoulder, and I sensed his disappointment. 'Tom? Is that why you're here? I was rather hoping you had changed your mind about Bella ... I really need to get her off my back, Severus.'

'I need to speak with Riddle,' I replied, ignoring the reference to his soon-to-be sister-in-law.

Lucius closed the drawing room door and sank into one of the leather armchairs, nodding to me to do the same. He uncorked a brandy bottle with an expensive pop and poured a large snifter for himself.

'Not for me,' I said quickly as he made to fill another glass. 'Perhaps if Riddle isn't here, I should come back,' I said, confident then that Lucius was intent on my staying.

'No, wait a while,' he said. 'I'm sure he will be back at some time. He and my father have gone somewhere where they seemed to think I should not go.' He looked across at me, and I could see the same nervousness he had tried to hide that last night I had been there. 'Nobody tells me anything around here,' he said. 'They seem to think all I am capable of is keeping tabs on however many Blacks they care to dump in my lap.'

For a moment I thought that it was going to be easier than I had hoped, but he knocked the wind from my sails quite quickly. 'I don't suppose you have any notion where Andromeda is?' he asked, with a bitter twist to his mouth. 'I have been given the unenviable task of rounding them up, or some of them at any rate, like so many cattle.'

'Sorry,' I murmured. 'I don't have any idea. Have you tried her home?'

He gave me a hard look. 'Yes, the same way I tried yours, as a matter of fact,' he snapped, his pale grey eyes flashing dangerously. 'Don't think I've forgotten about that, Severus.'

'Surely you could whisper something in the shell-like ear of your betrothed?'

He just lifted the brandy glass to his lips instead of replying directly, swallowing about half of its contents. 'How did you manage it, Severus? How did you manage to worm your way out of spending purgatory with Bella, when I am lumbered with her sister for all time?'

It was about then that I realised Lucius had consumed more brandy than I had suspected. 'I rather thought you were pleased with your match,' I said. 'You seemed to be.'

'Not all about me is what it seems,' he said, and there was something not quite challenging about the way he said it, something more inviting investigation. I was about to try to probe his mind a little when went on. 'You and I were fairly close for a time,' he said, toying with his glass. 'You didn't know that, did you? It was while we still at school, in fact.'

'Of course I knew,' I said, intrigued as to where he was leading, yet anxious to get him back to the Blacks. Somehow I had to get down to those damn catacombs, and all I had succeeded in doing so far was moving upstairs to the drawing room, even further away. I began to wish that Riddle had indeed been there; it was going to be difficult to manoeuvre Lucius to the cellars. And yet, perhaps if I followed his lead, I could indeed get back to the last time I had been there. 'Did you really think you could Obliviate my memories of your sister?' I asked, so there would be no doubts that he knew he had failed, and yet left it to him to move the step to where I needed to go.

'I suppose not,' he said, tossing off the rest of the brandy. 'And that day ... that day in the cellars ... well, I never did go back down, not while she was still alive, and then ... well, it was too late.' He looked across at me again, and I read something that didn't sit comfortably in his eyes, something like pain and guilt.

'Why are you telling me this?' I asked.

He looked away, and I fancied he was trying to come to a decision. 'I had thought for a while I could trust you, but you made no ...' He trailed off, whatever he was trying to say, left unsaid. 'And then, the other night ... the night of the party, you took his damned Mark too.' He turned back to me, and I let myself dip into his mind, to see what truth lay there, and he shocked me by raising his hand and making a gesture as though swatting a fly away. 'Don't do that, Severus,' he said. 'It is extremely rude, and I always knew when you were doing it.'

I sat back in my seat. That hadn't been what I expected at all; I had seriously underestimated him, and yet perhaps overestimated other things about him. 'Then I shall repeat my question. Why are you telling me this?' I asked, reminding myself that, whatever he was trying to tell me, he was the one reported to have arrested Black.

'Because I need to know what side you're really on. There is going to be a war, Severus, and I do not know whether to join the side I have to, or the side I want to,' he said, and I could feel him trying to probe me then, drawing back as he met a blank wall. 'But I don't have the courage I think you have, and I need someone to help me.'

I didn't say anything; I couldn't afford to. I was either sitting in the presence of a man who was delivering a test from Riddle to me, or a man who desperately needed help, and either way I was in a quite awful predicament, unless I could get away from the manor before Riddle arrived back. If I didn't, I would have to tell him about Lucius right away; to fail to do so could expose my own disloyalty, if Lucius were telling the truth, could well be condemning an innocent man to a fate I didn't care to consider. But I had to get to Black and Lupin, and had to know how much time I had.

'When will Riddle be back?' I asked, ignoring what he said.

'Who knows?' he replied, pouring himself yet another large brandy. 'Who cares?' he said, his voice a mixture of dull flat disappointment and choking fear. 'A day, two, it doesn't matter to me.'

It mattered to me though. If I went through with the plan that had begun to form in my mind, I needed Riddle to be back before the full moon rose, so that Black and Lupin could be seen still to be at the manor after I had left. It was either that or Riddle would know I had set them free, or Lucius would have the blame laid on his own shoulders, and neither notion appealed to me very much. I had already slipped my wand from my pocket when the drawing room door opened, and Riddle and Abraxas came in. I cursed myself that I had been so involved with Lucius that I had not detected his arrival, and warned myself to be even more alert. One thing was certain then though; however good an actor Lucius Malfoy was, he couldn't have drained the colour from his face the way he did, and I found myself worrying that I had someone else to look out for, and not having the vaguest idea how I could do that.

'Why, Severus,' Riddle said, crossing the room to embrace me, and kiss my cheeks the way he had kissed them the day before. 'Have you a result already?' he asked, waving his hand in dismissal at Lucius and Abraxas, as I took his momentary distraction to slip my wand back.

I gave Lucius a last look as he crossed the room to leave, but he would not meet my eye. 'Not so much a result, Tom,' I replied, as the door closed on the Malfoys, and Tom cast a Silencing Spell on the room. 'Just a tiny thread that may very well be a dead end. It is one, however, that may be worth exploring.'

He gave me enquiring look, and then glanced at the brandy glass Lucius had left on the table. 'Ah, I see Lucius has been drowning his sorrows again,' he said, moving away from the subject, and handing me a lifeline I had not expected, one that might save Lucius's neck if he were indeed innocent of duplicity.

'Quite,' I replied. 'In fact, I suspect he had been drinking heavily before I got here. Either that or he has a very odd notion of loyalty,' I said, being as offhand as I dared, yet leaving no room for doubt that I had informed on him. 'Are you sure he is as loyal as you would want him to be?'

'I told you not to worry about Lucius, Severus,' he snapped. 'I have his measure. He is a weak confused man, held up by his father's power and his father's wealth. I suspect he begins even now to suffer from what Abraxas refers to as the family ailment. Lucius has enough to do watching over the Blacks. All anyone really needs from him is that he produces a legitimate heir to the Malfoy name, and his marriage to Narcissa will keep him in check and meet that end quite satisfactorily.'

I fancied his view of legitimacy had more to do with the purity of bloodlines than the sanctity of marriage, but I moved away from the subject slightly. I had done enough to cover myself and not too much to damage Lucius further in Riddle's eyes. I had to get on; I was getting further away from my goal, and doing nothing but giving myself added distractions. 'I came here to see you, Tom,' I said, 'not Lucius.'

He moved forward in his seat. 'Yes, I assumed so,' he said. 'I do hope you have something worthy of my attention.'

'I'm not sure,' I confessed. 'Are you familiar with the Nag Hammadi Codices?' I asked.

'No,' he said, 'but they sound suitably obscure.'

'They are; at least one is. The codices were first found in Egypt in 1945, having been buried since the second century. They were in a glass jar discovered by farmers. They are mostly Gnostic texts, the complete Gospel of Saint Thomas amongst them, and I have copies of most of them.' I paused for dramatic effect. 'Popular belief has it that one of the books and parts of another were burnt by one of the farmers.'

'And, of course, it is this burnt book that interests us?' he asked, his eyebrow rising.

'Indeed. Whether the original was burnt or not is of little moment,' I said. 'But there were at least five true copies made of the book before it was burnt, and this must have been done by scholars, as no ordinary Egyptian farmer would have had the skill to copy such ancient text, written as it was in Coptic ... or indeed known it was worth copying.'

'I'm sure we can obtain a copy of it,' he replied. 'Such a valuable book must have more copies if, as you say, there are copies of the others so common that one even graces the bookshelves of Spinner's End.'

I ignored the jibe. I had to make the few facts I knew convincing, and sound important enough. 'A copy of any one of the five copies is no use, Tom,' I said. 'Only a copy of the original codex is of any use to us.'

'Why?'

'The book refers to some ancient Greek experiments,' I said. 'It seems to have been written by wizards, something backed up by the odd fact that no reader sees the same thing in any copy of one of the five copies. Only the five books copied from the original are true copies.'

'Are you telling me that if anyone were to copy one of the five copies, it could not be done accurately?' he asked, clearly intrigued.

'It has been tried,' I said, rushing on as I sensed his interest. 'Now this is where it becomes difficult. One of the five true copies lies in the vaults of the Vatican, and one was placed in an unknown cursed vault of an Egyptian Pharaoh by the Egyptian authorities at that time, in an attempt to keep it at home, so to speak. The other two, whose whereabouts are known, lie in equally unattainable places: one in a Swiss vault, and another was believed to be the property, at one time, of a Muggle of Germanic origin, who fled to South America after the Muggle wars in Europe, taking his spoils of war with him.'

'And the fifth?' he asked, his intrigue upping another notch.

I thought I knew where it was; I thought it belonged to either Albus Dumbledore or Nicolas Flamel, or perhaps even Ethel. 'I think it is right here,' I lied.

He gave me a sceptical look, as though to say that Abraxas Malfoy was not important enough to own such a treasure. 'Why should you think that?' he asked.

I was extemporising to a certain extent, but everything I said was backed up by enough truth that I could worm my way out of it if necessary. 'As you know, the Muggles regard this part of England as a place of ancient worship, particularly Salisbury Plain, where the great standing stones they call Stonehenge are. The plain, the Muggles believe, belongs to English Heritage. What they do not know, is that the ground, including Stonehenge, actually forms part of Malfoy Estates, and access was only granted to the Muggles and their English Heritage by treaty with the Prime Minister of the time, and Abraxas Malfoy's father. Now this family has never needed Muggle money, it has enough wizard gold, I suspect, to depress their precious markets for a century,' I said, buoyed along by his rising interest. 'There was a rumour that went around certain circles, about 1946, when the deal to allow Muggle access to Stonehenge was done, that the fifth copy of the book had been recovered from below Gestapo Headquarters in Cologne. It had been tossed into a corner with a load of Hebrew texts, likely mistaken as one of them. Presumably someone had forgotten to burn them, so busy, as they were, with burning everything else. This theory is lent credence by the fact that the codex's last known place of residence was Cologne Cathedral.'

Riddle was thoughtful for a moment, but I could see he was excited, possibly in no small measure by the very places the codex seemed to have been, and the people who had sought it. I had to be very careful now; I had to compose myself for the question I knew was coming, the one where, if necessary, I had to lie until my tongue turned black. I suddenly wished I hadn't tried to be so clever, and had invented something much less complicated, but I had known it would appeal to him, and I was stuck with it.

'How do you know this?' he asked quietly, but something I didn't like at all had crept into his voice, something like mistrust.

I waited until he looked up. 'I don't know, Tom,' I whispered, and let my eyes drop, as though inadvertently, to where the Dark Mark was hidden by my sleeve. 'I just don't know.'

He didn't say anything as he reached into his pocket and took a cheroot from a tortoiseshell case, placing it between his lips, where it seemed to light itself of its own accord. He just sat and smoked, eventually tossing the cheroot into the fire as he reached for the bell pull at the side of the fireplace, and tugged it once.

If Abraxas Malfoy were puzzled by the question, he didn't show it. He merely denied any knowledge of the book, offering the open doors of the library I had sat in a few nights before. He and Riddle let me examine the shelves, without attempting to pretend they knew what I was looking for, and after what I considered a suitable time I shook my head and addressed Abraxas.

'Are there any other books in the house?' I asked. 'Anything your own father might have hidden for safety? We are talking about a very powerful book,' I said, hoping to appeal to his vanity.

He shook his head; his white leonine hair coming to rest seconds after he stopped. 'Nothing,' he snapped, and turned to Riddle. 'Is this important?' he asked, without hiding the disdain he felt for me.

'Why should you have to ask that, Abraxas?' Riddle responded. 'If I have treated Severus's request with respect, I would expect that you do at least the same.'

Abraxas bridled at that, and I kept my eyes slightly downcast, feigning a modesty I certainly didn't feel.

'There are no other important books in this house,' he said. 'A few tatty old manuscripts in the cellars, but nothing of whatever value you are talking about. My father would have told me.'

'How old?' Tom asked, and I was glad I hadn't had to do that myself.

'I don't even know,' Abraxas replied, clearly angry that what he considered to be a poverty-stricken upstart of a half-blood should be issuing orders to him in his own home, however indirect they may have been. 'But I doubt they could possibly be whatever you seek.'

'It seems I'm mistaken, Tom,' I said, feigning defeat. 'I shall keep you no longer, gentlemen. I am sorry to have wasted your time.'

'It seems you are, Severus,' Riddle replied. 'And Abraxas and I must leave now; we have other business to attend to. Perhaps Lucius can take you to check out these other books, just in case,' he added, looking to where Abraxas frowned in the doorway.

'I shall go with him. There are other things nearby that are none of his business,' Abraxas said quickly, casting me a look of dislike laced with mistrust; it was one that told me that the nearby things may very well be Black and Lupin.

'I am finding it somewhat tedious to have to request everything twice from you, Abraxas,' Riddle said, with a more than a hint of anger. 'Send Lucius, and let us leave now,' he said, pulling his pocket watch from his waistcoat. 'We are late enough as it is, and I should not like the rest of the troops to become as dissenting as you seem to have become.'

Lucius didn't want to be in the cellars; I could tell that. He seemed to have decided not to unburden himself any further though, and I wondered if Abraxas had had a word with him about discretion. I was seeing a very different side to Lucius Malfoy though, if, I had to remind myself, it was genuine. It seemed that once his props were removed, the Lestrage brothers and Walden Macnair, and Crabbe and Goyle to a lesser extent, that he was unable to support the legend he had built around himself, or maybe he didn't see the need.

'Why don't you just go along yourself, Severus?' he asked as we moved deeper into the cellars to where the sarcophagi had been. 'I'm sure you can remember the way.'

Every now and again I had cast my mind around, searching for someone else, just in case I was being lured into some sort of elaborate trap, of my own making admittedly, to prove my loyalty. I sensed nothing but dust and cobwebs and the skittering awareness of mice and spiders. I began to wonder if I were mistaken, if what I had allowed myself to believe as fact, had just been something that fitted the circumstances. After all, I had no proof that Black and Lupin were there, no one had said as much, and whatever Lucius's involvement had been in their arrest, I doubted he knew where they were then.

'Why don't you just come with me?' I suggested, raising the torch I carried until it shone on his face.

He had stopped at the end of a row of jar-filled shelves; I didn't know what they were, they could have been anything from pickled brains to pickled beetroots, for all I cared. 'Did you tell Riddle what I said to you?' he asked, and there was no panic in his voice, just a dull acceptance that I didn't think was false.

'Of course,' I said, carefully. 'The maudlin ramblings of a drunk man can be just as dangerous to his cause ... our cause ... as the rallying cries of Dumbledore and his faithful. You would do well to remember that,' I said, turning away from the way his shoulders seem to sag in some tiny amount of relief, to let him make of it what he would. I could do no more for him, and I had to speak to Dumbledore about him; it would have to do.

But he wouldn't let it go, and I had to get on. 'Severus ... if you leave ...' he said, and waited for me to turn again, but I didn't. 'Go on your own,' he said, and I knew he had not finished what he set out to say. 'I'm not going down there.'

I began to walk along the last corridor to where the sarcophagi were, sensing their dim sentience again. It worried me a bit, just how able whatever was inside them was to communicate, and to just whom it would communicate anyway. I slipped behind the bookshelves to be level with the coffins, and found them to be, whilst not quite benign, somehow disinterested, and I wondered if they had been in some way linked to Lucretia Malfoy. I didn't have time to speculate further as I passed between them, casting my mind back to check that my path back out had not been blocked.

There was a door set into the wall of what looked like the very end of that part of the cellar, and I sensed something behind it, and I hoped I knew what that faint

consciousness was. There was a large iron key on a hook above the door, which I sincerely hoped fitted the lock. I looked back once, but Lucius's torch seemed not to have moved. I cast a charm about me so Lupin would not know who I was, took the key from its hook, and opened the door.

Except for the absence of the window which overlooked the rose gardens, the room was almost a miniature replica of the drawing room upstairs, and so incongruous in this neglected netherworld that it quite took me aback. There were two men lying on the floor; they looked to have been dumped there and left, as there was no other evidence of them in the room. They were alive, but Black barely so, and Lupin unconscious. I knelt beside Black and tried to turn him over. He didn't even groan, and one side of his face was so badly bruised that, but for his clothes, he was hardly recognisable.

'Black ... Sirius,' I whispered urgently, pouring whatever I could into his subconscious. 'Black, I need you to hear me and understand.'

I almost felt him trying to draw himself out of whatever cocoon he'd fled to to bear his pain, and then he slipped back again. 'Black, please, I have no time to spare ... you have no time to spare. I need to get Lupin out of here,' I said, appealing to what I hoped would rouse him.

'He's dead,' Black groaned, and slipped from consciousness again.

'He's not dead,' I pleaded with him. 'Lupin is alive ... Sirius, I have to get him out of here before tomorrow night.'

'He's dead,' Black said again, but he had dragged himself forward somehow.

'I swear to you he is still alive.' I took the Portkey from my pocket and slipped it into his. 'That will take you both to Dumbledore's office,' I said, praying to Merlin, or anyone who might be listening, that he understood me. 'Do not use it until after someone else has been down here to confirm your presence, otherwise my cover will be broken. Black ... please, Sirius,' I said, shaking the broken man's shoulder as much as I dared. 'Tell me you understand.'

'Don't listen, Sirius,' Lupin groaned from behind me. 'It's a trick. That's Snape. I can smell the treacherous snake from here.'

Of course he could; my hasty charm meant nothing to a man who could scent another the way the werewolf could. But his words, or more likely the fact that he was alive, rallied Black a little, and he dragged himself another bit towards full consciousness.

'It's all right, Moony. I know it is,' Sirius gasped in some tearing agony, but opened his un-swollen eye a little, as I dropped my disguise. 'I understand,' he said, moving his hand to his side to pat his pocket.

It was all I could do; even Lucius would not believe I had spent so much time looking at a shelf of mouldy books. I slipped the other wand from my pocket and put it in Black's empty wand pocket, charming it from view. 'Don't use that unless you have to,' I said.

I stood up. Lupin had managed to drag himself up onto one elbow. He was watching me with suspicion laced with puzzlement. I didn't have time to explain, and I didn't care to either. Lupin was an honourable man as far as I knew, but a weak one; he could not be party to my secret allegiance, but I would leave that to Dumbledore to deal with. For now it would serve my purpose that he knew we were not enemies.

I slipped from the room, locking it from the outside again, and moved back through the sarcophagi, sensing no difference in them. Just as I reached the bookcases, I felt him, and wondered if he had left the house at all. I was in deep trouble, realising in a moment of heart-stopping shock that I still had the key in my hand.

'Severus,' Riddle said as he and Abraxas approached the bookshelves, Riddle glancing past the sarcophagi to the partly hidden door behind which Black and Lupin lay. 'Just what are you doing?' he asked, a faint trace of disappointment crossing his features, whilst malicious triumph crossed Malfoy's.

My hand, the one holding the key, went to the nearest bookshelf, as though clinging for support, and my other hand dipped into my pocket, clasp around the white stone Dumbledore had given me. I picked up the innocuous looking book that I found myself touching, from the bookshelf, and turned it over. It had a faded green cover with dark lettering, and seemed to be of the era around the end of the Muggle wars in Europe. The title was written in German, "Die Letztendliche Wahrheit?", "The Ultimate Truth?". I held it up, my mouth dry and my heart hammering in my chest, without even having the mental strength to notice that the key had disappeared from my grasp.

'I was doing what you asked me to do, Tom,' I said, pouring what confused indignation I could into my voice. 'I was looking for this.'

'He's a liar, Tom.' Abraxas spat his fury and pushed past me, almost knocking one of the small stone coffins from its bier as he made for the door. He took the key from where it rested once more on its hook, unlocked the door and shoved it open, and I pretended to try to see past his bulk into the room where the two men lay, apparently undisturbed. Malfoy pulled the door closed quickly and seemed to attempt to moderate whatever tirade he had begun.

'I have never seen that before,' he said to Riddle, nodding to the book in my hand.

Riddle took the book from me, opened it at random, and frowned at the Coptic script. 'Now I know where Lucius takes his inability to find the obvious from, Abraxas,' he said lightly, snapping the book shut and handing it back to me. 'Have you actually ever looked? ... And if you have, I wonder why.'

Chapter Twelve

Chapter 12 of 48

The more Severus unravels secrets, the more confused he becomes.

I Apparated to the warehouse, taking the time to cast a charm about me as I stepped into Cottontrader Row. I had never done that before, but my sense of danger was so heightened and my nerve ends so taut that I doubted any precautions I took for my personal safety were overdone. Little did I know then that these very precautions were prompted by but a tiny taste of the gut-wrenching feeling of being observed that would stay with me for the rest of my life.

It had been quiet earlier, when I had left for the manor, but as I passed out of Cottontrader Row into Spinner's End, I saw a man standing at the junction of the two shabby little streets, as though waiting for something or someone. He glanced at me only briefly, and I could almost hear his sigh of disappointment that he had to wait longer still to see Severus Snape pass. Although he too had disguised himself, he was bored, probably having been standing in the rain for much longer than he would have wished, and it wasn't difficult for me to identify him as Evan Rosier. Tempted as I was to tap him on the shoulder and let him acknowledge himself as the failure he was, I didn't want to stop, or even change pace, and I walked past him, stifling even the urge to make any attempt to see what lay in the top layers of his mind. Lucius's advanced abilities in Occlumency had made me cautious; I just didn't want to take the risk that Rosier too, unlikely as that was, had hidden talents. Of course, there was no good reason why Rosier should not be able to inform Riddle that I was going home, but I felt no small victory at letting him wonder for the few moments until I disappeared under

the charm of the house, and left a space where I had been. I only hoped he had been looking in the right direction at the time, otherwise it was going to be a long wet evening for him.

Dumbledore met me at the door to Spinner's End, and I could feel his anxiety and relief as I crossed into the hall. I fully understood his concern; he had told me not to use his stone unless I was in desperate straits, and I had been, we all had been, and I included Lucius in that. Andromeda was standing behind him, equally worried, but perhaps for different reason; then again, perhaps I flatter myself, she was, after all, close to Sirius.

Dumbledore surprised me by speaking openly in front of not only Andromeda, but Ethel too, and I knew something about Ethel must have been explained to his satisfaction, although to be fair, he hadn't had time to enlighten me before I left. Whatever it was, I was content to trust his judgement and wait until he knew what he needed to know, before I learned what I wanted to know.

I told him about Black and Lupin first, and how I had left them, and he told me that Poppy Pomfrey and two other Healers were waiting in his office, and would do so until they returned. I doubled back on my story to fill them in, and I had just got to Riddle and Abraxas's arrival in the catacombs, when Ethel interrupted me, from where she sat looking out of her picture, like a nosey old neighbour hanging out of a window

'Next time, try not to be so inventive, dear,' she began. 'We had a bit of a job with your little codex.'

'Perhaps I should have asked him for a copy of "Hogwarts: A History",' I suggested, more than a little put out.

'Don't be facetious, Severus. It suits you rather too well,' she said. 'I was merely implying that we were a little pushed for time to deal with such a unique item.'

I turned to her, narrowing my eyes in suspicion. 'How did you do it anyway?' I asked, holding the book up. 'How could you possibly have been able to produce this, when you didn't know what I needed?'

'I shouldn't bother wasting too much time translating it, my boy,' Dumbledore said, something annoyingly amused in his eyes.

'Are you telling me this isn't real?' I gasped at the implication of that. 'Riddle opened it ...What ... what if he has memorised anything he saw?' I spluttered, and turned to Ethel, unable to keep the unreasonable accusation from my voice. 'You told me he had total recall. What if he's memorised whatever he read?'

Ethel's features had hardened somewhat. 'I was of the belief that the codex couldn't be copied accurately,' she reproved me. 'Anyway, he may take whatever potion for wart cures he finds as being important to the preparation of Aqua Vitae, if he cares to,' she remarked, leaving me in no doubt that she was a lot more able to think her way out of tight spot than I was at that time; then again, I supposed a thousand years of practice had helped. On the other hand, I hadn't even pointed out to her that memorising wasn't the same thing as copying, although I'm fairly sure she would have had an answer to that too.

'This is a book of recipes?' I gasped again. 'A book of old wives' cures for petty ailments?'

'Perhaps we should have left him where he was, and gone to the Vatican for the real thing,' Dumbledore murmured, giving Ethel a sidelong look that spoke of renewed trust, while Andromeda laughed in rather superior amusement that left me feeling uncomfortably foolish.

Ethel and Andromeda had stayed in the living room, Ethel keeping to her picture for a nap, and Andromeda reading, when Dumbledore and I had gone through to the kitchen. He wanted to speak to me alone as much as I wanted to speak to him. Too much was happening, and I needed to understand what powers I had backing me up, and just whom to trust, and how far that trust should go. I knew he had some things he wanted to air too, and I had a suspicion that Andromeda was one of them. It took him a long time to get there though; he had a story to tell first, and whilst I found none of it surprised me, much of it left me moved to my very core.

Godric and Ethel, or Emeline as she had been then, had been something like the Romeo and Juliet of their day, coming as they had from two families, perhaps not at war with one another, but certainly with ideals at odds. She had eloped with Godric, and the couple had four children, two sons and two daughters, the branches of whom led either directly or indirectly to every one of the present day Gryffindors.

When Godric died at the age of a hundred and seventy-two, Emeline had gone into mourning, keeping to the home they had lived in when he was not involved with the vision, and latterly the reality, of Hogwarts. Emeline was, of course, an old lady herself by then, and as she watched her own children and her grandchildren die too, she felt that it was time for her to be re-united with her beloved Godric. She had gone one last time to converse with the Merpeople at the great sea next to the home she had shared for so many years with Godric, and to whose care she had committed his earthly remains. As she stood for what she expected to be the last time, her bare feet lapped by the waves which washed the shingle, she saw not the Merpeople, but a young boy walking towards her. He came from the direction of the deep rock pool where she had laid Godric's body, awaiting the first high tide to wash it to its final resting place. The boy seemed not to look at her, busy as he was polishing a small white stone on his doublet, and yet she knew he had seen her.

Emeline waited for a while after the boy left, before finally understanding that the Merpeople would not be summoned that day. When she went back to her house she found the boy sitting at her relict fire, polishing his white stone. She looked to the fireplace and saw the stone was but one of three the boy had brought with him. One red, one black, and the white one.

The boy had no name that he could recall and didn't seem to know from whence he had come, and despite her great age Emeline took him in. For many days he sat staring into the fire, just polishing his stones, sometimes one, sometimes another. Every now and again he would look up at Emeline and tell her he had polished another nick out of a stone, and it would soon be perfect. Then he would stare into the fire for a while, and polish his stones again, occasionally murmuring that yet another nick had been smoothed. She felt a renewed contentment with her lot as the days passed, until one day the boy summoned her from her cooking stove to look at the row of perfect stones on the fireplace.

'No nicks, at last. They are as they should be,' he declared in some sort of triumph, lifting the white one to polish it on his doublet.

'What would you like me to call you?' she had asked him then, but the boy had just shaken his head and polished his stones and looked into the fire. She looked to the fire too, where the stones sat in a row, with no nicks, at last. She called him Nicolas, as though he had picked the name for himself, and Flamel for staring into the fire, and he seemed content with that.

It was the very stuff of legends, and yet a secret, and I wondered why it had never been told. I found myself expressing, perhaps not doubts, but speculation that she had made bits up.

'Ethel did not tell me this, Severus,' Dumbledore said. 'Nicolas did. He was with me this morning when I got the news about Sirius and Remus.'

'And the stones?' I asked. 'The white one is the stone you lent me?'

'It is but one third part of the original,' Dumbledore nodded. 'When the earth was young, just a flaming ball, three stones were fused together and lay below the sea for eons, until they were washed up on the day that Emeline went to go to the Merpeople. Nicolas maintains that he found the original large stone as he saw an old woman walk toward the shore, and as she raised her arms to call the Merpeople the stone fell apart in his hand to leave three others. One was the white stone, the red one became the Philosopher's Stone,' he said, and I felt him watch me as he said this last, to see if I knew that Flamel owned the Philosopher's Stone. I didn't see any point in denying it, or even showing surprise.

'The other stone?' I asked, although I suspected I knew the answer. 'The third one?'

Dumbledore sighed. 'The other one was flat, black and shiny.'

'Mordestone?' I whispered. 'But how did it find its way to Tom Riddle?'

'We do not know,' Dumbledore admitted. 'When Nicolas married Perenelle, some three hundred years later, they went to live in Paris. In fact they stayed there for many years, enjoying some degree of celebrity from time to time. It was during this time, towards the end of the centuries he lived in France, that his home was burgled, but as nothing appeared to have been stolen, Nicolas assumed that he had disturbed the intruders. He was in the habit of carrying two of the stones on his person at all times, but the black one he left in a case, hidden in his fireplace. He told me that he somehow felt that, whilst the black stone seemed not to care for the white one, it seemed to covet the other. Indeed, it was only many months later that Nicolas found that the black stone had disappeared,' he said. 'And shortly thereafter, Grindelwald rose to power.' Dumbledore looked away, and I knew enough of that particular part of history not to need to question him.

'But Ethel died,' I said, changing direction. 'Why? She had access to the Philosopher's Stone if her body were failing her. Surely Flamel would not have denied her?'

'For many years, many centuries in fact, she had longed to pass over, Severus,' the old man replied, and I thought there was something almost longing, some empathy with her, in the way he spoke. 'But she was always left with the feeling that her work was undone, although she did not know why that was. She had been living for a time in Italy, and she had come back here for a few years, feeling that the time had finally come. She called Nicolas and Perenelle to her and asked that they help her to return to the place where she had lived with Godric. Once there, she made her final appeal to the Merpeople. They heard her call on the day you left Hogwarts.'

I felt the blood in my cheeks freeze, and the tiny hairs at the back of my neck rise. The ancient witch in Italy who had claimed to be almost a thousand years old had been Ethel; it was reasonable to suspect that the fact that she had dropped from sight was enough to make people assume that so aged a crone had merely died. I had worked that out a couple of days before, I suppose, but then I consciously acknowledged it. Yet Ethel's original letter to me had intimated that she had never visited the olive grove in Tuscany that she had left me. I set it mentally aside, sure in the knowledge that there would be many other inconsistencies, and just as sure that she would have an answer for each one. It must have been from Italy that she had gone to stay in the mill owner's house in Northumberland, the one I had sold, before she finally sent for Nicolas.

'And the white stone?' I asked. 'How did it come to be in your possession?'

Dumbledore looked across the table at me, layers and layers of other men's pain and troubles in his eyes, and I wondered how he bore the weight. He laid his hand on top of mine and squeezed it. 'Nicolas gave it to me, a long time ago,' he said. 'But it was only this morning that he told me that it was on the day you were born.'

I sat in silence for a while, trying to collect my thoughts from where he had scattered them. I thought of Andromeda, and Black and Lupin, and I thought of Lucius, and Lily. I thought of Ethel, and the years and more countless years she had lived, unquestioning of her purpose and yet trudging down whatever path lay in front of her, and I found I had only one question.

'Why me?'

Dumbledore shook his head. 'We do not know,' he said. 'But we know it is so.'

He stood up, leaving all the questions I should have asked, unspoken. I knew he needed to be back at Hogwarts, to wait for Black and Lupin, and I found myself wondering if I had done enough, if I had even begun to live up to what seemed to be expected of me, and felt nothing but miserable failure. I had not ministered any of Black's wounds, indeed I did not even know what they were; I had not allayed Lupin's fear properly, nor had I explained to him what had to be done if Black were not capable; I had not helped Lucius, or even taken the proper time to find out where his heart lay.

'You have exceeded my expectations, Severus,' Dumbledore said, laying a hand on my shoulder. 'And I have been expecting for a very long time. Do not be so critical of yourself; it is a great failing of yours. We shall talk again at length, once I know Black and Lupin are safe. As to Lucius ... and I know you are troubled by him, let us see how the land lies in a few days.' He gave me a level look, one I returned, even as I knew what was coming next. 'Remember, Severus, Andromeda is with child to the man to whom she is betrothed.'

'I know,' I replied. 'But I loved her first.'

Dumbledore didn't stay much longer, and I could tell he was anxious to get back to Hogwarts to see if there were any news of Black and Lupin. I stayed in the kitchen when he went through to have a few words with Ethel and Andromeda, hearing snatches of their conversation, until I heard the front window open and close behind the bee. I hoped I would be left alone for a while. I know that after longing for Andromeda for such a long time that I should have preferred her company to my own, but I was a solitary man at heart, and the last couple of days of almost constant company were beginning to make me feel stifled. I know the real cause of that was Dumbledore, and Black when he had been there, but when I added the ubiquitous Ethel, and then Andromeda, not to mention Tom Riddle and Lucius dropping by, it was too much for me. I longed for the solitude of my living room and my books and my desk, and a bottle of malt whisky, and some room to think.

I couldn't work out how to go about asking Ethel and Andromeda to change places with me, so that I could go into the living room. Selfish, I know, but I don't claim to anything else, not where my personal space is concerned. It made me wonder what kind of husband I could possibly have proven to be, if I had been given the chance, or taken it, as the case really had been; perhaps it was as well I hadn't. I'd been fretting and working myself up into some sort of resentful anxious mess for about half an hour, when I realised that there was no sound of voices coming from the living room. I wondered if either Andromeda had fallen asleep, or if Ethel had stayed in her picture and left Andromeda reading. My curiosity overtook my ill temper, and I went through to see what was happening. The room was empty of people, just my furnishings and books, and a photograph on the mantelpiece of an old lady and a woman with black hair; they were tending some rose bushes.

'We've got a lot to do here, Severus, to get the garden ready for winter. Can you manage on your own for a few hours, dear?' Ethel said brightly. 'Just let me know when you're ready for dinner and we'll come back out. There's hot tea on your desk, and I've hidden your whisky.'

I gave her a hurt look, and then let my eyes slide to the beautiful woman who was picking the dead heads off some flowers, and felt the familiar longing, this time laced with pleasure. I didn't think Andromeda could see out of the picture in the way that Ethel and Dumbledore seemed to, but I was suddenly glad of both women's company, to the extent of feeling quite excluded when Ethel turned her picture round to face the wall.

I lay awake most of that night; not even Andromeda's soft breathing, and the way that when she moved some part of her always seemed to touch me, were able to calm the anxiety that threatened to rip from me, screaming, at any moment. Dumbledore had neither returned nor sent any message about Black and Lupin, and I fretted between wondering if I should risk the trip to Hogwarts, or go instead to the manor to see if there was anything else I could do there. And yet both options would have left Andromeda alone in the house, and although I had few residual doubts about Ethel, I was unhappy leaving Andromeda alone with just an old lady to protect her. That apart, Dumbledore had taken the white stone back from me, and I doubted that either he or Ethel could aid me in any way if I left Spinner's End.

'Try to get some rest, Severus,' Andromeda murmured sleepily from my side.

I stifled my sigh, and tried to lie quietly and let my mind wander to other things. But my dragons would not be caged, and I could not even find a fantasy to latch onto, not when the real thing was lying at my side. I pushed the bedclothes aside, and as I stood up I found my eyes drawn to the Dark Mark. Even in just the pale light of the almost full moon the obscenity seemed to leer at me in invitation, and at last I understood what I had been feeling. Riddle was calling me, and I would have no rest until I went to him. I pulled on the shirt I had tossed aside earlier, in some way hoping that covering the Mark would banish it from my mind as it had done before. It made no difference of course, my arm had been below sheets but moments before, and I knew that this feeling was different to the other terror I had felt when the Mark was exposed.

Dawn was just trying to creep into the sky when I eventually went downstairs to find Ethel staring into the fire the way she had two days before, when I had wondered if she were communicating with someone else.

'Who are you talking to?' I asked, and found I didn't really need the answer, and I felt shamed by having doubted her. 'It's Godric, isn't it?'

She turned slowly, and I could see she blinked her eyes rapidly, as though hiding some emotion too deep for a mere mortal to understated. 'Yes, dear,' she said. 'His portrait has spoken with Phineas Black's,' she went on. 'Sirius and Lupin have not returned.'

I made my decision, and the Dark Mark had already given me my excuse. 'Can you protect Andromeda if I go back to the manor?' I asked.

'Yes, dear,' she said, and I did not doubt her. 'Bring her downstairs and we shall retire to the picture now. I shall ask Godric to get Phineas to speak to Dumbledore to let him know.'

'Can't Godric speak to Dumbledore directly?' I asked. 'His portrait is in Hogwarts, after all.'

'Oh, no, dear,' she replied, turning again to the fire. 'No one alive may approach any one of the four founders. Only the dead have the right of audience before the highest court of our people.'

I nodded my acceptance. 'Will you have him send someone here to protect you? Make sure they understand the street is being watched.'

'It is already done.' She looked up at me. 'Even now, two are on their way. Phineas says that you will know you can trust them when you see them. You must wait until they get here, for they bear with them Nicolas's gift to Albus. You must not leave here without it.'

I felt no small measure of relief that I would have the stone with me, and I climbed the stairs to rouse Andromeda. It wasn't much later when there was a short sharp rap at the front door. At first I thought it was a trick when I opened the door and saw no one, and it wasn't until I felt a cat weave its sinuous way between my legs that I understood. I almost gave out a yelp of fright as the sensation repeated itself, this time by a larger, more battered looking cat than the neat little mackerel-striped tabby I had recognised as Minerva McGonagall. I waited with almost bated breath to see just into whom the second feline would materialise, and found myself strangely comforted by the appearance of a man whose mistrust in me was almost equal to my dislike of him, and Alastor Moody fixed his magical eye on Ethel.

'A snake and a ghost,' he muttered sourly to McGonagall, ignoring the fact that, despite his opinions, neither Ethel nor I was deaf. 'Is this Dumbledore's idea of protection?'

'Enough, Alastor,' McGonagall replied. 'You were only asked to accompany me because your Animagus form was suitable ...' she said, raising her eyebrow until it had all but disappeared under her hat, '... and there was no one else Albus was able to spare.' She turned to where I stood between Ethel and Andromeda, as though we three had closed ranks. She held up her hand as though to stall me from speaking, and took a tiny package from her pocket. 'Do not ask me for this, Severus,' she said quickly. 'It must be given to you without having been requested.'

Minerva had never called me by my given name before, and that alone made me feel that she, at least, had somehow accepted me. I took the package from her, feeling not only the reassuring weight of the stone, but also that it seemed to place itself as a buffer between me and the constant calling of the Riddle's Mark. That reminded me of Dumbledore warning me to beware lest the black stone recognised the white, and I wondered if whatever part of Mordestone resided in me had done just that ... and that gave me something else to worry about.

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter 13 of 48

Severus pays another visit to the manor.

As I slipped out of the charm protecting the house, I once again cast a disguise about me. There seemed to have been a change of the guard, and this time the man standing at the intersection of the two streets made no pretence of doing anything but watching for me. He had charmed himself not only to change his appearance, but to be invisible from Muggle view too, and I wondered vaguely why Rosier had not done that, but Rosier wasn't particularly bright, so that could have explained it. The man pretended not to suspect he knew who I was, appearing, as I had done from round a corner that wasn't there, and I reversed his favour as I passed him.

'Sorry to have kept you waiting, Walden.'

'Fuck you, Snape,' he growled. 'Where are you going?'

'I doubt it is your place to ask that, Macnair,' I called over my shoulder as I turned into Cottontrader Row. 'I shall check with Tom though, and if apologies are required, be assured I shall forget to offer them.'

I didn't wait to hear his response, consisting as it would have done of the words pauper, half-blood and scum, in any order I cared to place them, but I did notice that he made no attempt to follow me; he obviously had a wider remit than just watching the comings and goings of Severus Snape.

I didn't go straight to the disused warehouse though; I walked instead along Cottontrader Row to the next street, and along it to the off-license at the very end, next to the railway embankment. I had Muggle money on me; I had always carried it since I had developed a taste for malt whisky. I bought four bottles of Glenfiddich, and charmed them when I got to the warehouse, intending to pick them up on my return.

I went to the Apparition point to the west of the manor again, as I always did. It was a longer walk to the house, but it gave me some much needed time to think, and afforded me the opportunity to try to sense Riddle's presence. Unlike the day before, I felt him quite clearly, and when I did I noticed I dropped my hand to my pocket to where the stone sat nestled in the corner, as though to glean some comfort from it, and I was sure the stone recognised him too.

I wasn't kept waiting that time; in fact I had only begun to climb the stone steps to the front door when it was thrown open by the same elf that had given me such a dubious welcome the day before.

Its words were the same; just the order of them was different. 'You are expected, sir.'

The entrance hall was empty except for the elf and me, but I could hear voices issuing from upstairs, one of which was raised in something more than anger. I recognised it immediately as Walburga Black. I followed the elf up the grand staircase, past the room where Mrs Black was still arguing, but she had lowered her admirable pitch, and I was only able to catch snatches of what she said.

'At least I have not seen fit to hide my son's treachery,' she hissed, 'unlike the way you have presented your peacock to the Dark Lord as being worthy of his service.'

And here someone I presumed to be Orion Black added, 'Quite right, dear.'

'How dare you?' Abraxas's voice, low and threatening.

I wanted to stop to hear the rest, but the elf had already opened the door of the library, further down the minstrels' gallery, and I had no good excuse to linger.

Riddle was sitting at the fire, the same way as he had been that first night, but instead of a glass of brandy at his elbow, there was a glass of dark clear tea. He didn't stand to embrace me; in fact he didn't even look round as I heard the door close softly behind me, and I felt the flood of trepidation that I had tried to keep at bay lap over my defences.

'Tom?' I said unsurely, without the need to feign the solicitude; what I had begun to recognise as an emotion bordering on sheer terror had done that for me.

He turned at last. 'Tell me, Severus,' he said, 'for how long do I need to call you before you hear my summons?' He held up his hand to stifle whatever I was going to say. 'I only ask, so that I can plan for the future,' he added in that reasonable tone of his, the one that knew no reason.

I looked down to where his Mark seemed to burn on my arm, and I wondered if he had in some way caused the sensation. 'I didn't understand what I was feeling,' I said; it was the truth after all. 'I came when I ...'

I was unable to finish. I was seized by a pain so sharp that it starved my vision, and it took me all of my strength to stay on my feet, even with the support of the wall I had fallen back on.

'Perhaps, now you will recognise it?' I heard him say through the blinding agony.

I nodded, at least I think I did, but I didn't speak, as wave of nausea swept over me. I felt something else build up inside me too, and it took me a moment to recognise it as rage; and another to understand it was directed, not so much at Riddle, as at the black stone he slipped back into his pocket; and yet another still to understand that the source of my fury was not my own heart, but the white stone in my pocket. All that sharpened my wits and told me two things: I had to be in control of myself at all times and in control of the stone too. It could be my saviour, indeed it had already proven to be so, but I knew very well that it could be my undoing too.

He had turned back to the fire, just staring into the flames, and it reminded me of the way Dumbledore had told me that Nicolas had stared into the flames of Ethel's fire, and indeed the way Ethel gazed into the fire at Spinner's End to commune with Godric, and I wondered if Riddle too had a confidant in the nether world. I certainly hoped not.

When he turned back to me his demeanour had changed; he had become Riddle again and had put the Dark Lord away. 'Come sit with me, Severus,' he said, as though I had only then just walked in. 'I would talk with you undisturbed whilst the rest of the fools here argue amongst themselves.'

I had little option but to obey. I could hardly say that I hadn't come to see him, but had come to free Sirius Black and the werewolf. The werewolf, I thought, with a sinking sensation in the pit of my stomach. Just a few hours before the full moon would rise, and Remus Lupin would see the defenceless man in his prison as his quarry, one who had nowhere to run, and was unlikely to have the strength to effect the change to the form that would keep him safe. Of course, that was only one possible scenario; the other was that very prison being opened by some unsuspecting person or elf, and the werewolf escaping to vent its fury elsewhere, and gratifying though the prospect might have seemed on the surface, Tom Riddle, and to a lesser extent Abraxas Malfoy, were quite difficult enough without them being werewolves too.

'How are you settling into your new role, Severus?' Riddle enquired mildly, as though I had taken up a position as an assistant in a shop.

'I find I am unsure exactly what that is,' I said, deciding to make some effort at asserting myself. 'I had been trying to make some attempt at beginning work today, and now I find I am summoned here instead.'

If he were angry, he didn't show it, in fact he smiled the smile I knew as dangerous and he probably regarded as disarming. 'And have you made any sense of anything?' he asked.

'I haven't had the chance, Tom.' I tried to relax a little, tried to think my way forward to what my real goal was. 'Was there something specific you called me for?'

'Yes, yes there was. I would like you to take on the additional role of watching someone for me,' he said. 'But before you do that, I would like to be sure that your fealty lies to me.'

'You have doubts?'

'I always have doubts, Severus,' he replied, and smiled again.

'And this person I am to be watching?' I asked. 'Would it not be more economic of your manpower to let Macnair take up that duty, instead of keeping tabs on my comings and goings?'

He threw back his head and laughed. 'Oh, my Severus,' he said, and I noticed the address with some sort of relief, the "my" had been missing, the "my" somehow told me that he held me in some sort of regard ... and to be very cautious when it was not used, and even more cautious when he did. 'Walden Macnair is not spying on you,' he said. 'He is your reluctant protector for today. No one hostile will approach you, not when I am watching out for you.'

I think I believed that, although a guard's very presence, reporting as he would to Riddle, would have the same effect as a spy's. 'I see,' I murmured. 'However, if I understood you correctly, my main aim is to find a reference to work from to somehow unlock the secrets of Aqua Vitae, if ...' I said, hesitating for a moment, to let him know of my doubts, '... if such a thing can be found. How am I supposed to take on this additional task?'

'Quite easily. You will either come to stay here, or Lucius Malfoy will go to Spinner's End.'

'Lucius?' I repeated, totally baffled as to where he was leading me. 'I had thought that Lucius was watching the Blacks for you. Are you now saying I have to watch him?' I paused again, but he seemed content to let me vent my confusion, uninterrupted. 'Anyway, you led me to believe that I had not to concern myself with Lucius, and now I find that, not only do I have to do so, but that you have thrust him right under my feet.' I finished, on what I hoped was a high.

'Things have changed,' he snapped. 'But first I need to see you are capable and loyal enough to do what I am asking.'

I had no idea of what was going on, but I knew it wasn't good. I was also desperately aware that things were escalating out of any feeble control I might have had on them, and I finally acknowledged that I had made a bad mistake in going to the manor all. Then again, it would have been a worse one to resist, and I wasn't entirely sure I could have done that. Riddle had stood up, and at the door he cocked his head in invitation for me to follow him. When we passed along the minstrels' gallery the drawing room door was open, but Sirius's parents and Abraxas were no longer there. I began to wonder if Walburga and Orion had gone there to take Sirius back to Grimmauld Place, and wondered too if Lupin had been sent along with him.

Riddle didn't stop at the ground floor, and I understood then where we were going, and the flood of unease washed through me again when I wondered what he was asking of me. He made his way through the catacombs to the bookshelves, passed through them and past the sarcophagi to the door at the end. He took the key from the hook and opened the door.

There were still two people in the windowless replica of the drawing room, but this time one of them sat in the corner. His head was bowed, and his silver-blond hair covered his face. Lucius didn't even look up. The other person sat on a red velvet chaise, with a look of serene contentment, holding a wand pointed at Malfoy, one that I suspected had just been used. It was Bellatrix Black. Neither Sirius nor Lupin was there, and I felt sure that the Blacks had taken them, and wondered just where that left me, and them.

There was one other thing worthy of note in that thinly disguised prison cell; just a few feet from where Bellatrix sat was the maple wand, right in the middle of the floor. Of course, it was visible to no one but Sirius Black and me, and I wondered if he had left it deliberately as some sort of statement, or if it had fallen from his grasp in some struggle. I didn't even know whose wand it was; I had just found it one night in the Slytherin common room when I had still been at school. Although I had not been in the habit of pilfering anyone else's property, however poor I had been, I had taken it and hidden it, quite probably out of spite against anyone so careless as to leave it lying around. No one had mentioned it was missing, and as the weeks went on I forgot about it, and by then, of course, it was too late to enquire about its owner. It was a plain wand, light and small, probably a girl's wand, adorned only by a snake winding around the handle. I had not done a Prior Incantato on it, probably in the knowledge that the wand would let the owner know by whom that had been done if I returned it, and would question why I had kept it so long, and such was my disinterest afterwards that I just hadn't bothered. I bothered then though, as I tried to work out if I could use it to my advantage.

'What's going on?' I asked Riddle, nodding to where Lucius raised his head at the sound of my voice.

'I should like you to find that out from Lucius, Severus,' Riddle replied. 'He has managed to allow two prisoners I had here to escape.' He turned to me and held my eyes, and I found I could not look away. 'I would like you to drag the truth from this fool, as to why he has let Sirius Black and Remus Lupin escape from under his nose.'

Escape. That was why the Blacks were there. I reined in my thoughts from where they threatened to leave misplaced exhilaration; I had to escape then too, and under Riddle's watchful eye that might prove difficult. Instead of better, it was getting worse; everything was falling about my ears, like a house of cards. Riddle had sat on the settee, opposite the chaise where Bellatrix sat, both content to watch me perform whatever atrocity Tom had in mind: I knew one thing though; it surely had to be kinder coming from me than from the harpy who sat watching, still silent, but barely suppressing her malicious glee.

I shook my head. 'This is not what I am about, Tom,' I said. 'I am not a violent man. Find someone else to do this, but not me,' I said, dragging the inevitable out as I tried to think of a solution, and found my eyes looking at the wand. I pushed my thoughts out gently and began to roll it slowly across the floor to under the settee on which Riddle sat, feeling I was probably wasting my time, but at least it was hidden from obvious view then, so that I could release the charm on it.

'I shall not tolerate outright defiance, Severus,' Riddle said quietly, his nostrils flared in fury. He breathed in deeply, looked to where Bellatrix had snorted her own derision, and gave her a hard look to let her know that even she was not above reprimand. Then he stood up, and laid his hand on my shoulder, and it was all I could do not to flinch under his touch.

'Now, I understand what you are saying, my Severus,' he said confidentially, as though to let me know he had forgiven me already, turning us both away from where Bellatrix sat seething in furious humiliation. 'But I need to know the deep confidence I have put in your loyalty is not misplaced. I need to know that you will go beyond your boundaries for me,' he said, and leant forward to kiss my cheeks in a way that made my flesh creep, 'as I shall for you.' He drew back, and I could see something in his eyes that frightened me; it was hunger, and a lust for power that knew no limits, and a need that he thought only I could fulfil.

'I need to know what has happened then,' I said, feeling renewed self-confidence. 'Black ... And Lupin? Is that what was in this room? Is that what made Abraxas so loath to allow me down here?'

'Yes,' Tom replied. 'And just before you arrived today, this fool informed me that when he came here the room was empty,' he said, nodding to where Lucius sat in the corner, his pale grey eyes trying to catch mine. 'Now, I do not have any Veritaserum here, Severus, although I shall have you prepare me some for future needs, so I want you to get the truth from him by other means,' he added with the cold smile. 'You may use your wand.'

I nodded to Riddle in understanding, as Lucius's thought reached my mind, *Make it good, Severus; he will know if you hold back*. 'And what if I cannot?' I asked, still stalling, as I let the plan I was working out run through my mind again.

'Try harder,' Riddle snapped. 'Now get on with it.'

I raised my wand and turned slowly to where Lucius had dropped his head, as though somehow preparing himself. I let my gaze slide away from him to stop under the settee where Riddle had sat again, and frowned. Riddle looked down too, and raised his hand.

'Just a moment, Severus,' he said, bending to pick up the maple wand. 'Well, well, just what have we here?' he said, rolling the ends of the wand between the fingers of both hands. 'Neither Black nor Lupin was armed when they arrived.' He glanced in some sort of triumph to where Lucius had looked up again.

'That's not mine,' Malfoy said in a hoarse whisper. 'I swear it ... it's not mine.' He gave me a desperate look that made me wonder if the wand I had stolen so long ago were indeed his; I know I hoped it wasn't.

'We'll see,' Riddle said, handing me the wand. 'If you would, Severus.'

I held the wand in front of me and looked again at Lucius, but there was no renewed fear in him; he was either full to the brim of it, or unafraid of what was about to happen. 'Prior Incantato,' I said quietly, and felt the reverse surge in the little wand as it dived into itself, instead of out, to retrieve the last spell it had cast, some ten years before. At first nothing happened, and I began to think either it had been a new wand, although it was very unlikely that the owner had not at least tried to open a door with it, or it was too long ago. Riddle had just begun to frown, when a faint nimbus of rosy light began to pour from the end of the wand, and the image of a young Rodolphus Lestrage wavered into view. He was holding his hands in front of his balls as though to shield them, before doubling over in agony, gasping the words, "You fucking bitch, Bella." One thing was quite clear, however Black and Lupin had escaped, the wand had not been used, and that at least gave me confidence that they were, even then, safely at Hogwarts.

Lucius seemed to slump in relief, Bellatrix let out a whimper of what I recognised as disbelief, but it was Tom's reaction that worried me. He had stood up, his hands balled into fists at his sides, his face white but for two spots of colour high on his cheeks. He turned, not to Bellatrix, but to Lucius, and pointed a finger at him.

'What do you think you are going to gain by this?' he snarled, sounding more like an animal than a man, and his response made me wonder if Bellatrix and Riddle were more than favoured disciple and master, and if that were the case, why he had tried to press Bellatrix on me. 'Do you seek to make a fool of me?'

'I don't know what you mean,' Lucius retorted, and some of his spirit, his inbred arrogance seemed to have returned. 'You cannot blame me for Bellatrix's wand being here.' He let the corner of his lip curl as he nodded to where she sat bolt upright in some kind of shock. 'Why not ask the vicious little harridan herself?'

Riddle was wrong-footed, and I could see he was all the more dangerous for that. 'Believe me, Lucius,' he said, 'if I find that you have placed that wand in this room to deflect the blame from you onto someone else's shoulders, you will die.'

Malfoy remained wisely silent, and I wondered if I should venture anything, but Riddle had turned away from Lucius and looked speculatively at Bellatrix. 'Now, Bella,' he said, and I saw his game then; he had sought to lower her defences by turning on Malfoy. 'Perhaps I should, indeed, leave this to you to explain.' But he wasn't finished with his accusations, and he turned to me. 'And you, Severus? Have you had a hand in this, perhaps?' he asked. 'After all, Lucius and you were both down here only yesterday. Did you two and Bellatrix hatch a little plot to get her cousin freed? I find myself wondering just what went on before Abraxas and I arrived on the scene.'

I had peeled my thoughts of everything but finding the book to one side of my mind, and closed the rest down, just before I felt the gentle pressure of his. 'Lucius stayed at the end of the corridor, Tom. When I was here looking for the book anyway,' I said. 'I cannot vouch for him at any time I was not here.'

I thought he was reluctantly satisfied, and I rather fancied Bellatrix might have been in for a difficult time. I had more to worry about than her though; I had to get out of there and back to Spinner's End, without Lucius Malfoy for company. And yet, I was more worried for Lucius than I had been previously.

'Perhaps I may suggest you ask Abraxas who else has access to these catacombs,' I said, looking around the room. I ran my finger along the top of the fireplace and looked at the dust on its tip, rubbing it between my thumb and forefinger. 'I'm sure it wasn't furnished today just to make Lucius feel at home.'

I knew Riddle needed to back down, and he didn't know how to, or I thought that for a few seconds. 'Yes, Yes, you are right,' he admitted grandly, like one dispensing a

great favour. 'You will stay here for the time being, Severus, and help me to unravel this mystery. Lucius, you will find Sirius Black and Remus Lupin and bring them back here. Try the Ancient and Most Ridiculous House of Black first; perhaps Orion and Warburga's visit was a smokescreen.' He turned at last to Bellatrix, and there was no mistaking his displeasure or his mistrust. 'And you, Bella ... you will stay right where you are for the time being.'

'That wand was stolen from me when I was at school,' she screeched, breaking her silence for the first time.

'Silencio,' Riddle said, and dropped his hand to his side. 'You will speak when I permit you to.'

Lucius had hauled himself to his feet, but I knew I couldn't let things go any further in the direction they seemed to be travelling. 'I had thought I had more important things to do, Tom,' I said. 'I cannot stay here.'

'I shall tell you what is important,' he snapped.

I was trapped. 'As you wish,' I replied, pretending to back down as I searched furiously for a solution to my dilemma.

It was Riddle himself who came to my rescue. 'You may start studying here, Severus,' he said. 'I shall be glad of your company, and I shall see no one else disturbs you. You may use the library.'

'And what am I going to study?' I asked, giving him as challenging a look as I dared.

'We shall discuss that later.' Riddle turned yet again to Lucius. 'Are you still here?' he said. 'Go now, Lucius, and do not come back here until you have all the Blacks where I want them.' He gave Bellatrix a hard look. 'And I am beginning to suspect that there may be more traitors in that house than I had realised thus far.'

'And if I cannot find them?' Malfoy asked, his own backbone stiffening even more.

'Do not come back,' Riddle replied. 'I thought I made that clear.'

If Lucius thought about asking Riddle to reconsider ordering him out of his own home, he didn't say so, and I supposed he was only too glad to have an excuse to leave at that point. Tom watched until Lucius opened the door, as though surprised to find it unlocked, and I suspected he no sooner had it closed than he ran through the cellars as fast as his legs could carry him, and I wondered with no small measure of regret when I would ever see him again.

Riddle had turned to me yet again, draping an arm across my shoulders, all but ignoring Bellatrix, who sat fuming under his Silencing Charm. 'Come, my Severus,' he said, 'let you and I retire to somewhere private and comfortable. We have much to talk about.' And I saw it again, the naked lust for power and admiration, and yet another uncomfortable thought crossed my mind.

He led me back to the library, to what should have been a haven of knowledge and peace, but had become to me, like the downstairs cell, just a prison with different bars. I tried to get a grip on my thoughts, and think a way out of the mess I was in, but Riddle had sat down in his favoured seat at the fire, and began to talk with the air of man comfortably sharing confidences with a trusted friend.

'We shall take care of the dissenters, my Severus,' he said, placing one of his cheroots in his mouth. 'And once we ... you ... have done that, we shall surround ourselves with the true upper echelons of wizarding society, not just sycophantic fools who tug their forelocks at us in fear instead of admiration,' he said, and I hated the "we" and the "us" he had taken to using.

'Just think, Severus,' he said, turning to me, his eyes alight with the inner madness of newly conceived insanity. 'We can truly rule the world,' he said. 'Just you and me. We can be in complete control; we can make this country's wizarding world the envy of all others ... and then ...' he went on, swept along by his own propaganda, 'then the world truly will be our oyster.'

I was almost afraid to speak, to interrupt his fantasy. 'I think you misunderstand me, Tom,' I said carefully, cautioning myself to be very guarded in how I worded what I said. 'I have no aspirations of that nature.'

He had stood up, pacing the floor in front of the fire, like a man possessed of ideas so great that he could hardly keep up with them. 'You don't need aspirations, my love,' he said, as something cold writhed inside me. 'I shall have them for you. All you need to do is to make sure that I have the longevity to allow them to come to fruition ... Forever would be good, if you can manage it.' He stopped his pacing and dipped his hand to his pocket, and pulled Mordestone from it, and as he did I felt the white stone in my pocket throb angrily, like a festering wound. 'I understand it all now, my Severus. That which had been hidden for me is now clear. When Mordestone rose to meet you, I understood. I understood I could not travel this path alone, and I understood that you were the one I would have to take with me.'

It was only then that I began to fully understand something too: Tom Riddle was mad.

I began to comprehend the contradictions by which he lived. His loathing for anything less than pure blood, and wealth, and social acceptability, and everything his new order stood for, were all the things he was not. He was what he despised, he was all things not of his own making, things thrust upon him, and one more: whilst he made a great show of abhorring what he referred to as sexual deviance, I recognised at last that, paradoxically, he was homosexual himself. I understood then that his test with Bellatrix had been only to see where my own predilections lay, a test I had failed ... had he but known it, by default.

'I need to work, Tom,' I said, desperate to be away from him, before his presence crushed the last vestiges of sense and self-belief from me, and before the white stone in my pocket decided to take matters into its own hands. 'I cannot do that here.'

'I know that, Severus,' he admitted, surprising me. He crossed to me again, pausing only to toss the cheroot into the embers, and that time when he leant in to kiss my cheeks there was no disguising the possessive nature of the act, as though he had already laid claim to me, but had only been waiting for the right time to tell me. 'But do not absent yourself from me for too long.' He drew back, and I pretended not to notice the boyish flush that had risen on his pale face, and pretended not notice the way my own heart turned over in fear and disgust and emotions I couldn't even name.

'May I leave?' I asked, my voice barely a whisper. I only hoped he would not take it for an overflowing of emotion at our parting, or perhaps at that point it was best he did.

He turned to look into the fire, and when he faced me again he seemed to have shut away his insanity, hidden it for another day. 'Yes, yes, of course you may. I know not to hinder you,' he replied. 'Get to work, Severus. All of our plans ... our very future depends on you. I shall come to see you soon,' he went on, a smile crossing his features, which whilst warmer than any I had ever seen gracing his lips, turned my blood to ice. 'And, of course, you will come to see me too.'

It was already early evening when I got back to the warehouse, and so exhausted was I, that all I wanted was to fall into bed and sleep. Of course, that wasn't to be. No sooner had I Disapparated, than a man, who had been sitting on an upturned box, waiting for me under an Invisibility Charm, materialised in front of me. I had been so preoccupied that I almost let out a yelp of fright.

'You got away more quickly than I hoped,' Lucius said, standing up and brushing the imaginary dust from his ample backside. 'I thought I might have to stay here, freezing my balls off for days.'

'What are you doing here?' I asked him, bereft of anything else sensible to say, yet relieved he was there for some reason.

'You have to take me in, Severus,' he said, and I thought I could hear panic in his voice. 'There's nowhere else I can go.'

'Don't be ridiculous,' I replied. 'Go to the Lestranges ... or ... or go to your fiancée ... go wherever you want, Lucius, as long as it's not Spinner's End. I have work to do.'

'I shan't be a nuisance, Severus,' he said, ignoring my suggestions of alternative accommodation as though I had not made them. 'You won't even know I am there,' he said. I was just about to refuse outright again when he added, 'I have nowhere else to go, no one else to turn to ... and I think you know that.'

I felt my shoulders sag in agreement; how could I refuse a man in need when I had, on the surface, just accepted a man like Riddle? Lucius sensed my acquiescence; of course, he was ever one to see exactly what he wanted to see.

'Now, you'll need to tell me how to get round Walden Macnair,' he said, raising his eyebrow in the insufferable way he had.

I smiled to myself though. I had charmed the back route to Spinner's End many years before, when I was still at Hogwarts in fact. Lucius was going to get wet and dirty, crawling over the railway embankment as he would have to, but if Merlin were kind, he wouldn't get knocked down by a freight train as he crossed the track. The path would lead him to the top of the back garden though, and I could meet him there. I could tell by the flare of his nostrils that he wasn't terribly impressed by the idea, but he had no other option, unless he wanted to go back to Malfoy Manor.

Macnair was still there when I went down Cottontrader Row, and apart from a hard look at one another, nothing passed between us. I went around the back to wait for Lucius, and when he eventually showed up he was as bedraggled as I had hoped he would be.

'If I thought you had another way you had hidden from me ...' he snarled as I opened the front door, and then we both stopped short.

I wasn't the only person who had brought a visitor to Spinner's End that evening. There was a man just on the point of going into the living room, and his presence, whilst benign, was every bit as threatening to me as Riddle's had been. It was Ted Tonks.

He gave me a wary look that spoke of the uncertainty of his welcome, and I could not find it within myself to disabuse him of that notion; it left me wondering if Andromeda had confided in him though, and if he were as unsure of her affections as I was. And it was just then that I realised I had left the four bottles of Glenfiddich in the ruddy warehouse, and I had a bad feeling I was going to need them.

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter 14 of 48

Severus finds one friend, but seems to lose another along the way.

It was a picture of domestic bliss, not that I had any experience of such, but it was what I would have imagined that to be, had I cared. Dumbledore sat at the fire, chatting to Ethel, who once again sat leaning out of her picture in her "nosey neighbour" way, and Tonks had sat himself down on the settee, my favourite one, of course, and I doubted that he could have sat much closer to Andromeda had he landed on her lap.

To say they were pleased to see me, with the exception of Tonks, who probably wished I had died on the way home, was perhaps an overstatement, but they did seem relieved that I had come back unscathed, on the surface at least. It was only when Lucius followed me into the room that any of them showed a real reaction and, if for that alone, I was pleased with my decision to have taken him.

"Is this wise?" Dumbledore's thought reached me before anyone spoke.

"I had no choice in the matter," I responded in kind. *"But, for all that, the choice was mine. I have to speak with you alone."*

"Can we trust Lucius?" he asked.

"Only insofar as he is not, at this time, on Riddle's side," I replied. *"However, Lucius will pick the side that is winning, and it is my duty to make sure that we win whatever fight we are fighting, or at least keep him safe until he decides otherwise."*

"It was ever thus with Lucius, I suspect," he replied, and even in his thought I recognised the reproach for my making the decision on any merits Malfoy might have had, without consulting him.

"I had no choice," I repeated, in the defence he had not asked for. *"Black and Lupin ... do I take it they are safe?"*

He nodded to me, and I left it at that, and once again it was as though time had almost frozen to allow us our few remarks to one another. It was going to be difficult to talk to Ethel and Dumbledore with Lucius present though, and it was just as well I didn't need to talk to Andromeda too, I thought sourly, as I watched her give me a questioning look that I chose to ignore.

'What's going on, Severus?' both Andromeda and Lucius asked at the same time.

I had nothing to say in front of the others to either of them, and took the coward's option of leaving them all to make whatever job they wanted to of re-acquainting themselves, and went into the kitchen, feeling as displaced as Riddle had made Lucius, although not as gladly. I only just managed not to slam the door behind me in some kind of vent for the not unreasonable fit of pique I felt building up inside me, and slumped down at the table. It was only when I dropped my head to my hands in exhaustion-tinged self-piteous resentment that I realised I was being watched. I lifted my head again just as Sirius Black came in from Ethel's little terrace, flicking a cigarette back over his shoulder to hiss and die on the damp grass.

'This was never going to be easy, Severus,' he said, sitting down opposite me, and I took the time to notice he looked about as good as I felt, even as I stifled the urge to tell him not to smoke in my home ... unless he was going to pass them around.

'Did you bring him here?' I accused, looking to the closed living room door, behind which I had left such an odd medley of people that only Tom Riddle could have further complicated it.

Black frowned the frown that always seemed to lurk just below the surface, and I saw the effort it took him not to wince in pain, and felt childish and selfish at not having even asked him how he was; after all, the last time I had seen him, only a day before, he had been barely alive. Someone had done a good repair job on him though; his

eye, whilst still bloodshot and bruised, was open, and there was hardly any swelling at all. I knew how painful that particular transfer of bruised blood would have been, how the Blood-Replenishing Potion would have had to stretch the veins to disperse the swelling and leave the new blood to do its job. Of course, I knew his facial injuries had only been what I had seen in the few minutes I had had with him in the cellar, and I had no idea what internal injuries had laid him so low, or what toll on him they had taken. Why was it, I wondered, that I found it so difficult to enquire about the plight of some, and yet so easy to ask about others? I had had no difficulty in telling Dumbledore about the time at school with Lucius, and yet found I couldn't ask the man opposite me about himself and the man he cared for. I wondered what I feared, wondered if it had anything to do with my finding someone in a worse plight than I was, and then having to examine myself a bit more closely.

'No,' he said tiredly. 'I think he got in touch with Albus, and he brought him here ... That wasn't what I meant though,' he said. 'I meant Lucius being here was going to be difficult.'

It was my turn to frown that he even knew Malfoy was there, but of course Ethel would have sensed his presence, and Dumbledore would have guessed that I would take him there if I thought he was in any danger. Black was obviously deeply in the old man's confidence, and I just managed to push back my resentment at that too. I reminded myself that I was to all intents and purposes the new boy ... and a Death Eater to boot. But it was my turn then, and difficult though it was for me to let the words claw themselves up my throat, I did it.

'Is Lupin safe?'

Black nodded. 'He's at the Shack,' he said, and I could see it pained him that the werewolf was alone.

'And you?' I ventured.

'I am what you see, Severus,' he said, and something flat and not quite defeated had crept into his voice that I found hard to associate with him. It took me a moment to understand that everyone was damaged in some way, not just me, and that left me feeling small and about as self-interested as I ever wanted to feel again. He had glanced towards the back door to the terrace, the one I had stood upon on the night he had left to give me the chance I needed with Andromeda; it was just the same, and yet bathed in a different moonlight. This time the full moon did indeed sit low in the sky on her final ascent towards her master, before she turned her face away from him to begin her eternal journey for his favour once more, dragging Lupin and his kind in her uncaring wake.

'Are you fit to Apparate?' I asked, and wondered why I was asking that instead of interrogating him about what had happened at Malfoy Manor, as I probably would have done just two days before. But this was more important, at least it was to me right then. He had given me a chance, and it was my turn to do the same for him, and however foolish the decision was, and whatever came of it, I knew it was right.

He nodded doubtfully, and I saw the pain and exhaustion again, and tried to imagine just what effort it had taken him to free himself and the werewolf; but I didn't ask, that could keep.

I had stood up, and he stood slowly too. 'Albus will go mental,' he said, favouring me with a half dose of the Gryffindor grin.

'Don't worry, Black, I shall blame you,' I replied, feeling much better now that I had found some way to repay him a quid for his pro quo.

'And what about that lot?' he asked, cocking his head to where the living room door was still closed, and I found myself wondering why I wasn't wondering about just what was going on, and how they would manage their small talk, and just where everyone was going to sleep, and then I found I didn't really care. I wouldn't be sleeping with Andromeda, so I might as well sleep beside the Shrieking Shack; I wouldn't be any colder.

'What about them?' I replied. 'I'm sure between Albus and Ethel they can keep tabs on Lucius ... and Andromeda and ...' I added, hating myself for showing weakness by hesitating, but the damn man's stupid name caught in my throat, '... Ted ... aren't going to cause him any problems.'

He gave me a cautious look that I ignored, and I had just stepped onto the terrace when I heard them both converging on my mind.

"Be careful, dear," Ethel said, and I felt a little surge of guilt at not even having acknowledged her when I had come in.

"Make sure you stay with him, Severus," Dumbledore said more sternly. *"I should not like a repeat of what has already happened this week."*

I closed my mind down completely and wondered if I had really shut them out, or indeed if I would ever have any sort of privacy from them again.

We went out the back way, the way I had brought Lucius, and by the time we had negotiated the railway embankment Black was so exhausted that we had to stop for a few minutes. That didn't matter, not to me anyway; I wasn't in any hurry, and I didn't think a few minutes mattered much to him either. I had him Side-Along with me from the warehouse to the Shack; he wasn't really fit to Apparate on his own. When we Disapparated just outside Hogsmeade I had the feeling I had overestimated whatever strength he had, and rebuked myself again for not having taken the time to find out just what he had endured at Riddle's hands.

'Come on, Snape,' he said, straightening up and setting his shoulders in a way that didn't even fool himself, never mind me. 'It'll be fucking morning before I get there, if we don't move.'

'How far do you want me to go?' I asked, nodding to where the Shack was silhouetted in the moonlight, trying to pretend the low mournful howl I heard was the wind.

He gave me a long look before he replied. 'I swear he won't harm you,' he said in barely a whisper. He'd reached out his hand to clutch my wrist in a gesture of desperation I didn't understand. 'This time is different, Severus, I swear it ... you're different ... we all are.'

'I ... I don't know what you mean,' I said, not at all sure I wanted to meet Lupin's alter ego a second time. 'He's a werewolf...'

'Please,' he said. 'I'm not sure how much strength I have ... how his injuries have affected him.' He looked towards the Shack again, and I thought it looked like the loneliest place on earth. 'There wasn't time for Poppy to check him out properly ... it was too late when I managed to get back. I'm just not sure...' He trailed off, and gave me one of his long looks which, for all of its pleading, was as challenging to me as any I had ever read.

I wasn't sure either, but for purely selfish, albeit not irrational, reasons. 'He's a werewolf, Black,' I repeated. 'He is unlikely to welcome an ordinary man, however injured he is,' I said, cursing fact that I didn't even know what his injuries were, and wondering just why I had come if I had not expected this. 'I do not have an Animagus form to escape to.'

'I know,' he said, his grip tightening on my wrist. 'But you have the white stone ... you have brought it with you, Severus, haven't you?'

'Yes,' I admitted doubtfully. 'Although I'm not entirely sure that this is one of the uses Albus had in mind when he lent it to me,' I said, taking the time to admit to myself that Dumbledore had told me to stay with Black, and extending that thought to my using the stone if I needed to, satisfying myself at least that such use would be merited if the occasion arose ... I just hoped the stone would agree.

'Fuck Albus,' he hissed, and I understood how it was that he always seemed to be in some kind of trouble or other. 'Does it matter if Riddle kills you, or if Lupin eats you, or if you get knocked down by a fucking bus? You'd still be dead if you didn't use it.'

I heard the howl again, and I almost fancied the werewolf was adding his own spokes to Black's wheel, and some surge of recklessness in me had me nodding before I could stop to think things through properly. I didn't realise it then, or maybe subconsciously I did, but the plan had merits; it would allow me to see just what I could do with the stone, just what control I had over it, in case I had to use it again against Riddle, although practising on a werewolf was not really my preferred way of testing it. Of course, these were subconscious thoughts, if they really coalesced at all, but it didn't matter; Black was already almost dragging me towards the Shack, and for a man with

hardly the strength to stand unaided, he seemed to be making a remarkable job of it.

I heard the soft swish of him changing to his Animagus form, and he was off, with me trailing a bit behind, remembering too late that I hadn't asked him how we should communicate with one another if something went wrong.

The black dog looked back over his shoulder at me, before nudging the door of the Shack open, just as another even more mournful howl sounded from within. It was soulful and injured, like some pitiable creature lost in the dark, and whilst I had to suppress a shudder at what I was about to face, I couldn't stem the flood of compassion I felt at his plight, and for all of our plights, and for what we had become. Perhaps it was as well I didn't know then just how much worse it could be.

I followed Black up the half-rotted wooden staircase to the top floor, and felt my knees almost buckle at a sight I shall never forget. I had never seen anything more forlorn than that miserable wretch, secured to the wall by magical chains, his head lolling onto his breast, blood-tainted mucus drooling from his maw. He seemed to be having trouble breathing, and each gulp of air made an unwholesome rattle deep in his chest. I had to do something; I had an awful feeling that he would not last that night if I didn't. I was about to move towards him, past the dog who stood whining, looking up at him, with his tail tucked between his back legs, when the werewolf sensed me. Even in the state he was in, his muzzle wrinkled and his long fangs became clearly visible, yellow streaked with blood, and I wondered from whence the blood had come, whether its source was the long gash on the foreleg chained loosely above his head.

The dog looked up at me from where he sat between me and the werewolf, and I rebuked myself again for not having worked out some way of communicating with him. His mind was closed to me though, or at least I could not find the key to open it, and I was about to begin to back away and just hope that we made it through until morning, when the dog stood and came to my side, rubbing his head against my thigh, much the way a cat would do. It took me a moment to realise he was trying to get my attention for a specific reason, and it was only when he rubbed my thigh again that I felt the hardness of the stone in my pocket, where it lay between us.

I slipped the stone from my pocket and held it up, but the werewolf had dropped his head to his heaving breast again, his muzzle still wrinkled, and the low snarl muttering its warning to stay away.

'Lupin,' I said tentatively, and the grey head turned, fangs bared and gleaming in the moonlight. 'Lupin, I need to help you ... I mean you no harm.'

Again the low dangerous snarl, and the ominous rattling sound of his breath, and the whine of the dog who had slunk low on his belly over to the werewolf.

I held the stone up again, and it was only when the white of the stone caught the white of the moonlight that the werewolf seemed to notice it. His eyes widened, and a strangled moan came from his lips: not something human, or even animal, some sound that seemed not to belong to this world, something not for the ears of man. I felt the stone throb, but in a different way from its anger at Riddle and Mordestone; this was something unworldly too, and it struck me then that the stone was not talking to the wolfman, it was singing to the moon. I was almost tempted to set it on the ground at the werewolf's feet and let it get on with its business on its own.

'Let me help you, Lupin,' I said. 'I know you know me, as I know you.' I kept the stone in his view as I walked slowly towards him, resisting the urge to turn and run for my life as I had done from his presence once before, as my knees threatened to give way in terror. 'I do not fear you, Lupin,' I said, 'and you must not fear me.'

He was watching me then, and the snarls had abated, just leaving the rattle. I had a bad feeling that I knew what caused it, that he had broken ribs, and that one had pierced a lung, probably as a result of some fearsome struggle against his bonds. I knew that it would not be terribly long before he drowned in his own blood, unless I could get his head down. But for all my scant and probably dangerous knowledge, I was not a mediwizard; I had no training of how to treat him, and yet I knew the injury could be treated, it need not be mortal if I could get him to have faith in me.

'I need to know you trust me to let me help you, Lupin,' I said, and I felt the stone throb again, and saw him shift his glance from me to the stone again, and then back. I don't know if he really relaxed a little, or if I imagined that, but it gave me the courage to edge closer still. I was almost within touching distance when he let out another low moan, this time followed by a choking noise, and the next thing I knew I was wiping foamy blood from my eyes, and his head had slumped onto his breast again. I threw caution to the wind, sent a quick plea to Merlin to help us in our darkest hour, and aimed my wand at the bonds holding his forelegs aloft. He slumped to the ground, mercifully for us all, unconscious.

It was fairly easy after that, after Black reverted to his natural form, and between us we sat the werewolf against the wall, his hind legs still in their bonds, and his head bent low. Black was more gifted at probing his body for injury than I was, but I think the joint effort really saved his life. I know one thing, had we not gone to him that night, he would have died, alone and shackled, with no one to watch over him but his ultimate mistress.

It was only an hour or so after we got him stabilised that the moon disappeared with the dawn, and gradually Remus Lupin reappeared, and for a man I had never particularly cared for, I was inordinately pleased to see him. We took him straight to Hogwarts, both Black and I under charms to hide our identities. Of course, Poppy knew who Sirius was; who else, after all, would bring the injured Lupin to her? I doubt she ever knew who I was though; to her I was just a stranger passing in the night. She assured us that she could care for Lupin now that he was in the Infirmary, and Black seemed to accept that.

As she left the little room at the top of the Infirmary, Lupin turned to me. 'Don't, Severus,' he said as I raised my wand. 'I trust you, I swear it. Please don't do this.'

'Oblivate,' I said with quiet regret. I turned away, and it was only when I closed the door behind me to allow him and Black a few moments alone that I added, 'I know, Lupin, but I cannot afford to trust you.'

We didn't go straight back to Spinner's End, tired though we were, and went instead to Rosmerta's for breakfast. We were the only ones there, and I was almost tempted to drop my charms and just be myself, whoever that was, for once in my life. I wish even now that I had; it was the last chance I ever got. It was one of those mornings, one of those times I suppose we all look back on, and even now I see it, and not the night before, or even the days before, as one of the pivotal points in my life. Even after all that had happened during the last week, I found that it was that morning that perhaps is not foremost in my mind, but is certainly etched on my soul. It was the day that Sirius Black and Severus Snape set aside their adolescent differences completely and embarked on a plan to destroy the Dark Lord that lasted the rest of our lives, and destroyed us both, until we had nothing left to fight with, and not even one another to turn to.

'Do you have any kind of plan, Snape?' he asked as Rosmerta moved away from the table, frowning as she tried to see under the charms to the two men who sat so early in her bar that she still had her hair in curlers.

'Not really,' I admitted. 'I haven't had time. I don't even know what I am supposed to be planning for ... or against.'

'I suppose you could string Riddle along for a good while,' he said. 'Pretend not to know where to start.'

'I don't need to pretend,' I replied. 'Aqua Vitae is not real, Black. It is a figment of the imagination of those who seek immortality.'

'It began somewhere,' he argued, voicing the very reservation I had myself.

I found I was nodding. 'If that is the case it would be unwise for me to stall for too long then.'

'Why?'

'Because, Black, I am not the only man who can cobble a potion together,' I said, my thoughts on the matter clarifying for the first time. 'It would be foolish for me to disappoint Riddle, and have him find someone who can actually make the real thing ... not that it exists, or that such a man would be likely to satisfy the rest of the criteria.'

'Which are?' he asked, sticking a Muggle cigarette between his lips, and lighting it from the candle on the table.

'The similar bloodlines of the maker and the recipient for one,' I said. 'It is vitally important that the maker, the host, and recipient are of similar bloodlines.'

'Why?' he queried again, blowing a few smoke rings at the ceiling as he thought. 'For something that doesn't even exist, that's a very hard and fast rule.'

I nodded my agreement again at another bit of knowledge that troubled me, not so much the fact of it, as its source. I looked across to the door, to where it had opened, and two men came in and sat at another table. One of them was Peter Pettigrew and the other was James Potter. I'm not sure, but I fancied I saw distaste in the look Black shot them, the one he didn't manage to hide when I turned back to him, and I didn't think it was only directed at the admittedly un-likeable Pettigrew.

'Do you want to join them?' I asked. 'I suspect I should go back to whatever awaits in Spinner's End.'

Black shook his head. 'No, it's best I keep my whereabouts secret for now,' he said, and then went back to Aqua Vitae again. 'Are you seriously going to attempt this, Severus?' he asked, concern etching his tired face. 'I had thought that the point was keeping Riddle from gathering any more strength ... like becoming immortal,' he added with a cynical laugh.

'Indeed,' I agreed, as the plan began to firm in my mind. 'But let us say that it would be wise for me to brew my version of Aqua Vitae, than for some other potion maker to brew the real thing.'

'Can we carry that off?' he asked, and unlike when Riddle had used that inclusive "we", I felt as though something precious had been offered to me, something I had not ever really known; its name was friendship, something so profound that I almost gasped at its enormity.

'I think we have to, Black,' I replied, returning his compliment. 'I think too that it is time to go back.'

'Good idea,' he agreed, 'before there is blood on the walls. Lucius can be a little difficult, if I recall.'

'Lucius,' I repeated. 'I had forgotten all about Lucius.'

'How can you forget about anything that big?' he said. 'I confess I was more than a little put out that you had brought him. It's going to be a bit crowded ... even allowing for Ethel's talents.'

'Why not just stay with Lupin?' I asked him, and for once I didn't feel embarrassed about asking a personal question. 'Surely Dumbledore could find somewhere safe for you both ... even Hogwarts. The risk to you is not as great as to Andromeda, after all.'

'Lupin? Why would I want to stay with Lupin?' he asked. 'I think you misunderstand my relationship with Lupin, Snape ... he is my friend, one who would likely curse me into next week if I made any attempt to ... well, whatever ... Lupin is very much a ladies man. He only came to the club in Knockturn Alley to speak to me.' He paused for a moment, giving me a speculative look. 'You know, for a long time I thought that you ...'

'No,' I said quickly, cutting him off, and yet he was not the first to make that assumption. Hadn't Lucius been all too ready to believe it that night at the party? And hadn't Tom Riddle made his own plans in my direction? 'You have someone else?' I asked, trying to change the subject and not doing so at all, and immediately regretting it as I saw a cloud pass over his eyes.

'No, not now.' He was silent for a moment, and I wished we had left when we had first mentioned it. I was beginning to feel awkward, and I didn't really want to know any more. But he lit another cigarette, having just crushed out the last one, and seemed to want to go on. 'I lived for a while with someone I held very dear to me ... but he died.'

I knew I didn't mistake the hard edge his voice had taken, one that I didn't understand. 'Anyone I knew?' I asked.

'Yes,' he replied. 'It was Benjy Fenwick ... he was killed by Tom Riddle.'

There it was, the axe he ground, and it would be all the sharper for being personal. I just nodded. I remembered Fenwick, remembered how he had been murdered some six months before. 'You'll find someone else, I'm sure,' I said uselessly, as though a love could be replaced like a missing book.

He stubbed out the half-smoked cigarette, and I thought he felt he had said enough; I was wrong though, he hadn't quite finished. 'Yeah, I suppose so ... in fact for a while I thought I had ... but I was wrong,' he said, standing up and pushing his chair back, so it scraped on the floor and caused the other two men still sitting across the bar to look round. 'So you know my motivation, Severus ... what, I wonder, is yours?'

I couldn't put it into words, not any that didn't sound pretentious and insincere, until I took a moment to think properly. 'Redemption,' I said quietly. 'Isn't that what it's all about for all of us? Even Dumbledore.'

He nodded, and his mouth twisted in a cynical smile. 'So we can stand before whoever our God is on judgement day and say, "I made mistakes, but I tried to make it better"?'

'Something like that,' I said, standing too.

As we passed out of the bar I heard a tiny snatch of conversation from the two men huddled over the other table.

'You find Sirius, Peter. I want to know what he's up to,' Potter said to the man who seemed to cower in awe of him. 'Leave that bastard Snape to me.'

It was almost lunchtime when we got to Spinner's End, and once again we had come the back way, and once again I had forgotten to take my whisky from its hiding place in the warehouse.

This time the hall was empty, and the only voices I could hear were those of Ethel and Dumbledore, and I found I was mildly surprised he had stayed so long. I stopped in the living room, not noticing the cautious looks I got from both the old man and Ethel, or if did I linked them to Lupin's welfare.

'He is at Hogwarts,' I answered the unasked question. 'Madam Pomfrey says she will care for him now.' I glanced to where Black was making his way through to the kitchen, before turning back to a rather quiet Ethel and Dumbledore. 'Has Tonks left?' I asked.

Dumbledore nodded, and seemed about to say something, but I wanted to speak to Andromeda, regretting and feeling a bit childish that I had not spoken to her since I had come back from the manor, and then had virtually sneaked away with Black. Of course, that had been because Tonks had been there, and now he had left it was easy for me to forgive him ever having gone to Spinner's End. But Black was on his way back into the living room, wearing a worried look that he changed to accusation as he turned to Dumbledore. He was trailing a rather discontented looking Lucius, but there didn't seem to be anyone else following, and I at last understood something: Ted Tonks wasn't the only person to have left the building ... he had taken Andromeda with him.

I spun on Dumbledore, giving vent to the first outraged nonsense that sprang into my head. 'You self-serving bastard,' I hissed, as though I had not gone to either the manor or the Shack of my own accord. 'At least Tom Riddle displays his prices on the goods he seeks to sell me.' I turned to Black, as though he were my only real ally. 'I was wrong, you know. It isn't only about redemption; for some people it's all about personal glory.'

I stormed out of the house, and knowing that I had made no sense at all only served to fuel my bitterness. I was just about to slip out of the charm surrounding the house, when I felt Ethel begin to chide me in my mind. "*And stay out of my fucking head!*" I sent the vicious thought back. "*That goes for Dumbledore too!*"

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter 15 of 48

Severus tries to come to terms with Andromeda's absence.

The guard was different in more ways than one. This time Rodolphus Lestrangle stood huddled miserably inside his cloak. He had charmed himself from Muggle view, but that hadn't stopped a curious brown and white mongrel from sniffing around his legs, and I hoped that the cur would just piss on him and be done with it.

The other change was more subtle; in fact, had I not happened to be looking in the right direction at the time, it would have slipped past me, unnoticed. It was the mangy cat that was Alastor Moody's Animagus form. I felt a fresh wave of bitterness flood up inside me, wondering if Dumbledore had set up his own spy on me, or if Moody were Dumbledore's guard, but surely he would have been surplus to requirements, the old buffer having the option he always used of changing to his own alter ego. I was too tired and too bitter to think it through though, and it just attached itself to the growing list of questions I had to ask, not at all sure then of whom I would ask them.

I got to the warehouse before I even wondered just where I had intended going, and found that that dingy concrete and wooden block, with its windows set high in the walls to discourage intruders, now broken by a generation of stone-throwing youngsters with nothing much better to do, was my final destination. I rummaged in the dirty corners to see if there were anything worth sitting on, but it seemed that Lucius had already picked the most suitable seat, and I found myself sitting on the upturned box he had used the day before. At least I had the whisky, I thought sourly, as I unscrewed the gold cap on the first green triangular bottle, and tipped it to my lips.

I don't suppose I was alone for long, just a few drinks, just enough for the false warmth to begin to spread through me, only to leave a chill of a different sort in its wake. I watched the black dog as he slipped through the door and stopped, looking around at nothing, and then sniffing the air. For a moment I felt strangely overwhelmed that he had come, or perhaps just that someone bothered; I suppose the whisky had already made me maudlin. I should have guessed he would be able to scent past the charm I had cast around myself to the wretch beneath.

'Go back, dog, to the warmth of the hearth,' I said. 'There is nothing here for you.'

Black took that as an invitation, and I heard again the soft swishing sound of him doing his transformation. Of course, he could see me then, once he knew I was there, and he turned over a smaller box and sat down. He was so tired that he seemed barely to have the strength to look across at me, which was hardly surprising for an injured man who had had no sleep.

'What say we head back now?' he asked, shivering in the cold. 'You and I have got a lot of planning to do, and we can't do that without sleep.'

I found it so hard to back down, filled to the brim as I was with righteous indignation, as though someone else had thrown me out of my own home, and it was not up to me alone to go back.

'Dumbledore's gone,' he added. 'And Lucius is becoming a bit difficult.' He looked across at me and found me unmoved. 'I can't deal with him alone, Snape ... he's going to be a monster.'

I sighed at the thought of that, trying to remember what rush of nobility had prompted me to take Malfoy to Spinner's End in the first place, and I found myself nodding reluctantly.

'Where did Dumbledore send Andromeda?' I asked, ignoring the fact that she hadn't left alone. 'Hogwarts?'

He watched me, and I knew he hadn't wanted me to ask that, not just then, not until he got me to agree to going back. 'They've gone to the Potters,' he said. 'James's parents have taken them both in ... Dumbledore didn't think Ted was safe either.'

I supposed that was true; Riddle had plenty of people who could scout around in the Muggle world. 'Why is it any safer there than Spinner's End?' I asked.

'I don't think safety had anything to do with it, Severus,' he replied. 'I think ... fuck it ... I know Dumbledore was concerned about you and Andromeda.'

'What business was that of his?' I flared. 'It's hardly my fault if the old busybody hasn't got anyone to get his leg over, and thinks that no one else should.'

Black sighed. 'You know he thinks the distraction, never mind the complication, isn't one you can afford.'

'That's what he told you?' I hissed. 'That Andromeda distracted me? Did I allow her to stop me going to the manor a second time to see if I could help you and Lupin? Did it stop me going to Lupin with you last night?' I demanded it all in an accusing rush, one that somehow made me feel ashamed at using him as my target by default.

'I didn't actually get as far as asking him,' he admitted. 'I sort of fell out with him first.'

'Why?' I asked, and it took me a moment to understand that for myself. Of course, Dumbledore would have had little option; too much had happened at Spinner's End for it to become public knowledge, too much danger for Andromeda to remember it all, but even then I gasped my outrage, as tears that I would never shed in my lifetime scalded the back of my throat, and I pretended to blame the whisky.

'Look, Severus, I know how you feel,' he said.

'You know fuck all about how I feel.' I stood up from my box and went to the corner to get the rest of the whisky; I certainly wasn't leaving it a third time. I wasn't sure how to bear the fact that if Dumbledore had Obliviated Andromeda's memories of Spinner's End, she would remember nothing. It would be between us as though we had parted that last time at the manor in bitterness, and the chance Black had given me, the one I had finally taken, would be nothing but another pathetic fantasy.

'Yes ... I do ... I know how it feels for the memories you thought you shared with someone you loved, to suddenly be yours alone,' he said, stopping me in my tracks.

I closed my eyes, for a couple of seconds longer than a blink. Of course he knew; hadn't he not only lost his love, but had had to come to terms with never getting it back? It was, after all, only with life that there also came hope.

Black went in front of me, but Lestrangle seemed not to notice him; he was probably fed up with dogs. It was only when I passed him by that I remembered about Moody having been there earlier, and wondered if he had indeed been the guard for Dumbledore. I cast my thoughts about, but couldn't find any trace of him. I hoped I'd remember to ask Black about him, but for now I needed to reclaim my sanctum sanctorum, and get some sleep.

I squared my shoulders as I pushed the living room door open, but Ethel was in her picture, busy pottering about in her garden, and only took the time to wave out at me

and tell me she'd left a snack on the table, and to hurry in case Lucius ate everything. As it happens she was wrong about that.

Lucius sat at the kitchen table, his head in his hands, the food untouched, something remarkable in itself. He raised his head when Black and I closed the door, and I could see he was seething with a confusing mixture of accusation, anger at being left alone for so long, and fear. He hadn't shaved either, something I hadn't noticed earlier, but thought very odd for one normally so perfectly presented, the fact that he was still wearing the day before's clothing notwithstanding.

'Is anyone going to tell me just what the fuck is going on?' he demanded.

'Can it wait until tomorrow, Shirley?' Black asked, reverting to the name I had heard him call Lucius behind his back in his Hogwarts days.

Malfoy flared his nostrils in anger, rewarding Sirius's remark by subconsciously tossing his ridiculous blond locks over his shoulders, and turned to face me. 'Why have you brought him here, Severus?' he asked, as though Black were trespassing in the manor instead of my home.

'I didn't,' I said, picking up a rather appetising looking roast beef sandwich from the otherwise untouched platter. 'Like you, Lucius, he just arrived on my doorstep, and like you, I took him in.'

Malfoy looked away as Sirius helped himself to three sandwiches, one he stuck in his mouth, and the other two in his pocket. 'I'm going to bed, Snape,' he said around the mouthful of bread and rarely roasted beef. 'Where do I sleep?'

Lucius looked back at him when he said that, and I didn't miss the speculative look he gave Black, albeit this time tinged with puzzlement.

'Wherever you find a room that is not mine,' I replied, sitting down opposite Malfoy. I was going to have to spend just a little time with Lucius, I supposed; it wasn't fair, or safe, to just leave him alone again whilst I slept for what I suspected was going to be the best part of a day. There was no knowing what he could get up to with only Ethel there, not with the mind talents he had at his disposal. I needed to know just where Lucius stood, and I really needed to know before he was left to own devices for too long.

'What's going on, Severus?' he asked me again as Black closed the door behind him.

'What has Dumbledore told you?' I asked.

'Nothing. He had a few angry words with Black and left just after he did.' He looked down, and I could see he was struggling to find somewhere to begin, but I was so tired by then, and I didn't feel much up to beating about the bush.

'I'm going to turn your question to you,' I said. 'What's going on, Lucius? Why are you here?'

'For the same reason as Black, and you, and Andromeda was. I have nowhere else to turn,' he said, his pale grey eyes wide and ingenious. 'I have to break away ... and Riddle has given me that chance, had he but realised it.'

I didn't say anything, but I found it as confusing as it was disturbing that his mind was a soft blank wall.

'You don't trust me, do you?' he asked.

'No,' I admitted. 'I cannot afford to.'

'Yes you can,' he hissed. 'We can thwart him, Severus. Thwart him from within, from where he is entitled to expect it least.'

Of course, that was pretty much what I intended to do anyway, but I seemed to be acquiring passengers at an alarming rate, and I wasn't used to so many demands on me. 'I don't know what you mean,' I replied, wondering why I was bothering to feign loyalty to Riddle.

'Don't take me for the idiot you know I am not,' he snapped.

'I know no such thing,' I replied. 'I only know that you are the epitome of everything Riddle admires, and now you seek to tell me that you wish to betray him in some way.' It was his turn to be silent, but I needed more, and he knew I could not accept his disloyalty to the Dark Lord's teachings at face value. I needed proof to take him into any confidence, and he already knew far too much. 'What of your family?' I asked, changing tack. 'Will Abraxas not seek you out and convince Riddle to take you back into his favour?'

'I have played the idiot for long enough for my father to want to wash his hands of me,' Malfoy replied, and I began to wonder if he were playing a very clever, though dangerous, game. 'He was quick enough to get rid of Lucretia when her existence threatened to sully the perfection of the Malfoy façade.'

'The Malfoy family needs a new heir, Lucius,' I pointed out. 'Abraxas is no longer a young man, and right now the continuity of the line hangs on your weakest breath. Abraxas will not allow you to be out in the cold for too long,' I went on, as he looked away from me again, clearly uncomfortable. 'Why not go to Narcissa?'

He let out a suspiciously wavering sigh as a reply, but I cautioned myself not to take anything about him as genuine, not until he proved himself to me in some way. I felt a wave of tiredness wash over me, all but leaving me totally exhausted. I think he finally understood just how tired I was, and that I was not going to make any decisions until I could think clearly. He held up his manicured hands in some sort of submission as I removed my wand from its slim pocket.

"Just use the stone, dear," Ethel's voice said into my mind. *"The white stone will not trust anyone with a dark heart!"*

"Why didn't Dumbledore know that?" I sent the thought back.

"Albus does not know everything, Severus," she chided. *"And I have known that stone for almost eight hundred years. Anyway,"* she went on reasonably, *"you had taken it with you."*

I smiled to myself; sometimes the most profound questions had ridiculously easy answers. I put my wand back and slipped the stone from my pocket, laying it on the table between myself and Lucius. Malfoy frowned and lifted the stone, and I quite clearly saw it throb in his palm, before he closed his hand over it in what almost looked like a possessive gesture.

'What is this?' he whispered, as though fully aware that it was not just any old white stone. 'What is its power?' He shook his head a little, as though confused, and laid the stone back on the table between us. 'I'm really tired, Severus,' he murmured. 'Can this wait until tomorrow?'

'Of course,' I concurred gladly, wondering why Ethel had gone through the rigmarole of the stone when she had managed to put Black to sleep so easily the first day he had arrived.

Lucius stumbled to his feet, seemingly as exhausted as I felt. 'Where shall I sleep?' he asked the same question Black had asked.

'You haven't been shown your room?' I asked, rising to my feet too, relieved as I somehow understood that however long I slept, Lucius would sleep too. 'Where did you sleep last night?'

'No, no one spoke to me at all,' he said, giving me his hurt, "I have been wronged" look. 'I just woke up on a settee in the room next door ... I don't even recall sitting down on it.'

I didn't think that was very fair; it was one thing to have an unwelcome visitor, but quite another to treat him as though he didn't exist. I wondered why that had been, and

found myself contentedly shifting the blame onto Dumbledore's shoulders; it certainly didn't sound like Ethel's way of doing things.

'Follow me,' I said, 'and we shall both discover the wonders of this house. You know about as much as I do at this point in time.'

I hadn't the vaguest idea which room Black had gone into. I hadn't ever seen behind three of the doors which then led off the top landing; in fact I was sure there had only been two new ones the last time I had been upstairs. I got lucky; the first room I opened was empty, and Lucius made no comment at all as he closed the door.

At last I was alone, and I stood on the top landing for a moment, hardly even noticing that it had become a corridor to accommodate the new rooms. I wondered if the third of them had been for Andromeda and Tonks, but put the thought away; I needed sleep, not maudlin insomnia. I made my way to my own bedroom, to the room I had shared with Andromeda for two precious nights, trying not to remember that, as Black had so succinctly put it, the memories of those nights were now mine alone. But I had to stifle my gasp as I breathed the air, and caught the scent of wild summer roses after the rain, the scent of her; and I looked at the bed, and imagined I could still see the dent her head had made on the pillows; and I had to resist the urge to scream my impotent fury at the uncaring walls.

I slept for about fourteen hours and was awakened only by the smell of the smoke from what was presumably Black's cigarette, wafting up the stairs and coming through even the closed bedroom door. I tried to ignore it, tried to get back to sleep, but it invaded my senses, reminding me that this was first day of the rest of my life, and it was today that I had to try to put my failures behind me.

It was only when I was about to immerse myself in the bath I had drawn that the Dark Mark surfaced, from where it had been lingering all that time in my subconscious, to the very top of my awareness. It was like a sickening jolt, one to remind me that whenever I put away all of the other things that troubled me to the dark corners of my heart, the Mark would rise to fill the void, to take up the slack, so to speak. That panicked me, that I would never have any rest from some sort of torment, and it took me a moment to remember about the white stone, and another to wonder if I could glean some solace from it. I found that if I laid the white stone at the side of the bath that the Dark Mark seemed, perhaps not to be subdued, but that some buffer was placed between it and me. That both comforted me and worried me; if the Mark could be so easily cowed, perhaps Mordestone would recognise the stone, as Dumbledore had hinted it might do.

Despite a long warm bath and dressing in comfortable clothes, I felt groggy and slow, as though had I had slept too long and had awoken un-refreshed. I left my room and squared my shoulders, and I was halfway down the stairs when I remembered about Lucius. I was almost tempted to leave him in some sort of suspended animation for a few days, but that wasn't to be. I had only just turned to haul myself back up the stairs to awaken him, when the door to his room opened, spilling the quintessential Slytherin demi-god into the hall. He had shaved, but I could see how disgruntled he was about wearing the clothes he had already worn for two days. Black had been right; before Lucius opened his mouth to complain I had already come to terms with the fact that he was, indeed, going to be a monster.

'Next time you go to the manor, Severus,' he said, foregoing wishing me a good morning or a good whatever other part of the day it was, 'you will have to bring me some clothes back. Will that be today?'

'Not if I can help it,' I replied, and turned to go down the rest of the stairs. 'Perhaps you should send for an elf or two to do your bidding.'

'If I am to be a guest in this house,' he remarked to my back, 'I would expect to be treated as such.'

I didn't even reply, but felt somehow gratified at the thought of the culture shock Lucius was about to be dealt. I had shoved the living room door open, and now found the smell of Black's cigarette to be rather pleasantly mingled with the aroma of coffee and toast wafting through from the kitchen.

Black looked a lot better than he had the day before. He was sitting reading the Daily Prophet with his legs slung up on the kitchen table, the paper in one hand, a mug of coffee in the other and a cigarette dangling from his lips; I couldn't see the point really, as he was going to have to put something down to take the cigarette from his mouth before he drank the coffee.

'Morning,' he grunted, leaving all his props exactly where they were.

The Prophet had become pretty much Riddle's mouthpiece over the past few months, and every day it had taken to publishing a list of those wanted for whatever atrocity was Riddle's fancy that day. That day was no exception, and Black shoved the paper across the table, stabbing his finger on pictures of himself and Lupin under a headline: "Wanted: for Deviant Practices".

But I was still thinking about the headline I had seen before he spread the paper on the table, the one that read: "Where is the Heir?" I had an uneasy feeling that the missing heir was the one who had sat at Black's side, and was even now reaching for the toast, with a discontented pout which didn't really suit him at all. Lucius had noticed the headline of course, and he stuck a piece of toast in his mouth, before frowning and turning the paper over to scan the article. It didn't really say much, just a bit of speculation about the fact that Lucius had not been seen for a few days, and I thought it odd that such an unimportant matter merited the day's headline. That apart, it had only been two nights since Lucius had left Malfoy Manor, and as Riddle was quite clearly in charge of the Prophet, I found that gave me something else to worry about.

'What's that supposed to mean?' Lucius asked no one in particular, picking up the paper again. 'It says "Our source at Malfoy Manor informed us that the heir to Malfoy Estates has not been seen for several days". That's crap,' he snapped indignantly. 'I was there the day before yesterday; in fact I hadn't moved out of the ruddy place for ... well, not since...'

'You arrested me?' Black asked helpfully.

'Exactly,' Lucius concurred, with what sounded suspiciously like aplomb. 'And that was only ... well, a few days ago,' he muttered.

Black sat back and lit another cigarette, and I stifled the urge to reach across the table and knock it out of his hand, and the even more overwhelming desire to help myself from the packet he left on the table. He had a thoughtful look on his face, and his almost ever-present frown deepened and then cleared. He flicked the paper open again to where his own "wanted" notice was, and stabbed it with the hand that held the cigarette.

'This is really quite good, Severus, you know,' he said. 'We can use this ... and get shot of Shirley at the same time.'

Malfoy's nostrils flared dangerously at Sirius's use of the Hogwarts nickname again, but he seemed to save whatever comment he had lined up for later, concentrating instead of the rest of what Black had said. 'What do you mean by "use it", Black?' he asked suspiciously.

'You'll go back to Malfoy Manor with your prize, and that will whip the rug from under Abraxas's feet, and make you the hero in Riddle's eye ... for a time at least,' Black replied.

'What prize?' Lucius asked, 'Make yourself clear, Black, if you are in any way capable of doing so.'

'Me,' Black said, grinning like a maniac. 'You were sent to find Sirius Black, weren't you? ... And with Sirius Black will you make your triumphal return.'

'You're insane,' Lucius retorted. 'He'll kill you this time.'

'No he won't ... not when he understands my loyalty to him.'

'What loyalty?'

'I am about to become a Death Eater too,' Black said, spreading his hands disarmingly. 'After all, I'm a perfect candidate.'

'No, you're not,' Lucius objected, and I sat back listening to their arguments, and the pros and cons, as I tried not to let the feeling of euphoria wash through me that indeed

I would have men I could trust, well, one I could trust and one I would have to keep a steady eye on. 'You're shop-soiled goods, Black,' Lucius went on. 'You're a ruddy Gryffindor. And ... well, not to put too fine a point on it, you're homosexual, or at least Riddle believes you to be so.' He nodded to where the paper still displayed Black's picture and its assertion to his deviant practices.

'So is Riddle,' I put in quietly, breaking my silence for the first time since I had come into the kitchen.

Lucius pulled back at that. For a moment he looked as though he were going to scoff his disbelief, but he paused to think about it, the smooth Malfoy forehead creased in concentration, and it struck me again that he was not the fool he had let others think him to be. Then he nodded slowly. 'You know, I think you are right.' He gave me a long look. 'Is that the attraction you hold for him, Severus? Does he seek to take you as his own?'

There it was again, that assumption which had cropped up so often in the past few days that I was beginning to wonder just how I had portrayed that image, one that was completely alien to me.

'Riddle sees what he wants to see,' I remarked as cryptically as I could. Lucius didn't need to know anything about Aqua Vitae, and if he ever spilled any knowledge of it, I would know it had come not from me, but from Riddle. Not exactly a foolproof acid test of his loyalty, I knew, but one that would always be around all the same.

Lucius gave me a hard look, one that I recognised as him feeling more in command of himself, and I admitted that was good; it was when Lucius became unsure or frightened he would be dangerous, and like a rat trapped in a corner, I suspected he would find the quickest way to safety, even if that included betraying those who had placed any trust in him.

'He'll still kill Black,' he said. 'He had sent me down to the cellars that day to bring him to his presence, and I suspect that was his intention.'

'I doubt that,' Black replied. 'Why keep me alive at all? Why not just kill me and Lupin immediately?'

Lucius shrugged, and I realised that had been something that had puzzled me as much as it seemed to puzzle him. 'And what of my father?' he asked, changing direction. 'He is hardly likely to welcome my return.'

'Of course he will,' Black argued. 'He will seek to marry you off to Narcissa and secure the Malfoy line before the year is out.'

Lucius suppressed a shudder. 'I cannot marry that shrew.'

'Assert yourself, for the love of Merlin,' Black grunted, the cigarette back in place at the corner of his mouth. 'She's only a girl; surely you can teach her her place in the pecking order.'

'I still think he'll kill you.' Lucius went back to his original argument, obviously not wanting to discuss his betrothal to Narcissa, and I found it mildly gratifying that he had not just latched onto Black like the trophy he was going to purport to be. 'However did you get away anyway?' he asked. 'The door was locked ... and that wand ... did you steal Bella's wand at school?' he asked. 'I confess it rather got me off the hook.'

Black turned to me, not even bothering to veil his accusation. 'You gave me that harpy's wand?' he spluttered. 'You gave me a wand belonging to Bellabitch? How could you, Severus?'

'I didn't know it was hers,' I confessed, letting my eyebrow rise. 'Would you have preferred me to have left you to your own devices?'

'So it was you?' Lucius had latched onto that remark and its implications. 'You did go into Lucretia's room when you were looking at the old books. I thought you took rather a long time,' he said, looking down, clearly uncomfortable. 'And the next I knew I had an Imperius Curse on me and I couldn't move, and Riddle and my father were going towards you.' He looked back up in appeal. 'I knew you were up to something, that's why I waited at the end of the row, but I couldn't warn you, Severus. You've got to believe me.'

I was about to remind myself about caution again when I felt the stone throb in my pocket, and I wondered whether it meant danger, or if it meant me to believe in Lucius.

"I'm not sure either, dear," Ethel's voice sounded in my mind. *"Sometimes it can be a bit vague."*

That was no help at all, of course, but for all that I felt that I was moving along somehow, and that somewhere, even if it were only in my own mind, I was beginning to draw up my battle lines. I even found I had troops of my own, and that in turn cheered me enormously.

I liked the thought of Black joining me, and tried to make the logistics of that more important in my mind than just being relieved I wouldn't be so alone. But Malfoy was right; we were going to have to come up with something good to get Black off the hook as well as Lucius. It was just then that Ethel decided to come out of her picture and join us in the kitchen.

Black grinned and nodded to her as she moved over to the cooking range, and Lucius spoke to her over his shoulder. 'When you've finished there, put some more towels in my bedroom.'

I saw Ethel stop stirring whatever she was stirring, just as Black suppressed a snort of rather mischievous laughter, and I have to admit I was quite intrigued as to how Ethel would react to Lucius's apparent misconception about her status in the house. But Lucius still had a bigger hole to dig for himself.

'And while you're at it,' he added, this time without even bothering to turn at all, 'make sure that I have lavender scented silk sheets; I don't care for anything else.'

Ethel ignored him completely. 'Breakfast, Sirius dear,' she said, laying a veritable heap of crispy bacon and lightly scrambled eggs in front of him, as he rewarded her with a very Gryffindor wink. 'Now eat it all up, dear. I don't want to see you as peaky looking as you've been.'

She moved away from the table again, and this time when she came back from the stove she brought me a plate of equally crispy bacon and some dry toast and buttered mushrooms. She moved away yet again, and this time when she returned she sat in her own spindly little chair, rearranging her voluminous skirts to her satisfaction, and then lifting her toast to her mouth to nibble on it, much the way a little mouse would. Lucius's face was a study in shocked indignation.

'Does the hired help normally eat with you, Severus?' he asked, as Black snorted unhelpfully into his coffee cup again. 'Come to think of it, she's a touch over familiar for my taste too ... and she seems to have forgotten my breakfast,' he said, only then gritting his expensive dental work and glaring at her.

'Are you hungry, dear?' Ethel asked innocently. 'If you are, the larder's right over there. Just help yourself.'

'I beg your pardon?' Lucius spluttered, and then turned to me again as some sort of realisation began to dawn on him. 'Who is she? Why can't you just buy an elf like everyone else, Severus?' he added, looking around the admittedly beautiful kitchen, with its burnished copper pots and old wood. 'You're obviously not strapped for cash.'

'I, my dear, am Auntie Ethel,' she declared grandly. 'And as an elderly lady of high station, gentle birth, and good breeding ... not that a Malfoy would have a notion of the true meaning of those ... I expect to be treated with respect. That apart, Lucius, we treat everyone in this house in the way they treat us, irrespective of what someone like you may consider to be their social standing. Once you get the straight of all that, Lucius dear, I shall make your breakfast. Bacon, fried eggs, sunny side up, and brown toast, if I'm not mistaken?'

Lucius's arrogance leaked out of him like air out of a punctured balloon. 'Someone could have introduced me,' he grunted in accusation, and that much was true, I supposed. To give him his due, his own upbringing sprang to his rescue, and it never ceased to amaze me how someone with such overweening conceit could also be possessed of such exquisite manners, and on the few occasions that it was demanded, such disarmingly modest charm. It struck me then just what an accomplished actor Malfoy was, and that it was all a game to him; I just hoped he wasn't playing with loaded dice.

He stood from his place and walked around to Ethel, gave a courtly little bow, which on another man would have looked ridiculous, and lifted the knotty old hand Ethel held out to him to his lips. He kissed it once. 'Madam, forgive me,' he said. 'All accusations you lay at my door are justified. Know this though, Aunty Ethel,' he said, without a trace of self-consciousness, '...if I may presume to address you like that ... I admit to being an arrogant, and perhaps on occasion ignorant, man, but believe me, madam, I am not a bad one.'

"No, I don't think he is a bad man," Ethel's voice sounded in my mind. *"However, Severus, he is a weak one, and equally dangerous for that fact."*

I was glad of one thing, glad that she had summed him up in much the same way as I had done myself, and wondered just where that left me.

'You could get away with murder just for being a ruddy gentleman,' Black retorted as Malfoy sat down to the breakfast that had appeared on the table, his humiliation reversed to his satisfaction. But there was no real malice on Black's part, and I began to hope that we could at least work together somehow.

'Indeed, Black. Perhaps you should try it out for yourself one day,' Lucius agreed magnanimously. 'More to the point though, can you get away with pretending to Riddle that you have done a miraculous volte-face and now wish to become a Death Eater?'

'What's this?' Ethel asked sweetly. 'Have you been improvising again, Severus?'

I confess I was slightly surprised that she did not already know of the conversation; then I thought about how I had not really been a part of it, just an observer. I filed that bit of information away for the future, that fact that she only knew what was going on around me if I were actually taking part.

'I'm going to go to the manor once we convince Shirley to face the music, Ethel,' Black said, grinning his grin. 'That way he goes back with a prize, and Riddle won't bite him.'

'Perhaps not, dear,' she replied. 'But he very well may bite you.'

'That's what I said,' Malfoy put in, having given Sirius another glare for his "Shirley" remark. I was going to have to do something about that. Black had always thought he was tremendously funny, and Lucius had never taken very well to being made fun of; that apart, I didn't care to cast myself in the permanent role of referee.

Ethel turned to Lucius; she seemed to have forgiven him quite quickly. 'And you are right, Lucius dear,' she said. 'Now we shall have to put our heads together to work out some way of getting not only you, but Sirius, into Riddle's favour.' She clapped her hands together like a child. 'I confess I am much happier now that Severus will not be so alone at the manor.'

'But I'm not going to be at the manor,' I said carefully. 'I shall be staying right here. I have something to do for Tom which requires that I stay here.' A thought occurred to me then that it had been Riddle himself who suggested that Lucius stay at Spinner's End, and I wondered how to back down to that request without seeming to. The only way I could find around that was going to the manor myself, and I really didn't want to do that.

"I think you have to, dear, just this once more," Ethel said.

I felt my shoulders sag at the thought. The false security I had felt that morning had evaporated as the realities of the world outside broke through: enjoying Lucius's downfall and his remarkable comeback, enjoying Black's verbal sniping, they weren't the realities; the reality was that I had to face Riddle again, and so much the better if it were before he came a-calling. Perhaps if I were proactive I could put this across, and once I had, I could begin work in earnest. I had to slow Riddle down until Andromeda's child was born and taken to a place of safety, and I think it was just then that I finally accepted that it would be a very long time before I ever saw her again, and all that time she would think of me only as the cold bitter man ...

"Stop that, Severus." Ethel's thought broke into mine, startling me. *"I shall not allow you to drag yourself down!"*

I had stood up from the table, suddenly feeling alone again, the feelings of camaraderie I had harboured so recently, just another meaningless fantasy.

'Where are you going?' Black asked, slipping yet another cigarette into the corner of his mouth, seemingly oblivious to the fact that although he had finished his meal, the others hadn't.

'I shall be back soon,' I replied.

'Where are you going?' Black repeated, his tone hardening.

'To pave the way,' I said, and turned away.

'Severus,' Lucius called after me. 'Watch out for my father. He does not trust you and tries at every turn to set Riddle against you.'

I had just closed the front door with its peeling paint, just begun to walk down the horrible little slabbed pathway, almost the last remnants of the house my parents had left me, when Ethel's voice sounded in my mind again.

"Severus ... dear," she said. *"I do not know if this will help you to bear your pain, but Andromeda would not have been here for much longer anyway. She is a skilled witch, and within another week or so she will have realised that the child she carries is of no use to the Dark Lord. The baby sleeping in her womb is a girl."*

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter 16 of 48

Severus gets a bit more than he bargains for at Malfoy Manor.

Please heed the warning on this chapter of suggested, though in no way described, male/male sexual abuse.

I turned the stone over in my pocket as I walked up the elm-lined carriageway, once again aware of being watched. I knew Riddle was in the manor; I could feel him, and a lot of other people too. For some reason I did not think Tom was the one observing me, and that unnerved me; I cannot say why. I found I had to resist the urge to simply turn and flee, wondering what madness had dragged me there yet again, and why it was that each time I went the stakes seemed to have been upped, and more people

were at risk.

Once again the door opened before I reached it, but this time it was not an elf that opened it; this time the hooded unwelcoming glare of none other than Abraxas Malfoy faced me, and had I not been so terror stricken, I might have wondered just why he had stooped to carry out such a menial task. I wouldn't have had to wonder for long though. Tom Riddle stood in the hallway, surrounded by a group of men, most of whom I recognised as being his closest confidants. That made me feel vulnerable, even more so when I felt the palpable hostility from most of them. I wondered from what that stemmed, just why they should be so resentful towards one man so many years their junior. It didn't take long to find out.

Riddle stepped forward as the rest of his admirers parted to let him through. 'Severus ... my Severus,' he said, laying a hand on each of my shoulders. 'We have just been discussing you.' He leant in for what was becoming his customary kiss, and it was all I could do not to freeze, as the glances from the other men in the hall changed from hostility to disgust, or dangerous envy, and Abraxas's changed to fury.

'Tom, is this visit not slightly untimely?' Orion Black asked. 'We have much to discuss that is none of Mr Snape's concern.' I saw him glance to Abraxas, and saw that even within his elite there was dissent, and a pecking order, and I wondered if Riddle knew how dangerous that nest of vipers was. And yet he was the master snake charmer, and I suspected one of his games would be to keep them at one another's throats, so that they hated one another enough not to ever consider joining forces in any way against him.

Riddle turned to Black, his arm across my shoulders. 'What is my concern, is Severus's concern, Orion,' he said. 'Do let me know if you have a problem with understanding that,' he said, sweeping the rest of the men with a cool glare, one that fastened on Abraxas for a moment longer than the others, whilst I felt that I could have well done without increasing the number of my enemies.

'I apologise, gentlemen,' I said, making a futile attempt at a damage limitation exercise. 'I had not intended to intrude.' I saw no thawing of the stony, impassive faces that failed to mask their true emotions, and turned to Riddle, paradoxically my only ally. 'I should call another time, Tom. I confess it did not occur to me to send you an owl to request an audience,' I added as meekly as I could.

'An audience? ... With me?' Riddle swept my remarks aside. 'You do not need to give me advance warning of your arrival, Severus. There is no inconvenience between us.'

He was digging me a deeper hole, and I wasn't entirely sure that wasn't his intention. 'Nevertheless,' I said, trying to extricate myself from the situation. 'I shall come back another time. Perhaps tomorrow, if I may?' I ventured.

But Riddle waved my attempt away, his other arm still across my shoulders. 'We are finished for today, gentlemen,' he said, addressing them all, and then turning to Malfoy. 'Abraxas, perhaps you would be so kind as to send an elf with refreshments for myself and Severus ... we shall be in the library.'

I kept my eyes averted from everyone, and I was just about to be swept up the grand staircase when a man, even younger than me, turned from the body of men who had been surrounding Riddle when I first arrived, and I felt a jolt of shock. It was Barty Crouch. I didn't have to wonder what, apart from his inside knowledge of his father's goings on at the Ministry, afforded him his status in this particular elite circle of men.

'Well, my love?' Riddle asked, as he sat in the seat he always occupied at the fire. 'What have you come to tell me today? Not that I need a reason for your visit.'

'A few things, Tom,' I replied. 'One which may surprise you, I suspect, as much as it did me.' I let a cynical smile touch my lips, and drew a vial of brown liquid from the folds of my cloak, thanking Merlin that I always carried it with me; it was, after all, the crux of the excuse I had cobbled together for being there.

'Veritaserum?' he queried. 'And on whom did you inflict that?' he asked, laughing like a child who had just been presented with a new toy.

'Sirius Black,' I replied, enjoying my moment.

'Black?' he repeated, and all semblance of amusement dropped from him. 'And perhaps you can explain to me, Severus, just how you came across Sirius Black ... and where he is now.' He held up his hand to let me know he had not finished, and I saw the knot of fury that was never far from the surface; I saw it tighten his jaw and furrow his smooth brow, and I saw the effort it took him to swallow it, and how it ruled him, and I knew I was going to have to make this very good indeed. 'That is after you tell me, Severus, just why you have not brought him with you,' he finished quietly.

I let the silence draw out as much as I dared. 'I have him at Spinner's End,' I said. 'I ... I thought it unwise to attempt to Apparate him here,' I went on. 'As you know I have no Apparition point at Spinner's End, and I thought it unwise to walk to the warehouse with a man whom you consider to be so wanted a prisoner ... not past Rodolphus Lestrange,' I said, and felt him push softly at my mind, to try to sort the lies from the half-truths. 'I had no way of knowing if you had a "kill on sight" order out on Black.'

He let me draw to my shaky close without saying anything, and it was only when I felt him draw away from my mind that he seemed to have come to any decision. He was about to speak when there was respectful tap on the door, and it was pushed open by an elf bearing a tray of tea.

All the time the elf fussed I felt the anger building up inside Riddle, and wondered if I were even going to get the chance to put across the elaborate story I had prepared, until he eventually stood and kicked the tray from the table on which it rested, and then kicked the elf against the wall, where it sat, its hands over its ears, howling its misery. As far as I was concerned, it opened the pressure valve on Riddle's fury, and I was glad of that much; anyway, the elf should have got a ruddy move on.

'Really, Tom,' I said, in a moment of recklessness that sprang on me from nowhere. 'Should you treat Abraxas's little spy in such a way?'

He spun on me so quickly that I thought I had made a bad mistake, and then he threw back his head and laughed, as the elf took the opportunity to slip out of the door, casting a quick cleaning spell over its shoulder.

'I am surrounded by fools and miscreants and self-seeking madmen, Severus,' he said. 'Yet you are the only one who does not fear me,' he said, coming so close to me that I could feel his light breath on my face, smell the peculiar nuance of nutmeg that seemed to follow him. 'Now, why I wonder, is that?' He drew one of his long white fingers down my cheek in a gesture that, for all its outward innocence, felt as corrupt as something evil that had crept out of an unhallowed grave. 'You may tell me that after you explain to me just why you have not killed Sirius Black.'

'Killed him?' I echoed. 'I have never killed any man, Tom, nor do I intend to ever do so.'

'I think we may need to have a little chat about those boundaries I expect you to push for me, Severus,' he replied. 'But for now, you have had quite long enough to gauge my mood and formulate your little story,' he said. 'You may sit down and entertain me about Sirius Black. Firstly, how did you find him?'

'I didn't,' I replied, sitting down opposite him, on the two-seater chesterfield at the other side of the fire. 'Lucius brought him to me.'

'Lucius?' he exclaimed. 'My, my, Severus, you have been busy. Perhaps you can now explain to me just how Lucius and Black slipped past the guard that you seemed to think you couldn't get Black past, to bring him here?'

'Look, Tom,' I replied. 'I suppose I could have cast a Concealment Charm of some sort on Black, and got him to the Apparition point ... but I didn't really see the necessity to do so,' I said. 'And he wanted me to speak to you first ... before he came here of his own volition.'

'Since when did Sirius Black's wishes supersede mine?' he asked in that dangerously reasonable tone, the one that warned me I had spun him out as far as I dared, perhaps too far. He stood up, the two telltale spots of fury pinpointed on his white cheeks. 'Nobody's wishes supersede mine, Severus,' he said, bending over me to draw his finger down my cheek again, in a way that terrified me. 'Not even yours.'

'You misunderstand all of this, Tom,' I said in a hurry. 'I have not come to here to defend my actions. I came here to deliver you a prize from Lucius, a prize I had thought worthy of even you.'

'What prize?' he said, through teeth gritted much that way Lucius gritted his.

'Sirius Black,' I said. 'He wants to become a Death Eater.'

'Out of the question,' he retorted. 'Laying aside the fact that he was lying through his teeth to you, I have many other reasons to only want one thing from Black, which is his death.' He paused to give me a hurt look. 'You know, I'm not disappointed in Lucius ... I would expect no more from him than to be so easily fooled,' he said. 'But I am disappointed in you, Severus.'

I held up the bottle of Veritaserum again, and let my lip twitch in as near to a smile as I could muster. 'Just what kind of idiot do you take me for?' I asked. 'It is I who am disappointed in you, Tom.' I knew I was pushing my luck, but I had to move this along to where I wanted it.

We had reached a kind of impasse: I knew it would be dangerous to continue, and I could see he did not care to back down in any way, but wanted to know the rest. As luck would have it, Abraxas chose that moment to come to the door, probably having been enlightened by his elf that Riddle and I were arguing, and wanting to see if he could make any capital out of the situation for himself.

'Tom,' he said grandly, as he swung the door open after just one little knock, probably not wanting to risk being refused entry. 'Was there a problem with tea my elf brought?' he asked, giving me a glance that spoke of a passionate wish that I had fallen from grace. 'It informed me that you were displeased.'

'The elf spent so long eavesdropping for you, Abraxas, that it quite forgot why it was here,' Riddle replied. 'And by the time it did, the tea was cold.' He looked across to where I sat, and favoured me with a smile I didn't like the look of. 'Now, Severus and I still have a great deal to discuss, so if you would be so kind as to leave us ...' He trailed off suggestively, watching Malfoy stifle his indignation and close the door.

When the door closed Riddle turned to me again, and I could see how timely Abraxas's intrusion had been, how it had robbed the sting from Riddle, how he could back down now without seeming to. 'Tell your story, Severus,' he said. 'It will have to be very good to convince me of Sirius Black though ... and we haven't even got to his liaisons with Lupin.'

'He and that pauper are just old school friends, Tom,' I remarked offhandedly. 'However, I find I am being constantly brought to book by you, and as such it is difficult to put my point across ... if I have to measure every word.'

He examined his fingernails and, seeming to find them satisfactory, looked across at me again. 'You are not like other men, my Severus,' he said. 'Neither of us is. I shall not interrupt you, my love,' he said, letting what I suspected he thought would show as vulnerability slip through, but what I recognised as cunning.

To be fair, he didn't interrupt as I told him that Lucius had arrived that morning with Sirius Black. I told him that Black had been in hiding since he had freed himself, and how he had done that by using the wand he had stolen from Bellatrix at school. I told Riddle that Sirius had always carried it concealed on him, like a trophy to mark his disdain for the rest of the Blacks, whom he held in such low regard. I told him that none of them, to Sirius's way of thinking, whatever platitudes sprang from their sycophantic mouths, could ever have the depth of loathing he held for, not only the way the wizarding world saw fit to dilute its blood to what he saw as its extinction, but the very Blacks themselves.

That even got Bellatrix off whatever hook she may still have been hanging from, but it was an embellishment I came to regret deeply as the years passed. At the time Riddle seemed more interested in just who had searched Black and Lupin for weapons when they had been brought to the manor though, and I just hoped it hadn't been Lucius. But just then I felt a flood of trepidation run through me; Riddle had missed the one glaring mistake in my story, the one I had missed myself. If Sirius Black had used Bellatrix's wand, how then had it been that the last spell the wand admitted to had been Bellatrix's schoolgirl hex on Rodolphus? But I couldn't afford to distract myself by thinking up an answer to that; it was enough that I knew of the mistake, I would deal with it later if I had to.

He had moved on to questioning me as to why Lucius had brought Black to Spinner's End, and I told him of Lucius's dislike of Abraxas, and even how that stemmed from the imprisonment and ultimate destruction of his own twin sister ... cheap ammunition I know, unworthy of me to use a poor soul in that way, but if Riddle ever saw fit to probe Abraxas, at least perhaps her demise would not have been in vain.

Riddle tutted. 'Lucius was ever too soft, Severus. You will need to keep your eye on that one. He is too easily swayed, too damned honourable by half, although he seeks to hide it behind his mask of Malfoy arrogance.'

I concurred, letting him lead me where I wanted to go. I was nearing the end now, just telling him how I had used the Veritaserum on not only Black, but Lucius too, and had found Malfoy anxious to prove himself worthy of what he saw as his rightful position, usurping the aged Abraxas to take his place at Riddle's right hand. I even told him how I found Lucius to be resentful of me, and saw me as some kind of threat to his own plans, just making it devious and yet grandiose enough to have come from Lucius himself. I had almost finished, just come to the bit I had to slip in.

'There is something else, Tom,' I said, with what I hoped he would take as quiet regret. 'Something I suspect will not please you.'

He looked at me, his gaze somehow impassive, and yet I saw his internal struggle: the struggle of one who knows he is omnipotent, and yet doubts that others have the vision he has to understand that. And it came to me then what it was all about: the desire of one man to be admired above all others, and by all others ... forever.

'Go on, Severus,' he said. 'You have got this far.'

'Andromeda Black is indeed with child, Tom,' I said. 'But the baby she carries is a girl.' I had to press on, and not let myself dwell on something that should not have been important to me. 'I know that's disappointing, Tom ... but I am not ready anyway,' I said, stammering out what I hoped he would take as lame excuses. 'I have done no work ... I am unsure of how long this will take me ... or even were to start.'

He held up his hand. 'Hush, my love,' he said, sending a chill of apprehension through me. 'I shall not pressure you. I had only hoped that it was sign.' He brought Mordestone from his pocket, and I saw it throb in recognition of him first, and then it was almost as though the stone turned in his hand to acknowledge me too, just as the flames in the fire dipped for a moment in their own salute.

Riddle slipped Mordestone back into his pocket, and stood and crossed in front of the fire to me, and bent as though to bestow the kiss I dreaded. Before I knew what he was doing he had dipped his hand into my pocket and withdrawn, not the white stone as I feared, but the vial of Veritaserum. His wand had appeared in his hand and he held it against my throat, tugging my head back by my hair with the same hand that held the wand.

'Now, I think I shall have the truth of this matter, Severus,' he said, flipping the glass stopper of the little bottle open with the thumb of the hand that held it, and raising it to his nose to smell the telltale whiff of almonds. 'Not even you can cobble up an antidote for this.'

That much was true; there was no antidote for Veritaserum, and I had always supposed there was no real point in anyone wasting time brewing such a thing, when the serum would be used under duress, and the victim would hardly have the opportunity to get to the antidote before spilling his darkest secrets.

I swallowed the Veritaserum, pretending to gag on it, as Riddle swallowed my plan ... hook, line and sinker. My hand clasped around the stone in my pocket, and I prayed that the buffer of my faith in the white stone, and the dose of asphodel and henbane I took every day of my life, so deadly and yet so addictive that I could never forget to take it, would see me through.

I felt the familiar, hot uncomfortable rush I had felt when I had been experimenting with the potion some time back, just after I had finished my renovations on Spinner's End. Then, of course, it had been Ethel asking me questions after I had taken Veritaserum, and it had worked quite well. But this time it was Tom Riddle, and the questions came one on top of the other, always loaded with live ammunition, and I felt myself struggling to even give my mumbled answers, panicking that I would not have the

strength to endure this, as words I did not recognise tumbled from my mouth. It is a curious effect of Veritaserum, that the victim replies with his own thoughts, but in the speech pattern of the interrogator; both Ethel and I had noticed that, and perhaps it was that alone that satisfied Riddle of the truth of my lies.

I fell back exhausted, nauseated, as the last of the Veritaserum wove through my veins. I think I actually blacked out, because I found that when I regained my senses Riddle was sitting in the corner of my settee, with his arms around me, stroking the hair away from my face, like a lover who has gone one step too far, and is anxious to make some sort of amends.

'I doubted you, my own love,' he said, his voice laced with what might even have been genuine contrition. 'I doubted the only man worthy of me.'

I said nothing; I had done what I set out to do, and now I had to get away, and I had not given any thought at all as to how I was going to do that.

'I have an idea, my Severus,' he said, pulling me close and kissing the top of my head. 'Perhaps it would be a good idea to get Sirius to watch over the rest of the Blacks. That would kill two birds with one stone, so to speak, in that it would get them off my back, and would let me assess his worth, before I take him into any confidence.'

'I had thought that was Lucius's job,' I murmured, trying to pull away from the hellish embrace without seeming to.

'He is not up to it,' Riddle said. 'Granted, he has found Sirius ... but I have doubts about Lucius. I find him in some ways more shallow than I had hoped, but in other ways much deeper. I am sorry, my love, but I shall have to insist that you keep him at Spinner's End until we marry him off to Narcissa Black ... thereafter, Sirius can watch him.' I felt him nod his head in satisfaction. 'Yes, I think that would do.'

I feigned disappointment. 'I have work to do, Tom. I cannot have Lucius under my feet,' I said. 'He should not know of our plans with Aqua Vitae. That apart, he is impossibly demanding ... He even asked me to pillage his wardrobe for him.'

'Ah, you will just have to be very secretive then, because I am afraid it will not only be Lucius who is under your feet, my love, but Black too,' he said, holding me at arm's length. 'But do not worry, my Severus, when we want to be alone together, we can be so here.'

I felt my heart turn over in panic. It had all gone so well, and I supposed it was only to be expected that the bill was more than I wanted to pay. But I had brought myself to this pass, and I could see no way out of it, not when I recognised the hungry glint in his eyes: for once the lust was not only for power.

I had thought I could bear it, see it as just his act of dominance over me, and perhaps if it had been just that, I might have. But this was something far more frightening, something he had hinted at, yet I had not fully understood. Tom Riddle saw me as not only his lover, something to do with as he pleased, but he also thought he was in love with me, and the very madness of the implications of that terrified me beyond thought. Maybe it sustained me too, and maybe in some way it worked for me, because I understood something else, as I recognised the rage that built up in my defiled body as something I had never really experienced before. Much as I had detested my father; and loathed James Potter, and Peter Pettigrew, and even until recently, Sirius Black; and despite whatever abhorrence I had felt for anyone whom I had thought had wronged me; I had never tasted what I tasted then. I had feared Riddle up until then, but now I was armed with something much stronger: it was undiluted hate. Such an ugly misused word, but such a powerful weapon.

I knew I would not get away from the manor that night. I had barely the strength to stay conscious through some of his assaults, and yet I could not afford to let the darkness I longed for creep over me; I had no way of knowing how my defences would slip if I were not alert enough to keep them un-breached. It was very late when he eventually left me, and I wondered if the rest of those in the house had left earlier, or if even then they laughed at me as an after dinner joke, and silently thanked whomsoever they thanked in their hour of need, that they were not chosen to lie with him.

I had crawled out of the vast canopied bed once I was sure he had left, and took the stone from my pocket, squeezing it in my hand as though I could extract some elixir from its core. As I turned the stone over in my hand the moonlight caught the Dark Mark on my arm, and I don't think I imagined that it somehow grinned in triumph. I thrust my arm behind my back in a useless effort to hide it away, and staggered back to the bed, my breath coming in huge tearing gulps. I lay back, clutching the white stone and wincing in pain as I tried to find a part of me to lie on that was less bruised than the rest, and perhaps the stone did help, because I found the darkness I had denied myself creep from the corners of my mind to drag me away to somewhere better.

I don't know how much later it was, perhaps three hours or more, judging from the way the waning gibbous of the moon had moved across the sky, that something woke me. At first I thought it was him, and curled myself into a foetal position in some sort of primal defence. I slowly forced myself to relax again, as I sent my mind out to search for him, understanding then that, not only was it not Riddle's presence that had woken me, but that he had left the manor altogether. I wondered, in a moment of panic, whether he had gone to Spinner's End, and if he had, what damage I had done to the two men who still did not know the lies I had woven about them. I needn't have worried though. Something denser than the darkness around me stood at the side of the bed, something watching me, and I almost wept in relief as I heard the soft swish of Sirius Black changing from his Animagus form.

'Fuck sake,' he muttered, then turned to the door. 'Malfoy, hurry, we need to get him out of here.'

Lucius slipped in the door, his blond hair gleaming in the moonlit darkness. 'The house is empty,' he said, and then I heard him stifle a gasp. 'Is this how you intend to deal with him, Severus? To stay in his favour?' he asked, but it was anguish I heard in his voice, not reproach. 'By prostituting yourself to him?'

'Enough, Lucius,' Black snapped. 'That can wait. Let's move now before anyone comes back. Are the elves still undisturbed?' He was wrapping his cloak about me, and I couldn't even stifle my wincing as the soft wool rubbed on my raw skin.

'Yes,' Lucius replied. 'It will just look as though Severus has left of his own accord,' he said, stooping to pick up my jacket from where I had dropped it on the floor once I had the stone. Then he bent down to me. 'Is there anything you need from here?' he asked, and there was something I didn't recognise in his cultured affected drawl, the one that had always set my teeth on edge; it was something like care.

I shook my head. I had the white stone still clutched in my palm, and Lucius had already gathered the rest of the clothes that lay scattered where Riddle had thrown them. There was nothing I needed from this place, just the hate; I would take that with me, and make it serve me the way he had made me serve him.

We were just ready to leave, Lucius had just charmed my clothes and his own bundle of personal belongings, which for once I didn't begrudge him, when I saw him stiffen and nod to Black. Lucius cast an Invisibility Spell over me and himself, as Black changed form and padded silently out into the corridor in the upper hallway of the manor, one floor above the minstrels' gallery. It was only seconds later that we heard the sound of drunken laughter, and feet tramping up the stairs. The door to the room we were in was thrown open, and Abraxas, Orion and two other men spilled into the room, and I saw Black slip to the door in his other form and cast a hasty charm to conceal himself.

'Lumos,' Orion muttered, and the room was filled with ghostly wand light.

'Ah, it seems that Riddle's little bird has flown his nest, gentlemen,' Abraxas said ruefully. 'Never mind, there will be many nights of sport with him, I suspect, before Tom tires of him and throws him over for another.'

'Like he did your own boy?' Orion remarked, and laughed an ugly whisky-sodden laugh. 'I confess I was disappointed when your son fell out of his favour, Abraxas. There was so much of him to enjoy.'

'Perhaps it is just as well,' one of the other men said, a man I did not know. 'He may not have been so easy to keep quiet as your Lucius, eh, Abraxas?' he said. 'I mean, it wouldn't have done for him to go squealing to Riddle about abuse, just because you couldn't hold the threat of disinheritance over him.'

'Do you think me incapable of silencing one scheming little half-blooded pauper?' Abraxas retorted back with a drunken snort. 'Come, gentlemen,' he said, 'the wenches await us. Put your bloodlust away for the night, and let us concentrate on lust of another sort.'

I swore then that I would take Abraxas Malfoy at a time of my choosing, adding him to my list, just below Tom Riddle. I had two men to truly hate now, and already I was getting used to the feeling. I looked up at Lucius, where he stood with his fists clenched under his charm, and felt the pity I held for him at that moment coalesce into puzzlement. I wondered why Lucius had feigned ignorance of Riddle's homosexuality, if he had been used by him the way I had been, and how many other secrets he still had.

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter 17 of 48

Severus ponders the aftermath of his latest meeting with Riddle.

It was about half an hour before Black came back up the stairs to say that the men were all in the drawing room with four Knockturn Alley whores, and so deeply in their cups that he thought it was safe for us to make a break for it. I had dressed while I waited, admittedly with a little help from Lucius, and I felt a bit less vulnerable, less than when I had just been wrapped in Black's cloak. I felt a bit better that the Dark Mark had been covered again too. I had even allowed Lucius to perform some perfunctory cleansing and repairing spells; after all, who would know better about the immediate aftermath of Riddle's brand of affection?

He had avoided my eyes, and I suppose I had avoided his, but I could see that what had been dealt out to me had somehow been different from the treatment meted out to him, and that the burn marks from Riddle's curses, and the bites on my shoulders and legs, and the raw patches where Riddle's touch had abraded the very skin, were not something he had any experience of, and that made me wonder what had been bestowed on him in their stead. I didn't ask though; whatever it had been had probably been no less intense. I just bore his detached attention, trying instead to wonder how Lucius had coped in the past, lying alone with presumably no one but himself to offer him a crumb of comfort, and I wondered at a strength of character I had not recognised in him before.

I was more relieved than I thought possible that we were ready to go. I had almost counted every second, expecting Riddle to return, and there was nothing I wanted more than to be away from that manor before he got back, and never to return to it. That apart, I knew Black was seething with Lucius, and that situation needed to be diffused before it festered into something none of us could afford. As for me, I could understand both their points of view. The time waiting had given me time to consider Lucius's position, and I found it hard to understand how a man like him had managed to bear the humiliation of what he must have borne, and I could see why he had hidden it from us, much in the way, I suspected, he even hid it from himself.

'Can you walk, Severus?' Black asked, keeping an eye on the hallway outside the room.

'Of course I can walk,' I snapped at him. 'Can we get away from this fucking place?'

It was a slow business going down the stairs. I had not allowed for just how much pain I was in, and twice we had to stop, as sweat broke out on my body and I was all but overwhelmed by nausea, as the other two waited, nervously watching, and straining to listen for anyone coming into the hallway. It passed though, and agonisingly slowly, we made it to the back door to the kitchen garden without being seen. The Apparition point was just behind the glasshouses, and when we got there I did black out, just for a few moments, but when I regained consciousness Lucius and Sirius were bent over me, ready to have me Side-Along with them as they Apparated in tandem.

Even their almost flawless Disapparition at the warehouse sent a jolt of agony through me, one that left me retching violently onto the dusty concrete floor, until I was shaking in miserable pain, and soaked in sweat, and felt about as pitiful as I had ever felt before.

'Come on, Severus,' Lucius said urgently, as I stood with my head hanging and my back against the wall. 'Not far now. Come on, Ethel will be worried sick waiting for us.'

I knew I had to move; I couldn't stay in that damn warehouse forever, but the effort it took me to nod shocked me. I let Lucius and Black almost drag me to the door, and waited with Malfoy until Black went out in his doggy suit to check out the short walk to the house. His face was set and grim when he got back, and I knew what was wrong.

'Tom Riddle is standing just at the corner of Spinner's End, with Evan Rosier,' he said, confirming what I had already guessed.

Lucius gave me an uneasy look, and then turned to Black. 'He can't go crawling over the railway embankment, Black,' he said, and then turned to me. 'Can Ethel leave the house? If Black brings her picture here, can she help you?'

I didn't know; she had never left the house to my knowledge since I had brought her back from the solicitor's office in London, some five years before. I think their concern rallied me a little though, and I began thinking again.

'Black ... I need both of you to get to the house,' I said, hating the fact that I couldn't make even that short distance unaided, not without being detected. 'You will need to keep the form you are in, but if you permit Lucius and me entry to your mind, I think between us we could close it down,' I said, managing not to gasp as another stab of sick pain shot through my body, leaving me shaking again. 'Riddle will be searching not only with his eyes.' Then something occurred to me that I had not thought to ask. 'What way did you leave Spinner's End?'

Black gave me a superior look, and even Lucius let his lip twist in his version of a smile. 'Do you think you are the only talented man around here, Snape?' Black asked. 'I can close my mind down almost as well as you can, you arrogant fuck,' he said. 'Dumbledore has been teaching Occlumency to anyone with any aptitude.' He gave his Gryffindor grin, and I suspect he would have stuck a cigarette in the corner of his mouth too, if he'd thought Riddle wouldn't have smelled the smoke. 'I'm the only one who's any good, of course.'

I nodded in relief, for more reasons than just getting past Riddle that night, but I filed that away for later. I had to get back home. We had plans to make, and I thought I had all the chess pieces I needed to start the game. 'Let us just make a break for it under a charm,' I said. 'If we are very careful, I think we can manage.'

Black and Lucius looked doubtfully at one another, but I suspected they were more dubious of each other's talents, than each man of his own. It would do, it would just have to; I needed support from both of them for that walk to the home I longed for.

I felt myself quail as we passed Riddle and Rosier, but I need not have worried; Tom's ever-present fury was directed at his spy.

'Should it turn out that you have missed anything of significance, Evan, let me assure you you will regret it,' he said, looking towards where the charm of Spinner's End sat untouched, and I fancied, untouchable. 'It is imperative that I talk to Sirius Black and Lucius Malfoy before Severus gets back to that house.'

I didn't hear any more; Lucius and Sirius had tightened the shield around us so much that I found it difficult to even breathe.

Poor little Ethel was standing in the hall, wringing her knotty hands together, and it occurred to me just how incongruous she looked, and how old and frail. Not only had I never seen her so anxious, but I realised I had never actually seen her anywhere but the living room, not until she had come into the kitchen she had rebuilt a few days back.

'He's all right,' Lucius murmured to her, and there was something kind and oddly touching about the way he dwarfed her as he put an arm across her shoulders, and directed her into the living room that was her real domain, leaving Black to support me.

I was home, and I almost felt as though not only did Ethel's presence welcome me, but so also did Spinner's End. It was as though the house closed itself around the four people inside, and that made me recall a time when Ethel had told me that, because I had been born there, the house would always owe me the debt of protection. It didn't feel like Spinner's End was repaying a debt though, and I find this hard to explain even to myself, but a debt somehow sounds grudging, and whatever protection that little house cocooned us in, it was of its own accord, something not owed, but willingly bestowed, and I was not fool enough to think that anyone but Ethel had made it so.

She didn't fuss about me, for which I was grateful, not once she satisfied herself that my condition was not in any way life-threatening, and she scoffed at Black's suggestion that he send for a mediwizard.

'I'm quite sure that Severus would hate that, dear,' she said, and I agreed heartily. Then she turned to me. 'I think you should go and rest, Severus dear, until the Dark One has left the street,' she suggested, handing me a mug of something suspicious smelling which I had no intention of drinking just then.

'I'll just stay here,' I said from the seat that had appeared beside the fireplace in the kitchen. 'We have a lot to think about, a lot to talk about.' I glanced to where Malfoy sat quietly at the table, and Sirius sat opposite him, throwing him the odd hard look that I knew accused him, and yet was puzzled too. 'We have a lot of air to clear too,' I added.

Black just nodded and gave Lucius yet another hard look, one that made me angry.

"Ethel," I said to her mind. *"Would you leave us for a while?"*

"Yes, dear, I can see there are things you need to say that the others would not want said in front of an old lady," she replied in kind, standing up from her little seat that was opposite mine at the fireside. 'I have a bit of gardening to do, but do not talk too long,' she said to the other two. 'I should want to prepare breakfast before you all get some rest.' With that she left the room, and I waited until the door had closed, in full knowledge that she would eavesdrop through me, and that Lucius and Black would not know that.

'What other secrets have you got, you fat tart?' Sirius snarled across the table as the door between the living room and the kitchen closed, before I could say anything.

'Leave him alone, Black,' I said. 'Do not condemn others until you have a benchmark by which to judge them.'

'He let you walk into that,' Black snapped, glaring across to where Malfoy sat with his face set in an impassive mask.

'Did he, Black?' I asked. 'Did he send me? Were you not also here? And if I am not mistaken, was it not you who wanted to go to the manor in the first place ... to become a Death Eater? Or perhaps you thought Riddle would be as excited at the prospect as you were, and would just pat me on the head, give me a couple of sherbet ruddy lemons, and tell me to run along, the way Dumbledore would.'

'He could have warned you,' Black countered. 'Told you what to expect. And then I ... I could have prepared you in some way.'

'Had you done that I suspect I would still have been sitting here, instead of executing a plan that might, for all of its potentially fatal flaws, begin to get us where we need to be.'

'Fatal flaws?' Black scoffed. 'Let's find out first what other secrets the fat idiot's got before we see just how fatal a flaw can be,' he ranted, not making much sense at all.

'And you have none, Black?' Lucius asked. 'Coming from that despicable den of vice that spawned you?' And I could see that Lucius had his own grudges too, and no small part of them would have been directed at whatever Orion Black and the other three men had dealt out to him on the nights Riddle had taken him, and then left him for the vultures to pick over.

'Stop it ... both of you,' I said, pushing my exhaustion back. 'Or perhaps we should continue bickering amongst ourselves in the way that Abraxas and his cronies do, whilst Riddle rises unchallenged to such a height that he will be as powerful as he thinks he already is.'

Lucius dropped his head, and I could see he was struggling to maintain his outward composure; the revelations flung out in that room in Malfoy Manor had been too much for him. And I needed Lucius, I knew that then; that apart, I would not have sent a dog to the manor unprotected, not even one as capable as Black. But I could see that Black was deflated too, and that made me see that much of his anger was directed at himself, and I thought I understood that too, thought that he felt the weight of his own father's part, and was shamed by it.

'We have been marching to someone else's beat,' I said. 'That stops now. There are so many things to discuss, and so many questions to be asked that we cannot, any one of us, face Tom Riddle until we know the answers ... particularly the answers another one of us might give. My conversation ... before ...' I hated the way I hesitated, the way Lucius looked down, and Black looked at the fire. 'My conversation with Tom Riddle taught me that much,' I went on, hurrying the words along, 'and it is possible that whilst opening up our avenues, I have done as much damage as good.'

I told them about the horrible mistake I had made about the wand, but Sirius just waved that aside.

'Don't let that worry you. We can cobble up any old story,' he said airily, and that reminded me of how much better three clear heads were, than one under Riddle's pressure. 'I'll just say it was charmed along with another wand ... trophies of youth ... and I left Bella's to get her into a spot of bother.'

I felt my shoulders slump in relief; it was the just the type of thing Black would have done, but then I found myself asking him something, my eyes narrowing in suspicion.

'Did you somehow know that was her wand?'

'No,' he replied, and I wasn't sure if I believed that.

'Why did you leave it then?'

'It fell out of my pocket.'

I had no option but to leave it at that; we had more important matters to discuss: matters like why James Potter and Peter Pettigrew were anxious to trace Sirius; and matters like why Alastor Moody had been at the top of Spinner's End, and on whose orders; and just how we would cope with Lucius or Sirius being forced by either Veritaserum, or some other method, to confess where their loyalties lay; and other things that I couldn't remember, but hoped I would, before they jumped up in front of me in an unprepared moment.

We had cleared the air a bit though, even leaving whatever Lucius had endured un-discussed, and I felt it better that way; I didn't think he deserved to be humiliated again.

'I'm not sure about James,' Black confessed, surprising me. 'He seems to have a slightly different agenda to Dumbledore.'

'Why do you think that?' Lucius asked.

'His concept of the future of wizardkind is not as radical as Riddle's, but it is equally exclusive of Muggles in any positions of power. I find his attitude to Muggles to be patronising at best. In fact,' Black said, 'I think that is James's way of wooing some of Riddle's less fanatic followers with what he sees as a middle line. I think he is blinded by some vision of himself being the saviour of the race.'

'Ah ... a benevolent dictator?' I suggested. 'But a dictator, all the same.'

'Yeah, something like that,' Black admitted. 'Whatever he has in mind, I notice that it is only pure-bloods he invites into his inner circle, and that makes me uncomfortable. That apart, he has dazzled Dumbledore with his Potter insincerity.'

'But I had thought he was almost engaged to Lily Evans,' I argued. 'And Lily's a Muggle-born.'

'Yeah,' Sirius agreed again, sticking a cigarette into his mouth. 'And Tom Riddle hates homosexuals. That's the thing about dictators, Snape, they're terribly inconsistent.'

'And Moody?' I asked, refusing to be drawn into levity, but I was really thinking about Sirius's close friendship with Lupin, and how that may have been a cause of whatever friction had built up between James and Sirius; and I was thinking about how Dumbledore had trusted Moody enough to send him with McGonagall to guard Andromeda.

Black nodded. 'Moody is one of his group. Anyway, Dumbledore Obliviated Moody's memory of coming here when Andromeda was here ... he shouldn't have even known where Spinner's End was.' He frowned at that. 'Does James Potter know?'

I nodded. 'I expect so. Lily has been here.' I ignored Sirius's blink of surprise, and the way Malfoy turned to give me a speculative look. Of course Lily would have told Potter: pillow talk, confessions of old flames, and that brought me up short; but I needn't have bothered, Andromeda had no such secrets to confess where I was concerned, none that she would remember.

"*Stop that, Severus.*" Ethel broke into my mind as she had the last time I had let that thought run away with me

I sighed and put it away again. 'I think the first thing we have to do is to prepare ourselves and our minds for Riddle's inevitable call,' I said, glancing at my arm, where the Dark Mark hid below my sleeve, but I found myself somehow haunted by the thoughts that chased around my head. Thoughts like the fact that I had lain, for want of less kind expression, with Riddle, and had not even had a bath, and save for Lucius's quick cleansing spells at the manor, I was still tainted inside and out by him. Yet I had not even had the courage to go upstairs and soak the stench of him from my skin, and I knew that was because I could not face the Dark Mark, that my nakedness would let its triumph show again. I tried to speak again, but I found I was shaking.

Black had stood up, his chair scraping on the flagstones of the floor. He came back to the table with three tumblers and a bottle of my Glenfiddich, slapped a packet of Muggle cigarettes on the table, and poured three killer shots into the glasses. He tossed his over in one gulp, but I wasn't watching him, I was watching Lucius. He had dropped his head to his hands, his palms on his forehead and his fingers splayed into the mass of silver-blond hair. Black nodded to me and then shot Lucius a worried look.

'What say I just ask Ethel to come and make us something light, and we get some rest?' Black said quietly, watching Lucius. 'I think we've all had all we can handle for one day.'

I nodded, I knew I had.

Black went into the living room, and it was then that I remembered that he too had had a dose of Riddle. It was only when the kitchen door closed that Lucius looked up.

'He never did that to me,' he said. 'He never injured me ... not in that way.'

'I know,' I replied, looking away from the torture in his grey eyes, not wanting to know in what other way he had been harmed, or what the other four had done to him. 'Don't dwell on it, Lucius. It is only a lesson we have learned,' I said. 'Riddle seeks to own, to possess, that's all.'

'Tell that to Black,' he snarled.

'Don't worry about Black,' I said. 'He has enough to deal with the ghosts of his own past, without exploring the ghosts of anyone else's. His anger is a surface thing, it hides his own pain ... he is not our enemy.'

'I cannot go back there, Severus,' Lucius said. 'I cannot go back.'

I wondered at the effort that had dragged him to even accompany Black, and I thought then that both Ethel and I had been wrong about him; Lucius wasn't really a weak man, he was just a man with a different sort of courage.

'No, Lucius, you cannot go back there,' I agreed, pushing his tumbler of whisky towards him. 'Not alone at any rate.'

I watched him swirl the whisky around the glass, and raise it to his lips, and swallow it in what looked like a painful gulp, as though it had to pass a knot in his throat.

'Why didn't you tell me, Lucius?' I asked.

'When?' he asked. 'It took me all my time to persuade you to bring me here ... I had to virtually deposit myself on your doorstep.'

I nodded my acceptance; that much was true.

I watched the door open again, saying nothing as Ethel moved to the stove, humming to herself, and Black sat down, and Lucius poured himself another slug of my whisky. We didn't say much after that; I suppose we were all too drained in our own ways, and it was a relief when Black eventually abandoned his effort at eating the tasty little hot sausage sandwiches Ethel had prepared, and announced he was going to bed.

'Sirius dear,' Ethel said, wiping her hands on the apron she wore over her long red skirt, 'you cannot. Not yet. There is something still to be done.' She seemed to think, looking off into the middle distance only she could see. 'I suspect it is safe to do it now. He seems to have moved away.'

'What?' Sirius and Lucius both asked at the same time, although neither of them seemed to want the answer.

'You must take Severus back to the warehouse, and he must come back here alone. He must be seen to arrive on his own. It would not do for the Dark One to suspect that you assisted his escape from Malfoy Manor, would it?' She held up her hand to stifle their objections. 'You will be right with him; but he must be seen to be alone, and not in hiding, nothing else will do.'

She was right, of course, but that didn't make it any easier to swallow.

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter 18 of 48

Severus takes a couple of steps back, and another couple forward.

Rosier was sitting on a wall at the corner of Cottontrader Row and Spinner's End; it was a point about halfway between the house and the warehouse. He would obviously be suspicious about anyone walking down Spinner's End in what was by then the early morning, and yet still too early for normal pedestrians. The dawn was already threatening to break the darkness of the sky, and it was that damp autumnal cold, not quite frost, but cold enough for his breath to steam about him when he let out a harsh sounding cough. I was pleased to see that he looked thoroughly miserable; Tom Riddle obviously didn't worry too much about the wellbeing of his troops. Simple disguising charms would not do though, and Black and Lucius tightened the same complex shield as they had used earlier to pass him by.

We got to the warehouse undetected and crossed through the open door. Lucius had just begun to let his side of the shield waver, I could feel it falling, when Black stiffened, looking across at both of us, as someone crossed the doorway behind us, effectively blocking us in.

Tom Riddle was pacing up and down, his fur-lined cloak pulled tightly about him, muttering my name like some sort of weird litany. It had been a stroke of blind luck that he hadn't collided with us; after all, shielded or not, three men were a pretty solid mass. Lucius and Black stood frozen to the spot, each with a hand on one of my elbows; it was too dangerous to move, as Riddle kept pacing up and down, across the open doorway, cutting off our exit route. At the far corner, just as I felt the two men at my side draw their wands, four Death Eaters Disapparated in quick succession: both the Lestrage brothers, Walden Macnair and Bellatrix Black. Maybe if there had been just one less we could have killed them all then, there were three of us after all; maybe we should have tried anyway.

Riddle turned again, and began to walk back across the doorway, crossing behind us again, and just when he passed us, he began to move further into the warehouse, his attention diverted by something other than his four faithful. He was frowning across to the corner where we had Disapparated earlier, in particular at the drying pool of vomit I had thrown up. I felt both Black and Lucius tense, as Riddle shoved Rodolphus aside, and squatted down on his haunches beside the mess.

'Filthy bloody Muggles with their disgusting addictions,' he said savagely as he straightened up. 'My Severus and I shall rid the wizarding world of all of them and their corruptness.' He let a smile cross his face, breathed in deeply through his nose, and dipped his hand into his pocket, withdrawing Mordestone ... and I fancied he was talking to the stone, and not his shivering audience. 'And when we have cleansed the depravity of their perversion, then....' he said, pausing to stroke the stone, '... only then, shall my love and I have a world worthy of us.'

The four Death Eaters remained impassive at his display of what I could only think of as madness, and I wondered if I were the only one who even noticed the uncomfortable insights into the lunatic who had clawed his way to the top of a rotten tree. He kissed the stone and slipped it back into his pocket, as the three of us exchanged long looks under the shield.

We could have moved then, and I suppose we should have; the way through the open door was clear, but neither Lucius nor Sirius seemed inclined to make a break, and, as I was under their shield, I had to wait too. Riddle had turned away from the Death Eaters to face the door, actually looking right through us, through me. He took the stone out again and raised it to his cheek, his face hidden from the Death Eaters, his lips parted and his eyelids fluttering as though on the edge of consciousness, or the throes of sexual fulfilment. Then he kissed Mordestone again, and slipped his insanity into his pocket along with the black stone. It was odd, yet terrifying, to study Riddle when he thought himself unobserved, a frightening look at the madman who had managed to reach such heights, using the ambitions and vanities and avarice of men equally corrupt to get him there.

'Mordestone feels his presence,' Riddle said, spinning to the Death Eaters. 'She feels he has been here.'

'Snake?' Bellatrix ventured, and I could see she was not as confidently arrogant as she had been, as though she still had a bit of work to do to crawl her way back to her position of favour. I could see too, from the way she let her lip turn on my name, that she saw me as the cause of her fall from grace: just what I needed, yet another enemy. 'Can it feel Sirius too?' she asked.

'What makes you think that a Black is worthy of Mordestone's attention, Bella?' Riddle asked.

'I ... I just wondered if' She trailed off, mouthing the rest of whatever she was going to ask in silence.

'I want that house watched from all four sides now,' Riddle snapped, as Bellatrix lowered her head in furious mortification at being so silenced in front of those whom she probably considered her inferiors. 'Rabastan and Rodolphus will take the back corners of wherever that wretched charm ends; this side is already being watched,' he said, raising his thumbnail to his teeth. 'And you, Macnair, you will find wherever the far side ends.'

'The house is at the end of the street,' Macnair remarked. 'There's nothing after it.'

'The end of the world is there?' Riddle asked. 'Or perhaps you find this task beneath you, Walden?' He dropped all pretence of reason, and pointed to them where they stood in row, letting his voice rise with each word. 'Let me tell you all that no one ... no one ... is above my bidding. Now, I want Sirius Black and Lucius Malfroy delivered to me ... and if you cannot get to them before Severus does, let me assure you that I shall find someone who can. Do I make myself understood?' He ended almost with a scream of fury.

The four nodded, and Bellatrix gave him a look of appeal; one that spoke of wanting to ask him something.

'Ask away, Bella,' he offered, as though bestowing a great favour on her by dropping the Silencing Charm he had cast on her.

'What of me, my Lord?' she asked. 'What would you have me do?'

'You, Bella, will find your sister, and bring her to me at Malfroy Manor,' Riddle said, smiling his cold smile to let her know that he had forgiven her, but not forgotten. He had taken the stone from his pocket again, and rubbed his thumb over it, before drawing his cloak tightly to him. He seemed to be just about to Apparate away, to leave the rest to their appointed tasks, when another man Disapparated very nearly on top of him. It was Barty Crouch, one of those little points I had forgotten to remember about.

'I'm here to relieve Rosier,' Barty declared, and there was something cocky about him, as though he were assured of his own position.

'Hopefully you can see under a simple charm, Crouch,' Riddle replied.

'Hopefully I won't have to freeze my balls off all night,' Crouch returned, glancing at the other four Death Eaters as though to show that he, at least, was not afraid of bantering with Riddle.

'Let me assure you, Barty,' Riddle said, with the smile I could have warned Crouch to beware of, 'that if you miss anything, you will not have to worry about your balls freezing off; worry more about choking on them when I stuff them down your throat.'

Crouch refrained from replying, and I fancied he thought he'd maybe been just a bit too sure of himself.

'What are waiting for, Crouch?' Riddle snapped.

'Sorry,' Crouch replied quickly. 'I thought you were coming with me.'

'Me?' Riddle crossed the space to him, to where Crouch then stood just in front of us.

I saw Lucius close his eyes for a moment, and wondered if we had stayed too long, if we should indeed have tried to slip out and come back later! *"I am fine, Severus,"* he said softly into my mind. *"Rather you should watch out for Black's itchy wand hand!"*

"My wand hand's just fine, fat boy," Sirius responded in kind, and I felt something lift my spirits, something to do with the three-way communion we had found between us in what could best be described as desperation. I wondered if the white stone clutched in my hand, whilst the two men each held firmly onto my elbows in support, had anything to do with our ménage a trois, or if it were something even more precious, something we could use when not even physically linked. But I couldn't spare any thought for that, Riddle was talking to Crouch again, and I needed to know what they were saying, and I needed to keep my mind as neutral as possible.

'I have rather more important things to do,' Tom said. 'I shall return soon. I shall bring Severus with me, when he is well enough, and have him show me how to dismantle the wretched charm he has thrown around that house.' He paused for a moment to let a smile cross his mouth, one that was sickening to me in its longing. 'Although, I confess, it was worthy of him to keep Black and Malfoy trapped where they are.'

'I didn't know Snape was ill,' Crouch ventured, clearly unimpressed by Riddle's current obsession, glancing around at the others. 'He looked well enough earlier: pale and as ugly as usual, and about as sour as if he'd just chewed a rag soaked in vinegar, but well enough.'

'And just what would one such as you know of the difference between ugliness and beauty?' Riddle replied, and drew a finger down Crouch's cheek, much the way he drew one down mine, but when he moved his hand away I saw that instead of the hideous invisible ghost of his touch on my cheek, there was a livid mark on Crouch's. Riddle drew Mordestone from his pocket once more, and I could see it wasn't the first time Barty Crouch, or any of the others, had seen the stone. Of course, it wouldn't be, they would have had her Mark tattooed on their arms too, but I could see Barty was truly frightened of it. Riddle held the stone high, and laughed as Crouch almost seemed to wither, his face contorted in such pain that he appeared to age in front of our eyes.

Riddle turned. 'Get moving,' he ordered the Death Eaters. He slipped the stone back into his pocket yet again, leaving Barty gasping in agony as the others moved toward the door, and the Dark Lord Apparated away.

'Bastard,' Crouch hissed at the space where Riddle had been, and stumbled out of the warehouse in the wake of the other four, into the predawn darkness.

'Barty Crouch?' Black whispered when he had gone.

'Yes,' I replied. 'I had forgotten about him.'

'That's not possible,' Black said, clearly shocked, but there was no time for any more; there was another set of footsteps approaching the warehouse, and this time it was Evan Rosier. He didn't hang about though; he just moved to the corner and Apparated away too.

Even knowing that Black walked a few paces in front of me, and Lucius did the same behind me, didn't stop me feeling exposed and about as vulnerable as I ever wanted to feel. I kept expecting Riddle to reappear from nowhere, although I knew that was not possible; he would have to use the warehouse just like everyone else. Crouch was standing far nearer to the house than Rosier had though, away from the junction of Cottontrader Row and Spinner's End, just a few yards outside the charm.

He looked down the road at me, to where I was walking slowly and painfully towards the house. By the time I had almost reached him my legs were on the point of giving way, and my breath was coming in laboured gasps that made me suspect that the first aid I had refused to allow anyone to give me, was going to be needed after all.

'Well, well, lover boy,' Crouch said, grinning a rather insane grin at me. 'What a pity. I had hoped that Riddle was going to catch that old toad Abraxas and his drunken yobs giving you a doing over.'

'What are you talking about, Crouch?' I snapped as best I could.

'You've just missed your ... paramour. In fact he was very anxious to return to your charms ... whatever the fuck they might...' He trailed off as I sent a hex from my open hand to knock him off his feet; one that almost totally exhausted me.

'Worry about yourself, and not your betters, Crouch,' I said. 'Or perhaps I shall tell Tom, and Abraxas and his ... drunken yobs ... what you think of them.' I had stopped, not to gather another head of steam, but more to catch my breath for the final few yards, and I could feel Lucius close in behind me, even as I felt Black slip back a couple of steps. 'I'm sure I can make up something suitably disloyal,' I said, trying my best to produce the sneer that I had never had trouble with before.

'Fuck you, Snape,' Crouch said, regaining his feet, and letting the mad smile touch his lips again. 'Oh, I forgot ... word is you already got fucked.'

That time I didn't hold back; I let him get the full blast of my pent-up self-disgust. He was unconscious when I passed him by, still charmed from Muggle view, and probably he'd be lucky enough not to get stepped on by a passer-by. It was just as well he'd chosen to stand so near to the house; no one else was likely to go that far down the road. I was only sorry that I wouldn't hear how he explained himself to Riddle.

Black closed the door behind us, as Lucius grabbed my arm. I shook him away, feeling oddly strengthened by venting myself on Crouch; the second hex hadn't weakened me as the first had, it had somehow done the opposite. I felt something begin to creep through me, although I doubt I recognised it just then: I had begun to fight back.

As Lucius went up the stairs, I pulled myself away from the wall I rested against and followed Black through to the kitchen, finding him already telling Ethel what had happened. That made me wonder just how near I had to be to her, in a physical sense, for her to know what was happening around me.

"Here, of course, Severus dear," she replied to my mind, nodding absently to Black at the time. *"I know if you're on your way down Spinner's End, of course, and who else is outside, but it is the house that contains our link to one another."*

I supposed I should have known that; I did, however, remind myself to ask her how she had known that I had needed the book when I had been at Malfoy Manor. I was too tired to ask her just then though, too tired to have some rambling explanation given.

'Ethel,' Black said, sitting himself at what had become his customary seat at the kitchen table, the one with the ashtray in front of it. 'Remember these sandwiches I didn't want?' He flashed her a grin, slightly more tired than usual. 'I wouldn't mind some, while Lucius tells us all about barmy Barty,' he added. 'Where's he disappeared to anyway?'

'Yes ... Crouch ... I had forgotten about him,' I admitted again, as Lucius reappeared in the kitchen, dressed in something made of black velvet that he should clearly have left at Malfoy Manor.

'Hey, you didn't need to get all dolled up for us, Shirley,' Black said, failing to hide what looked rather uncomfortably like appreciation that I doubted would be welcomed by Lucius.

'There is a limit to just how long some of us wear the same clothes, Black,' Lucius declared, looking around the kitchen he had seemed to admire earlier, with what then bordered on disdain, 'even if one finds oneself in somewhat straitened circumstances.' He reached out his hand and helped himself to one of Sirius's sandwiches.

'But you're just going to bed,' Black remarked, shielding the rest of his sandwiches with his arm, and I could see his point. 'Unless that's your nightie?' he added. 'Anyway, what's this about Crouch?' he asked, dropping the levity from his voice as I shot him a warning look.

Lucius shrugged, letting Black's remarks pass, and I suspected he was just tired too. 'He hasn't been around for long,' he said. 'Just a couple of weeks, in fact.'

'I hate this,' Sirius replied, swallowing the remnants of his second sandwich, as I wondered if I should eat one too. After all, the last meal I had had, what felt like days before, was decorating the warehouse floor. 'Barty Crouch is very friendly with James too,' Black added, clearly worried.

I digested that, instead of a sandwich. 'How many games within games are we dealing with?' I asked.

'Can I make a suggestion?' Ethel asked, as though any one of us would have stopped her. 'Why don't you all have some nice rest and wake up fresh to this tomorrow.'

'It is tomorrow,' Black said sourly.

'I know, dear, but when you awake refreshed, I promise you it will still be there,' she said cryptically.

My bath had already been run for me when I went upstairs. Black and Lucius had gone to bed about an hour before, and I had sat nursing a glass of whisky that had turned into five, before Ethel finally took it away from me and sent me packing.

I had been dreading this, and yet I couldn't comprehend how I had waited for so long to wash him away from my body, as though frightened that the physical abluion would do nothing to cleanse his presence from me. I stripped cautiously, leaving my shirt until last, noticing that wasn't something I normally did; I would normally start with shoes, then socks, shirt, and trousers, in that order, and I didn't even attempt to fool myself that it was for any reason other than keeping his accursed Mark covered for as long as possible. I had unbuttoned the shirt, and was just about to peel it from me, when there was a soft knock on the door, and Black pushed it open.

'Do you need a hand?' he asked. 'I mean to get into the bath.'

I wasn't sure what else he could have meant, but I shook my head without replying. He gave me doubtful look and closed the door.

I couldn't wait any longer; I had to take the ruddy shirt off one day, so it may as well have been then. I slipped the right arm off first, and at last summoned up the dregs of my courage to pull the damn shirt off completely. The red eyes of the Dark Mark looked up at me, glittering in triumph that I pretended was just the way the flames from the single wall sconce caught them. I caught sight of myself in the slightly misted mirror above the sink, far enough away from it to have a view of the whole of my torso. I was streaked with darkening bruises, and angry weals, and marks I could barely remember having had inflicted on me. I was about to turn away, to immerse myself in the foamy water that beckoned to me, when I stopped. I examined each part of me, memorising the indignities and everything else he had heaped upon me, and added them to the ledger I had begun in my mind, in the debtors column, and I vowed to myself then that whatever the final tally was, the price would not be one that Tom Riddle could afford to pay.

I sank into the warm water, refusing to listen to the angry hiss the Mark made when it was submerged, just letting the tendrils of cinnamon and orange blossom steam invade my troubled senses. But it wouldn't be denied; it was almost as though it became angrier and angrier the more I tried to force it from my mind, and I once again had the uneasy feeling that I would never have any peace from it. I tried to push it from my mind again as I ducked right under the water to let my hair fan out, but I had to resurface almost immediately, grasped by some kind of panic at what I had seen. The Mark had seemed to stand out from my submerged arm, as though it were straining to break free from the restraint of my flesh, and claw its way to the surface for air.

I felt a wave of furious nausea wash over me, consumed as I was with rage that this cleansing I had so longed for, was nothing but another chance for Riddle to display his power over me. I was about to haul myself out of the bath, when I heard Ethel tapping on my mind. I almost laughed to myself; she had never done that before, always content just to remark whenever she cared to, without prior announcement, and I assumed that she was somehow allowing me the privacy of my own bathroom. There was something so old-fashioned and genteel about that that quite took me aback, and made me remember that there were better things in this world than Tom Riddle and Dark Marks.

"*What is it, Ethel?*" I enquired.

"*Use the stone again, dear,*" she whispered lightly back to me. "*Use the stone to shut it out!*"

I reached out over the bath, wondering why I had forgotten about it, deliberately using my left arm, even though it was the one at the wall side, and just managed to grasp my trousers from where I had stepped out of them, feeling my own triumph at the way in which the Mark burned angrily back at me. I freed the stone from my pocket, and as I did, the Mark seemed to recoil like a whipped dog. I left the stone sitting on the edge of the bath and finally went about my bathing undisturbed, taking as long as I wanted, and almost falling asleep in the process. In fact, had it not been for Black coming into the bathroom about an hour later, I suspect I would have gradually slipped down under the water, and saved Riddle all the trouble I hoped to give him.

'Sorry ... I thought you'd drowned,' he said, coming over to the bath and sitting himself down on the edge of it.

'Do you mind?' I said, quite at a loss as to how to deal with his invasion of what I considered to be my personal privacy. He looked surprised, and a horrible thought crossed my mind. 'Black?' I asked, not at all sure I wanted to hear the answer. 'Are you under the misconception that your boyish Gryffindor charm is in any way fetching?'

He didn't answer.

'Let me set the record straight,' I said. 'I am not interested, not only in any man, but in you in particular.' He still said nothing, and I began to have the notion that he thought his silence might appeal to me better. 'Go and try your dubious charms on Lucius,' I suggested. 'Beware though; he is likely to hex you into next week.'

'Yeah,' he said, standing up resignedly, and I found myself staggered at the man's audacity, especially that night, or morning as it had become quite some time before. 'I already tried,' he went on. 'He wasn't terribly impressed either.'

'So I was second?' I asked, not at all sure how I felt about that.

'Sorry,' he said, grinning his Gryffindor grin. 'I just get so fucking randy when there's any danger around.'

'I could have lived without knowing that,' I said. I didn't think there was any point in either of us being embarrassed, and as he wasn't likely to be, I slipped even further below the water, to avoid any lingering doubts he might have had, and any of his further scrutiny. 'Go to bed, Black,' I muttered, nodding to the door.

He had already opened the door, not at all crestfallen, and for that at least I admired him, when he turned back. 'Was that definite no?' he asked.

It was just then that I noticed something odd creeping up my chest and into my throat, something I didn't recognise. And it was too late by the time I did, because I had already thrown my head back, and laughed out loud.

'I've never seen you laugh, Severus,' he said.

'I've never heard anything quite so funny before,' I replied. 'Get out of here; I have had enough of madmen for one day.'

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter 19 of 48

Lucius gets some unexpected news.

When I woke the next morning, or later that same morning, I was surprised to see the sun had hardly moved. It had been broad daylight when I had finally got to bed, perhaps only an hour or two before noon, and yet I felt the refreshment that only a good undisturbed sleep can give. I wondered if I had actually slept right through the day until the one after, but I didn't feel groggy enough for that to have happened, and I suppose I finally resigned myself to the fact that Ethel had been messing around with time.

Two things had surprised me a little, and I found myself thinking of them as I hauled myself out of bed, in much the same way as I had thought of them in the few minutes before sleep had claimed me. The first was that Dumbledore had not called since I had left in my fit of pique at him spiriting Andromeda away; the other was that Riddle had not called either, at any rate he had not tried to summon me through the Mark. I wondered if he were playing some sort of mind game with me, perhaps to see how long it would take me to get in touch with him, or maybe he hadn't even noticed I was no longer at the manor. Somehow I doubted that.

I dressed quickly in a black shirt and black trousers, and it was only once I had buttoned the left shirt cuff that I realised that I hadn't looked at the Dark Mark at all. I told myself that was good, and not to think there was anything ominous about Riddle's seeming silence; perhaps I even convinced myself.

I was only halfway down the stairs when I heard voices raised in argument, and when I reached the kitchen I found Black and Malfoy standing at opposite sides of the table, and Ethel busy at her stove, ignoring them completely. They resembled a pair of angry peacocks squaring up to one another, and I doubted that there were any colours in the spectrum that they had not used between them. They assaulted my very eyes.

'What in the name of all that is sacred are you two arguing about?' I asked, offended by the noise. I still wasn't used to sharing my breakfast with anyone, let alone two noisy dandies, and that was the second time in a few days, and I found the prospect of it being any sort of long-term arrangement slightly depressing. Then again, I reminded myself grudgingly, the kitchen had not been a place in which one could have sat in any degree of comfort until Black had arrived on the scene. I sighed, and gave up my argument with myself, decided I wasn't interested in theirs either, and took my black tea into the living room, which was where I always drank it anyway.

I crossed to one of my bookshelves and took the copy of the fake "Die Letztendliche Wahrheit?" from the shelf, and I was just about to sit back down when I caught sight of a packet of Black's cigarettes, where he'd left them sitting on the mantelpiece. I hadn't smoked for about two years, having neither seen the point nor found much pleasure in the act, but I rather fancied one with my tea. I noticed the voices from the kitchen had dropped to an occasional angry mutter, interspersed by the sound of Ethel humming as she busied herself at her range, doing nothing much at all apart from eavesdropping. I put one of Black's cigarettes into my mouth and lit it, letting the absent assailant assault my lungs, and found my lungs in turn welcoming it back.

"What are they arguing about, Ethel?" I sent my thought through to her.

"Nothing really, dear," she replied. "I suspect Sirius is worried about trusting Lucius, and Lucius is frightened of what will happen when the Dark One comes calling."

"I have to trust him, Ethel," I replied, exhaling a cloud of blue smoke and trying not to feel the tightening in my chest.

"Lucius?" she asked. "Of course you must, dear. It's either that, or he will be sleeping for a rather large part of each day, and I suspect even he may notice that."

"I need to speak to Black first though," I said. "I don't think we can afford hostility between any of us. Can you arrange for him to come through here alone?" I asked as I felt some sort of resolve quicken inside me.

"I don't think hostility is what you need to worry about between Sirius and Lucius, dear," she said somewhat cryptically, and I couldn't think what she meant, and then it dawned on me.

"Did they sleep together last night?" I asked, and I felt the oddest sensation of loneliness, of being left out, creeping over me, and wondered if Black coming into my bathroom had been some sort of elaborate smokescreen.

"No, dear, not that I can tell, but I have a suspicion that they may have done so often in the past."

That shocked me for a moment for some reason I could not explain to myself, and then I thought about it and realised it didn't really surprise me at all. Then the door was opening, and I could see into the kitchen to where Ethel had sat down opposite Lucius and was talking to him.

'Making free with my cigarettes, Snape?' Black queried.

'A small fee to pay for bed, meals, board, lodging, and my whisky,' I replied.

He shrugged and made himself comfortable on one of my settees. I thought for a moment, and I was about to let it pass and go on to talking about Riddle, but I changed my mind; I needed to air my concerns. And they were concerns, not just prudish observations of any sort; if I were going to trust Black as much I had already begun to, I had to know what his feelings were towards Lucius, just in case it mattered in the future.

'You told me the other day, at the Three Broomsticks, that you thought you had found someone else, Black,' I began, 'although you seemed to have thought then that you had been mistaken. About whom were you talking?'

He actually blushed like a schoolboy. 'Why do you ask that?'

'Because I need to know if you meant Lucius.'

He seemed to relax, and I was glad I was mistaken, and that it was out of the way. 'No not Lucius,' he said. 'We go back a bit, the fat tart and I ... but not now.' He gave me a look, a frank, open, yet concerned look. 'I didn't think it mattered,' he said. 'I didn't think to tell you.'

'No, it doesn't matter,' I replied, and it was my turn to feel awkward. 'I just didn't know that,' I said, and there was really no reason why I should have; others people's

relationships were none of my concern. It did explain Lucius's reactions on the night of his party though, if there were a bit of bad blood between them.

'You mean you weren't sure if I had any allegiance to Lucius that could compromise us ... if the chips were down?'

I nodded. There was little point in denial, but I was relieved that what hostility there was between Black and Malfoy, and it wasn't really much, was only because of whatever broken relationship they had shared, and not something altogether more sinister.

'I had hoped you wanted to talk about more important matters,' Black said, picking up his cigarette packet and making a great show of counting them, before he slid one out and stuck it in the corner of his mouth.

I picked up the little book that Dumbledore and Ethel had spirited into Malfoy Manor for me, and I think it was just then that it became clear to me where to begin unravelling threads, and weaving my own tapestry instead. 'I wondered why I had picked this particular book,' I said. 'What it was about its history that appealed to me, and what I also knew would appeal to Riddle.'

Sirius sat back, rather like an audience of one, waiting for a performance of some sort. 'And?' he asked eventually, the frown which usually creased his forehead back in its normal place of residence. 'Look, Severus,' he went on a little testily. 'If you don't trust me ...'

'... I do,' I said, cutting him off quickly, and I did trust him. 'It's ... I'm just trying to work this out for myself.'

'Are you trying to tell me that the book you plucked out of midair is indeed the book we need?'

There it was again, the way he used "we", and I wondered if I ever used it in that way, or if vanity still prompted me to think I could plough any sort of furrow alone. 'I think it is ... at least I don't think it matters if it isn't,' I said. 'Does that make sense?'

'As much as anything does,' he admitted. 'But I think you're right. We're making this up, so we might as well start from our own place.'

'Quite,' I replied.

Sirius cocked his head towards the kitchen, to where Ethel had managed to keep Lucius, and I wondered whether she had just put him to sleep despite what she had said earlier. 'What are we going to do about him?' he asked.

'I think we trust him ... I think we have to. After all, it looks as though he has not only been dumped on my lap, but has also landed there willingly.'

'You trust him anyway, don't you,' Black asked, his grin finding its way back to his face, and I understood then just how shrewd Sirius Black was.

'Up to point, yes,' I agreed. 'What were you two arguing about anyway?'

'Nothing,' he snapped. 'I don't think it's his place to tell me when I can and cannot smoke, fat arrogant fuck that he is.'

I closed my eyes for a moment longer than a blink, in truth as much in relief as in frustration at their idiocy. I opened the bottom drawer of my desk and withdrew a small opaque bottle with a dropper top. I unscrewed the cap and drew off a measure, squirted it into a glass, and topped it up with water from the jug that sat on my desk, while Black sat watching me without comment. The two lots of clear liquid became an inky dark blue as I swirled the glass, and only when it began to give off slightly acrid fumes, did I raise it to my lips and drink off the deadly brew I dosed myself with every day of my life. It almost stopped my heart, as it always did, and caused my breath to labour for a few moments, and made my stomach roil in rebellion, but these were small prices to pay. If I missed a day, I could get away with it; if I missed two, the reactions I had just felt would be nothing compared to what would happen to me; if I missed three, it would be unlikely that my heart could take the pain and mental anguish that would follow, and I would probably die.

'Are you going to tell me what the fuck that is?' Black asked as I got over the two or three minutes it took for the symptoms to pass.

'As you know, Black, there is no antidote to Veritaserum,' I said, raising my eyebrow. 'But what I have just taken is something I developed that seems to work as a buffer; it seems to stop the truth serum working through the veins to the brain. And as we all know ...' I trailed off as he interrupted me, gratified again at his keeping up and not just pretending to do so.

'... Prevention is better than cure,' he finished for me. He had stood from the settee, and then he reached his hand out towards where I had placed the little bottle on my desk. 'How much do I need to take?' he asked.

'Not so fast, Black,' I warned. There are some things you need to know before we do that. I told him how I had found myself not only unable to physically bear weaning myself off the potion, but also how I found I didn't care to, as though it were an addiction. He mulled that over and, to give him his due, I suspect he also mulled over the possible consequences of not taking the potion, the possibility of being dosed unwillingly with Veritaserum, and what that could mean.

'And it worked with Riddle?' he asked. 'Not just with you and Ethel?'

'Yes. It was harder with Riddle,' I admitted. 'But it worked.'

It was more difficult to convince Lucius to take the potion, and I left it up to Black to talk him into it, tiring of his objections even as I understood their validity. Eventually he agreed, and maybe I'm wrong, but I think he was glad to, and that maybe he was beginning to feel that we would trust him more if he were less of a potential danger to us, which in a way I suppose was true. I still didn't know how long Lucius would be at Spinner's End, and no matter how discreet Black and I tried to be, he was going to get some idea that we were working on something specific. I doubted that he would go back to Riddle, but there was a real and imminent danger that he might be coerced into going to Narcissa Black, and I thought that that was very nearly as bad.

'I think you should let your charm round the house drop,' Black said, later that afternoon. 'We're going to have to accept that Riddle is going to call sometime.'

I agreed; it would be better if the charm were simply not there when he did so. Ethel had told me that he had not called at all since we had watched him Apparate away at the warehouse, and I was content then to let him come to me, to have him make the first move, so to speak. He wasn't our first visitor though. We had just sat down to our evening meal when Dumbledore called, and I was mildly surprised that it had taken him so long, and realised I hadn't asked Ethel if she had been keeping him up to date through Godric, and thence to Phineas's portrait.

Dumbledore had come to impart some rather unexpected news, news that was going to have some far-reaching consequences.

He sat at the table in the kitchen, having already told me why he was there, in that way he had of drawing to one corner of my mind, and I tried to think things through as he addressed Lucius.

'I have some rather bad news, Lucius,' he said, and I could see Malfoy draw back, as though to tell him to keep it to himself. 'I have just heard, through Phineas Black's portrait, that your father has died.'

'Pardon?' Lucius replied, as though the remark hadn't made sense.

'It seems that he suffered a massive seizure of the heart early this morning,' Dumbledore said. 'And by the time mediwizards arrived at the manor he was already dead.' He

reached his hand across the table and laid it on top of Lucius's. 'This must be a great shock to you, my boy,' he said.

'Too fucking right it is,' Lucius said, drawing his hand away. 'I was quite sure he didn't have a heart.'

'Well, well, Lucius,' Black murmured from where he sat beside Malfoy, not seeming to feel the need to offer any type of condolences. 'Lord of Malfoy Manor and all its estates. Quite a catch now for my cousin.'

Malfoy turned to where I stood against one of Ethel's dressers, with my arms folded, wondering if this had been the reason for Riddle failing to be in touch with me earlier, as some darker thoughts chased themselves through my head: thoughts about Riddle arriving back at the manor to find Abraxas and his friends with a group of whores, and me missing. I wondered if Abraxas had truly had a seizure of the heart, or if Tom Riddle had just become very angry with him. Whatever it was, dead was dead.

'I can't go back there,' Lucius said to me in some sort of appeal, as though he were accusing me of renegeing on a deal. Then he turned to Black with the same accusation. 'And I'm certainly not marrying your cousin ... or any other Black for that matter.'

'I heard you tell Severus that he could do worse than a Black,' Sirius argued, harking back to the night of the party at the manor. 'When you were trying to palm Bellabitch onto him.'

'That is as maybe,' Lucius replied with his customary aplomb. 'But let me assure you that I could do a lot better.'

'He's just grief stricken,' Black muttered out of the corner of his mouth to Dumbledore, as Lucius drew him a withering look.

I was already thinking of the logistics of what was likely to happen then though, and the ramifications too. 'No, Lucius,' I replied, 'you certainly cannot go back to the manor right now. Not until someone else informs you of Abraxas's untimely demise.'

I took some time alone with Dumbledore, at first feeling faintly superior of being in the possession of so many facts he didn't know himself. As I let my story unfold, I became aware of feeling childishly resentful instead. This man was not my enemy.

At first I had intended to keep the speculations Black and I had made about James Potter to myself, but I recognised that as foolish and dangerous. I did take the time to get a brief mental nod of approval from Black though, from where he sat in the kitchen with Lucius and Ethel, and I was mildly surprised that I could communicate in that way with him when I could not see him, and all notions of it being some sort of Legilimency fled me.

The old man was thoughtful when I told him that Black and I had almost decided to begin our false quest for Aqua Vitae using "Die Letztendliche Wahrheit?", and then he nodded his agreement.

I finished with telling him how the stone had seemed to subdue the Dark Mark, and remembered then that it was his stone, and that he had given the trust of its power to me, and I almost forgave him his decision to spirit Andromeda away from me.

'I shall keep her safe, Severus. That is my pledge to you,' he said, as though he had plucked the very thoughts of her from my mind, and somehow that made me feel oddly humbled. 'I had no choice,' he added, repeating the words I had said to him when I had brought Lucius to Spinner's End. 'When I move her from the Potters, as I shall do in view of what you have told me, it will be to somewhere safe.'

I had nothing to say to him though. I was still too bitter, but at least the resentment had passed; it was something I could not afford to hold on to.

He left shortly after; he had brought bad tidings with him, and I had sent him away with even more. I knew he was almost as concerned about Barty Crouch as he was about James Potter's mystery plans, especially as Barty's father had been mooted in many circles by then as being the most suitable candidate for the next Minister of Magic. Dumbledore had already opened the window to let himself out in his other form, when he turned one last time.

'Do not overuse the stone, Severus,' he said. 'To be unaware that Riddle is calling you could be a danger itself.'

I nodded my understanding. He was right, and it was enough to know that I could get at least some brief respite if I needed it. 'How do I hide it from Riddle?' I asked. 'I mean ... if I am unaware ... or incapacitated in any way, and he searches me?'

He knew what I meant; he knew I meant if I were forced to sleep with him. 'Somehow I doubt that the stone would show herself to Riddle,' he said, and I could see that he was puzzled by that piece of knowledge, the way I often found myself puzzled by something I knew that Ethel had slipped into my mind.

'What is the stone called?' I asked him, wondering why I had not asked before.

He shrugged. 'It is not my place to name it, Severus; it is yours.'

But I never did name it; perhaps because its equal and opposite number was called Mordestone, but to call it Vitaestone would somehow be tainted and second-hand, or perhaps because there is nothing more pure than white. Whatever it was, it remains known to this day as simply the white stone, and I rather fancy that there are some things that do not require a label, and that perfection needs no embellishment.

Chapter Twenty

Chapter 20 of 48

Sirius gets interrogated, and Lucius gets a shock.

When I went back into the kitchen, Black and Lucius were once again sitting opposite one another, and Ethel was fiddling about with what I hoped was the dinner. Dumbledore's visit had postponed. Lucius was withdrawn throughout the meal, and ate little, in itself an indication that he was not quite himself. I doubted it was for any feelings of grief about the sudden loss of his father, and knew he was desperately worried about returning to the manor, as he would inevitably have to do.

There was still no word from the world outside Spinner's End. I had even taken the step of going to the off-licence to replenish my whisky stock, trailing what appeared to the world as a stray black dog a few steps behind me. Lucius had panicked so much when Black and I had left on our brief shopping trip that I had raised the charm on the

house again, just in case Riddle took that little window in time to come a-calling. Evan Rosier, who was back on guard for Riddle, said nothing to me, and just gave me a hard glare as I passed, and I began to wonder if we were going to have to wait for the next day's Daily Prophet to find out about Abraxas.

'Have you any Polyjuice here?' Black asked me, as he pushed his plate away and stuck his cigarette into his mouth.

'What would you want Polyjuice for?' I asked.

'I don't ... not yet, at any rate,' he replied, and I noticed neither of us had really answered the other's question. 'One of us is going to have to go to the manor, Severus,' he said eventually. 'We can't wait this out much longer.'

That was true, and I didn't attempt to fool myself that I had not been considering the same thing.

'We have to find out what's going on, for fuck sake,' Black snarled in frustration, crushing out his cigarette. 'Merlin alone knows what's happening there just now.'

'He had better not have plundered the place,' Lucius remarked, with his teeth gritted in what I recognised as suppressed fury. 'How dare he kill a Malfoy?' he added, and I could see it was the attack on the Malfoy name, and not his father's person, that so outraged him. It was something that gave me a little hope that Lucius just might not fall to pieces after all. I realised something else then, something I had not fully appreciated. Lucius Malfoy was the only Malfoy left, and unless he produced an heir, the line would die when he did.

We didn't get a chance to finish our talk though, and it was almost a relief when I felt the Dark Mark burn on my arm, just as Ethel turned from her cooking range and announced that Riddle was walking up Spinner's End.

I could feel the very atmosphere drop over the kitchen, but instead of dread, it was one of quiet calm and resolve. Then I found that I, too, could follow Riddle's exact progress, that I felt him and the group of men he had brought with him stop for a moment, presumably at Rosier, and then walk the last steps to the path. I felt him swing open the metal gate, and walk up the slabbed pathway to the front door. I even felt him hesitate before he knocked, and that gave me some kind of hope that either Abraxas had indeed died of a seizure, or that Tom Riddle had found that causing his untimely death was an ill thought-out move. I didn't have time for any more though; the other three were watching me as the imaginary echo of his three sharp raps faded to nothing, even in my mind.

'Tom,' I said quietly, as I opened the door and stepped aside to allow him and his Death Eaters to pass me. He didn't seem to be taking any chances with his personal safety.

Unlike our recent meetings, there was no kiss of greeting; in fact he said nothing at all, just giving me a look I didn't understand. It was neither hostile nor warm, and I wondered if he felt he had overstepped the mark the day before, and was trying to work out from my reaction to him how to redress the situation.

'I have been very concerned about your lack of communication, Severus,' he said eventually, once he had settled himself, and lit his cheroot, and waved his hand at his assembled personal guard, freezing them to the same immobility he had used on Lucius in that very room. They would hear and see nothing he did not want them to.

I looked away from him, feigning the hurt uncertainty I had decided upon.

He stood up again, and crossed to where I had sat on the settee on the opposite side of the fire to him, and I tried to steel myself for his touch. 'I have dealt with their impertinences for you,' he said. 'Abraxas will never insult you again ... I have seen to it.'

I still said nothing; I dared not ask what he meant, far safer to let him tell his own story.

'I should not have left you, my Severus, not when there was a chance of those men coming back in the drunken way in which they saw fit to misuse Lucius,' he said, as though others, and not he, had been guilty of defiling me. He moved my hair from my neck, exposing it to him. He dropped his head, and instead of the customary kiss on the cheeks he had been in the habit of using, he kissed my neck, like a lover, as my insides threatened to rebel. 'I need to know you forgive me, Severus ... my Severus,' he said, and I tried to make sense of his insanity, and hold onto my own nerve, but I felt myself quailing, fearing that he would begin some sort of assault like the day before, and that he was not even afraid to do so in front of the frozen Death Eaters. 'I should not have left you,' he whispered, his hand reaching down to stroke my thigh.

And then I felt something else, something I had not expected to come to my rescue. *'Severus'*, Black called softly into my mind, warning me, yet holding me up. *'Make him get to the point. Don't let him forget why he is here. Remember, what he mistakes for love means nothing but that he is mad.'*

He was right; I had to stop it right away, it was time. I pulled away from Riddle, letting him make of it what he would, and looked to where I had left "Die Letztendliche Wahrheit?" lying open on my desk. 'I am trying to work, Tom,' I said, no longer needing to feign the uncertain fear. 'What did you want me for?'

He drew back, his contrition shrugged off as carelessly as he had donned it. 'Why am I here?' he demanded, rising to his feet. 'I should have thought that was obvious, Severus. You have not brought Lucius Malfoy and Sirius Black to me, so I have come to them instead.' He pointed a long slim finger at me. 'And I do not care to have had to do so. Now,' he said, forcing his temper back, 'where are they?'

'Here,' I said, gesturing at the wall beside the kitchen door, and allowing the charm I had cast round the two men to drop.

He actually laughed, as though he was a child, and I had displayed some incredible conjuring trick never seen before. 'Well, well, well,' he said. 'What pretty pair of wallflowers have we here?'

'I'm Sirius Black,' Black began.

'Yes, yes, Black, you may entertain me with your youthful humour after you tell me how you made good your escape from Malfoy Manor. There seem to be some inconsistencies in the tale Severus so skillfully wove,' he added, giving me a hard look.

'It was magic,' Sirius replied, moving across the room to sit beside me, leaving Lucius standing at the wall.

'Gentlemen,' Riddle said, seeming to backtrack, perhaps reluctant to reach any sort of impasse so early. 'Let us be civilised with one another. After all, are we not all on the same side?'

'I had thought so,' Black replied. 'You are the one with doubts, if what Severus told me is to be believed.'

'Let us not argue the finer points,' Riddle snapped. 'I have not come here to bandy words with you, Black; I have come to talk to Lucius.' He nodded to me. 'Is there somewhere here we can talk alone ... just Lucius and me?'

'Anything you have to say to me can be said in front of the others,' Lucius said with a coolness that impressed me mildly.

'Not this, Lucius,' Riddle replied. 'I have bad news, I'm afraid, and I really need to speak with you alone.'

'I don't care to speak with you alone,' Lucius replied, and I thought he had just hit the right balance between firmness and underlying fear, and reflected that he had possibly feigned neither.

'Come now, Lucius,' Riddle said disarmingly. 'Come sit with me then ... I mean nothing by that,' he added quickly as Lucius stiffened visibly. 'I merely mean you should sit to receive bad news.'

'What's going on?' Lucius asked. 'What has happened?'

'I'm afraid Abraxas is dead,' Riddle replied.

'Don't be ridiculous,' Lucius said, as though he had made no sense. 'What are you trying to tell me?' He crossed the room and sat at the far side of the settee on which Riddle sat, and gave him a long confused look, and I thought he was doing very well. 'What happened?' he asked eventually, as though he had at last managed to digest what Riddle had said.

'A seizure,' Riddle replied. 'By the time the mediwizards arrived, there was nothing they could do for him. He was already dead.'

'Were you present at the time?' Black asked.

If Riddle thought the question loaded, he didn't show it. 'No, no, I had just returned ... from being elsewhere. Your father was there though, Black,' he said, shifting the onus back to Sirius. 'And Igor Karkaroff and Darius Shield.'

Lucius had stood up again, and began to pace across the fireplace, a bit like the way Riddle paced. 'Severus, Sirius,' he said, 'you must come with me. I must return to the manor at once.'

'I shall come too,' Riddle said quickly. 'I would like to offer my support for you at this trying time.'

'I have my own friends, Tom, but thank you for the offer,' Lucius said smoothly. 'Be under no illusion though, I loathed Abraxas; but that apart, I suspect I have much to do at home, a fitting funeral to arrange, not the least of all.'

Riddle only considered that for a moment before backing down with as much grace as he could, and I could see he understood that he would have to at least make some show of respect to Lucius as the head of Malfoy Estates, its vast gold reserves in particular. He would not risk outright rejection. He turned instead to Sirius, and I fancied he had to vent his well hidden rage somewhere.

'I understand your need to be alone, Lucius,' he said magnanimously, letting his glance flick back to Malfoy for moment, then back to Sirius. 'I shall take up Orion and Walburga's kind offer for a while. That reminds me,' he said, letting his dangerous smile cross his lips. 'Before I leave, Black, you were going to explain to me how you managed to free yourself from the manor ... without using the wand you left behind.'

Black laughed. 'You found it? Good. It was only a joke, Tom,' he said, grinning his Gryffindor grin. 'I hope you didn't give Bella too hard a time.'

'Of course it was found, as I am quite sure Severus told you,' Riddle said, giving me another hard look.

'You never told me that,' Black said, glancing to where I sat beside him.

'I know,' I said quietly, as though the other events of that day had swept so minor a detail from my mind. 'I forgot.'

'The wand?' Riddle demanded, his temper rising.

'I had two wands,' Black replied easily. 'Well ... three to be precise, but Lucius confiscated one when he arrested me. I left Bella's to get her into a spot of bother, and used one I had nicked from James Potter years ago ... trophies of youth ... I carry them for luck. Just as well as it turned out,' he said, giving Riddle a wink that I thought was unnecessarily dangerous; then again, I wasn't Sirius Black.

'And?' Riddle asked, totally unconvinced by what, even to me, sounded like a very unlikely tale; I only hoped Black a something an awful lot better to come.

'And I used James's wand to activate a Portkey. I always carry one of them too,' Sirius said blithely. 'You never know just when you're going to have to leave somewhere in a hurry ... if you know what I mean.'

'And this other wand,' Riddle said. 'Just where is it?'

'I have it,' Sirius replied, his tone hardening.

'I would like to see it, Black.'

'Why?'

'Because I do not intend to take any liars into my confidence,' Riddle replied. 'And I do not believe a word of what you have told me.'

Sirius dipped his hand to the pocket of the red and gold robe he wore, and withdrew a dark wand, and when Riddle held out his hand for it, Sirius held it back. 'This is mine,' he said, like a possessive child. 'Treasure trove of a sort.'

'In that case you will not mind doing a *Priori Incantatem* with the wand,' Riddle said, in what sounded uncomfortably like triumph. He had removed his own wand from his travelling cloak, and held it pointed at Sirius.

Sirius looked at me and then at Lucius, before raising the wand and speaking his spell. Unlike when I had performed the incantation with Bellatrix's wand, there was no delay. The immediate area in front of Sirius was filled with a swirling blue light, showing the wand belonged to a man. In the centre of the light was the lion's head ring Sirius often wore, the one with ruby eyes, and as we watched there was the image two men's hands clutching the ring, and closing around it, and disappearing.

'I do not care to be mistrusted, Riddle,' Sirius said in a voice totally bereft of his normal amusement. 'I suspect I have been mistaken in thinking I wanted to have anything to do with you.'

'And I understand your feelings on the matter,' Riddle replied, 'as I am sure you will understand my reservations, once you have the time to think them through.' And with that said, he nodded curtly to me and Lucius, snapped his fingers at his Death Eaters to waken them, and swept out of the room.

"And very well done, dears." Ethel's little voice sounded like the clear, clean tinkle of a bell as it dispersed the heavy atmosphere of the room.

We only waited for about half an hour before leaving Spinner's End.

'Will you let Dumbledore know we are going to the manor?' I asked Ethel, as I cast a charm on the book before handing it to her

'Yes, dear,' she replied, in a way that made me suspect she had already done so through her own little network. 'Now ... you won't forget all about me, Severus, will you?'

'Ethel,' I said, genuinely upset that she should even think such a thing. 'I would never do that.'

'Can't we take her with us?' Lucius asked, stopping his fretful pacing for a moment to look down on the birdlike old lady who seemed to wield so much influence over us.

'No, Lucius dear, I cannot leave here just now,' she said. 'I have Godric in the fire, and roses planted in the walls, and I would have to do all sorts of very complicated things to move.'

'Will she be safe?' Black asked, voicing the concerns that now seemed to spring somewhat belatedly to all of our minds.

'Of course I shall be safe, dears. Nothing can harm me; I am not of this world.' With that, she stood on her tiptoes and kissed each one of us on the cheek; it was a gesture so unlike Riddle's, that to call his a kiss was an outrage.

I cast the charm that hid the house from everyone but the three of us, unsurprised to find that there was no guard in Spinner's End. I knew that even then Riddle was working out how best to re-introduce himself to the new lord of the manor, and, of course, his estates and his gold.

We Apparated to the glasshouses behind the kitchen garden, and not the further away Apparition point in the western grove of trees that I usually used. We walked around the front of the house and were suddenly engulfed by the press. Not only the Daily Prophet and the Quibbler, but it seemed that camera tripods took up every inch of the front lawns, and scribes scratched their quills in every language known to wizardkind, as the world's press heralded the arrival of Lucius Malfoy.

'It seems the lord of the manor is expected,' Sirius muttered to me, whilst presenting what I supposed he considered to be his best profile, as the flashbulbs popped in the night-time sky, and I tried to hide behind Lucius without seeming to do so.

Malfoy was in his element, of course, and I knew that Riddle would be seething in anger that he had not had the opportunity to present himself to so wide an audience.

We made it inside eventually, Black and I almost having had to drag Lucius away from the reporters. We climbed the grand staircase to the minstrels' gallery as an elf hurried along behind us, issuing orders hither and thither to other elves, for refreshments, and meals, and Merlin alone knew what else, for their new master.

Malfoy threw open the door to the drawing room, and stopped short at the second reception to await him, one not nearly as welcome as the first had been.

Orion and Walburga Black stood up as we entered, as did Cygnus Black and two of his three daughters, Bellatrix and Narcissa, both of whom curtsied deeply, and with much more respect than they had shown Lucius at the party, when only a quick dip of the knees had sufficed. On the other side of the room stood Igor and Olga Karkaroff, and Darius and Tatiana Shield. All of the women were veiled and dressed in costly sable furs and black brocade, as though they were members of an immediate family of pure-blooded wizards recently bereaved. The men were also dressed in black, trimmed with silk ribbon, and were a startling counterpoint to Lucius, who still wore the emerald green and pale blue and violet velvets and leathers that he usually favoured, and Black who wore the rest of the colours of the rainbow.

Cygnus was the only one of the men who had not been present the other night when the drunken group had come in search of me, and he stepped forward, arrogantly assured of his own importance. Lucius had said nothing since he had come into the room, content on the surface to let them all make whatever bad job they had in mind of their intrusion into his privacy.

Cygnus took another step forward, and as Lucius made no attempt to meet him halfway, he moved closer still. He seemed to become slightly less comfortable as he held out a traditional star-shaped wizard wreath of dark fir branches, and woven black ribbons and feathers. I fancied he was beginning to regret the decision he had probably made that, as he was the senior of Abraxas's close circle, it behoved him to present the group's condolences.

'I know I speak for all of us, Lucius, when I say how shocked we are at your loss,' he said in a low measured tone. 'Abraxas was a good and trusted friend ... and we hope that we do not presume too much to expect that you will be the same.' He trailed off somewhat unsurely, as Lucius turned away from him, and took much longer than necessary to hand me the wreath.

'I loathed Abraxas,' Lucius said when he turned back. 'Now, if you will excuse me, gentlemen,' he said, laying an insulting emphasis on the last word, 'and ladies too, Severus, Sirius and I have much to do. I shall not offer you refreshments,' he added, and turned away again, as though they had already been dismissed.

'Perhaps you would like the company of your fiancée for a short time later,' Cygnus offered, pushing Narcissa forward in what he surely must have realised was a futile attempt at keeping open a window of opportunity that had already been slammed in his face. Narcissa curtsied again, and gave the lord of Malfoy Manor a winsome little smile from below her veil, one that Lucius ignored.

'I do not have a fiancée,' he replied, and swept all of the men with a look that suggested that if they sought to curry favour with him, they had a very long hard climb to so do.

'But your father and I had an arrangement...' Cygnus faltered as Lucius held his hand up.

'Then I suggest you take that up with him,' Lucius replied, his nostrils flaring and his tone becoming icy. 'As far as I am concerned, any arrangement you thought you might have had with Abraxas, died with him. Now I really must insist...' He trailed off suggestively, looking to where an elf stood holding the drawing room door open.

Orion cocked his head to the door, shooting a meaningful glance at Karkaroff and Shield, as they seemed to come to the understanding that this man was not the same Lucius Malfoy as they had violently intimidated so short a time before.

'Oh, Father,' Sirius said, as Orion passed him without looking at him. 'Get Kreacher to air one of those filthy cells you call guest bedrooms.'

'I hope you are not under the misconception that you are coming back to our home,' Walburga snapped from under her veil, her mouth twisted in distaste, as though she at least were not as easily cowed by three young upstarts as the men had been.

'Are you under the misconception that I would consider such a ridiculous move?' Sirius asked. 'Anyway, Mother, I was talking to Father, not you.' He nodded to where Orion had looked back, and I almost fancied that some sort of vague regret showed in Orion's features, as though he perhaps wished that he had had the strength to stand up to his wife the way his firstborn son did ... the way he and his friends found it easy to brutalise injured young men.

'What visitor?' Orion asked.

'Tom Riddle's coming to stay for a while,' Sirius replied, seeming gratified by the shock Orion didn't quite manage to hide. 'He said to let you know. I'm sure you'll enjoy his company much better than mine.'

It was sometime later, sometime in the middle of the night, but not yet dawn, when our talk turned away from the events of the evening, and became desultory. I suppose we were tired, and I suspect we all really needed to begin to adopt a more normal timetable. That apart, I had already decided I would leave Lucius and Black at the manor the next day, and return to Spinner's End, although I hadn't told them.

Lucius had been talking about the day I had found the book, and how Abraxas had placed a curse on him to prevent him warning me that he and Riddle had come down to the catacombs.

'I always meant to ask you,' I said, in an attempt to steer him away from the book. I still didn't want Lucius to know anything about Aqua Vitae, not until I had the full measure of his strange depths. 'What is in the stone sarcophagi that guard the door to room Black was in?'

Lucius said nothing for a moment, and I regretted what I considered was a cheap shot at diverting him. Then he looked across at me, swirling the brandy in his glass. 'My mother's remains,' he said. 'They were there to guard Lucretia.' He looked to Black, probably to see if he knew who Lucretia had been, and seemed content to accept that I had told him.

Something puzzled me about that though. 'Why were they not interred when Lucretia died?' I asked.

Lucius shrugged. 'Perhaps they were. What few facts I know were told to me by the elves.'

'No,' I said. 'I felt something the last day we went down. It was the same thing I felt when we went down to the catacombs when we were at school. I always wondered,' I

said, understanding only then why the awareness had borne me no hostility.

'She's still there?' Lucius asked. 'Still aware?'

I nodded, and then I found Black watching me. 'Why don't we go down and see,' he asked. 'I could always don my doggy suit, and have a sniff around.'

'Why don't we just leave well alone?' Lucius countered, clearly uncomfortable at the thought of any trip to the cellars he so feared.

'We're all here, Lucius,' Black reasoned. 'Nothing's going to harm you, you know.'

Malfoy seemed to think about that, and I could see he had welcomed what almost amounted to a declaration of friendship from Black, and I think too, that prompted him to show that he could begin to deal with his own ghosts. 'Very well,' he said. 'But let me assure you, Black, that if anything happens down there,' he said with a shudder, 'I shall hex you into next week.'

There were no sconces lit at all in the cellar, and we lit them one by one as we came to them, casting a sooty glow that only served to make the blackness around darker still. It seemed quiet and peaceful, like the tomb it was, as we made our way to the far end to where the bookcases and the stone coffins were. I edged my way cautiously, even though, unlike the last times I had been there, there was no need for secrecy. I stopped between the sarcophagi, and felt again the dim consciousness, feeling it seem to gauge me and find me harmless to whatever its cause might have been.

I heard Sirius swish into his Animagus form, and before I could stop him he had jumped up to put his forepaws on top of the nearest coffin, sniffing around the long-sealed edges. He repeated his action on the other coffin, and changed back to his natural form.

'I can't smell anything,' he said, shrugging his obvious disappointment away.

I was loath to prise a sarcophagus open, probably filled with superstitious dread; anyway, I reasoned to myself, whatever was in there had never harmed me before, and I had certainly been in tighter situations in that very cellar. I found I was tending to agree with Lucius, to leave well alone, and get a decent night's sleep, or whatever was left of it. I had just begun to turn away when the door to the room in which Sirius and Lupin had been held, opened, and an elf stepped out, bearing the remains of a dinner tray.

It wasn't startled by our presence, which was much more that I could say for us, but merely lowered its head as respectfully as the tray would allow, and murmured, 'Master, good evening,' to Lucius, before turning the key in the lock, and hanging it back up on its hook.

'What is that tray for?' Lucius asked, his voice almost shocking in its normalcy. 'What are you doing down here?'

The elf backed away. 'I ... I has done wrong, Master?' it asked, then as confused as we were. 'I had not realised.' It laid the tray down, and prostrated itself at Lucius's feet.

But Black had already snatched the key back down from the hook and had opened the door, and was staring into the room as Lucius stepped over the elf and pushed past him, only to stop dead in the doorway. For a moment I thought he might faint.

'Lucius? Yes ... of course you must be Lucius. Have you come to steal my living room away from me for Sirius Black again?' Lucretia Malfoy asked, as she raised her head from the book she was reading.

She was small and fine boned, like a frail little flower that had never seen the light of day. She was dressed as though to receive visitors though, in pale green silk and velvet, and her white-blonde hair was held up at either side by two emerald-studded clasps, fashioned in the shape of serpents. I wondered just for whom she had taken such care over her appearance. I was staring, just as the others were. It was incredible that such a dainty little thing could be so feminine and beautiful, and yet still be the very image of her brother.

'He told me you were dead,' Lucius whispered, from where he had clutched my arm. 'He never even told me about you ... and then he told me you were dead.'

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter 21 of 48

Lucius gets some unexpected visitors, and Severus gets more unwelcome news.

Lucius began to move cautiously into the room, as though any sudden movement might frighten her. Lucretia followed him with her eyes, as if she were fascinated by him, and then looked across to where Black and I still stood in the doorway.

'Have I to entertain these men, Lucius?' she asked. 'Only I had hoped now that my father was dead that men would no longer come here.'

I watched Lucius freeze as the implication of her words struck him like a blow in the chest.

'Is my father truly dead?' she asked when he failed to answer. 'Tell me it is truly so.'

'Yes ... yes,' Lucius replied, his voice choked with rage. 'He is dead.'

'And these men?' she asked, looking again to Black and me. 'Sirius Black and the other one?'

'They are my friends, Lucretia. They mean you no harm.' Lucius had sat down on the settee opposite the chaise longue on which Lucretia sat, his face pale with fury. He turned for a moment to where Sirius stood with me, unable to hide his dark suspicion. 'How do you know of Sirius Black?' he asked, as Black shook his head in a mixture of denial and dumb mystification.

'I watched when my father and two men brought him here. He was with another man. I thought they were dead at first,' she said, 'and wondered why I had been locked away with dead men. But then that man with the dark hair came to them,' she said, nodding to me, 'and he gave them something. He called him, Black, and then, Sirius, and I guessed it was his name,' she said doubtfully. 'And they disappeared ... not long after, less than a day after ... right in front of my eyes.'

'You were here when Sirius and the other man were here?' Lucius asked, shooting another meaningful look at Black.

'Not in this room, Lucius,' she replied. 'I had managed to get to the room next to this, and peep through the spy hole to see why I had been shut away ... But my father came later, and when I asked him who the men were, he beat me and locked me away.' She nodded vaguely towards the back of the room, to where a bookcase had been drawn aside to reveal a door, and I wondered just how many rooms were hidden under Malfoy Manor, and what dark secrets they held.

Lucius said nothing, and I could tell he had no clue as to how to proceed.

'I have not to entertain these men, Lucius?' she asked again.

'No,' he said softly.

'You then? Do I have to entertain you? You are my brother after all, and perhaps that is fitting.'

'Fuck,' Sirius muttered under his breath. 'Make him change direction here, Severus.'

'No ... no, that is not fitting,' Lucius said quietly, and I could see he was struggling.

I began to move cautiously into the room, much the way Lucius had, and found Black beside me. He sat at the far side of the settee on which Lucius sat, and I found I was left to either stand or sit beside Lucretia.

'May I sit?' I asked, first to her, and then to Lucius.

'Of course,' Lucius replied, appearing glad of something to break the intensity of the surreal conversation.

'Would you like to go upstairs, Lucretia?' I asked.

'Oh, I don't think so,' she replied. 'I am not permitted to leave these rooms. Father would not approve.'

'Father is dead,' Lucius said. 'So if you care to leave here, there is no one to stop you.'

That seemed to frighten her, and I thought I could understand that, that that room, and whatever others lay hidden there, had been all she had ever known. 'You must try to understand now, Lucretia, that Lucius will care for you, and that you have nothing to fear by leaving here,' I said. 'But also that you may come and go, or even stay here, if that is what pleases you.'

'I see,' she said.

I had begun to probe gently into her mind, and found it confused and frightened, but not in terror. There was one thing I did not find, and that was any hint of the dark waves of madness. I wondered what devil had possessed Abraxas Malfoy to imprison her there for what must have been almost thirty years.

'Do you have other rooms here?' Lucius asked.

'Why, of course I do, Lucius,' she replied. 'I have a room to bathe, and one in which to sleep, and one in which to play music and read, and this one. I like this one best; I have never entertained my father and his men here.'

'I think Lucius and Severus are trying to tell you that you need never entertain men again,' Black said, breaking his silence for the first time since he had sat down, and I had an idea that he too was finding her references to Abraxas and his friends to be almost more that he could bear. 'That life will change for you now, Lucretia. You now have the freedom to make your own choices, and no one will ever again force you to anything you do not want to do.'

'Severus? A weighty name,' she said, darting a glance at me, and then looking back to her brother. 'Is this all because my father is dead?'

'Yes,' Lucius replied. 'I never knew you were here, Lucretia. He never told me. I would have come for you before, long ago.'

'I wish you had, Lucius,' she said, and began to cry.

Lucretia couldn't be coaxed out of her rooms, and we settled for sleeping in her living room, Lucius on the chaise and me on the settee, and Black on the floor; he was a dog after all, and changed into one for what was left of his night's sleep, once Lucretia retired to her own bedroom.

In the morning Lucretia's attitude had changed somewhat, she became relaxed and seemed happy, and I wondered if that were because no one had attempted to harm her, or have her entertain them, as she put it. An elf arrived with her breakfast, on a tea tray decorated with a small posy of fresh roses; the elf was quickly followed by three more, bringing breakfast for us. Once we had eaten, she became animated, declaring that she would like to explore a little, and perhaps Lucius could take her to see what the world looked like.

Black and I left him to it. We had both already warned him not to probe her too much about Abraxas and his friends, and to let her come to terms with herself, and understand things bit by bit. He came to see us a couple of hours later to say that Lucretia had gone back to her rooms, expressing a desire to be alone for a little, and saying that she would like to go outside the next day. He had arranged for an elf to stand outside her door at all times, so that she could let him know whenever she wanted for company or anything else, and he seemed at a loss as to what else to do.

'I suspect what you have already done is enough for the time being,' I said. 'You can't rush this, Lucius.'

He nodded, but I could see he was a lot more relaxed about the whole thing, and I suspected much of that was due to the fact that it did, on the surface at least, appear as though Lucretia was as sane as any of us.

There was an endless stream of visitors to the manor that afternoon: the great, the good, and the thoroughly evil, and it got so busy that I suggested to Lucius that he give his elves instructions that each visitor be given a strict ten minute time slot, so that he could get through them. I could tell that he was becoming bored anyway, listening to meaningless platitudes from those who had been short-sighted enough to have crossed him earlier in his life, and insincere condolences from those who knew neither him nor his recently dead father. Even when the Lestrangle brothers and Walden Macnair called, Lucius didn't seem much interested in them, and when Walden suggested a night out at the fleshpots of Knockturn Alley, Lucius had just looked at him as though he had been speaking some tongue he didn't understand.

He had left it up to Black and me to make the actual funeral arrangements, after suggesting that we sever Abraxas's head, put a silver stake through his heart for luck, and bury him upside down, ten feet deep in a ditch somewhere. We had willingly passed the business onto the head elf instead, a capable enough seeming creature, who brought the various arrangements to us for checking every now and again.

We got rid of the callers by about half past four, and even managed to get down to the cellar to take tea with Lucretia, and we had just come back upstairs when the first of two interesting sets of late visitors arrived. The first two were Albus Dumbledore and Minerva McGonagall.

'I confess I am surprised to see you,' Lucius said, hauling himself to his feet as they came into the drawing room, and for the first time that day calling for refreshments for his visitors.

'Were I not to offer my respects, it would be more unusual, Lucius,' Dumbledore replied. 'Your father was, after all, a governor and a great benefactor of Hogwarts.'

'Of course,' Lucius replied, nodding to the elf that had reappeared, to pour the tea and pass round whatever fancies it had brought on the plates.

'Is it ... safe to speak here?' Dumbledore asked, looking around the room, then rather pointedly to where Black and I sat under the Concealment Charm we had sat under for a fair part of the day.

'Of course,' Lucius repeated. 'The only people in the room are us ... and of course Black and Severus.'

McGonagall pinched her nostrils and gave us a long look as we dropped our charm, very much like the one she had drawn me often, and I suspect Black, when we had been at school. 'I thought the cat in me smelt dog,' she said.

Sirius flashed her his grin; it was one I supposed he had tried on her many times, and she seemed to be as unmoved as she probably had been in times past.

Dumbledore seemed satisfied with our presence. 'Firstly, Severus,' he said, poking a lemon tart into his mouth, and chewing it thoughtfully, before swallowing it and beaming in pleasure, as we all sat waiting for what he was going to say, 'I am pleased to find you here, as it saves me a trip to Spinner's End to tell you that I have moved Andromeda.'

'Where?' I asked, before he had a chance to go any further.

The old man glanced to Lucius, and once again appeared to satisfy himself. 'Nicolas and Perenelle have taken both her and Ted in,' he said.

I nodded; that was a good choice, and I wondered why we had not thought of the Flamels earlier. 'And she can stay there until it is safe?' I asked, wondering if Ethel had told him that Andromeda's unborn child was a girl; then again, I reminded myself that that assertion of mine had not curbed Tom Riddle's interest in her whereabouts.

'Indeed,' he concurred. 'For as long as it takes.'

'Have you decided to remain here now, Lucius?' Minerva asked.

If Malfoy were surprised at her question, he didn't show it, but then, although there was no one who could deliver a dismissal in quite the way Lucius could, his manners were impeccable when he felt the occasion demanded. 'In the meantime, yes,' he replied. 'Black is going to stay here, and I suspect Severus will return to Spinner's End, although he hasn't said as much. I doubt that we can talk him out of that,' he said. 'May I enquire why you ask?'

She favoured him with a twist of her thin lips. 'No reason really, other than nosiness,' she replied. 'However, you must know that the race to secure your hand in marriage will be heating up, and no holds will be barred.'

'Am I to understand that you are offering me your own suit, Minerva?' Lucius replied, and I wasn't quite sure if he was joking or not, as Black snorted unhelpfully into his teacup in that way he had.

She blushed and smiled in a grotesque version coquetry, until they both laughed, breaking down more barriers with that little exchange than any long monologues could have done, and I added another aspect to Malfoy's long list of character traits. But Minerva was right, Lucius was going to have to pick a bride at some time, and I suspected it would be fairly soon.

Dumbledore had demolished about a half of the lemon tarts when he sat back. 'Has anyone from the Ministry been to see you, Lucius?' he asked.

'Not in an official capacity,' Malfoy replied. 'Should they have?'

'I would expect a call, if I were you,' the old man murmured, twisting his beard. 'I have heard through my own sources that there may well be an enquiry into Abraxas's death ... in fact, my source was surprised that that had not happened immediately.'

It was something I was half expecting; in fact, save for Riddle's declaration of a seizure, we had no details at all of how Abraxas had died, and I suppose it was really only the other events of the past day that had stopped me thinking more about it.

'Was there a problem with the report from the mediwizards?' Lucius asked.

'Not so much the report,' Dumbledore replied, 'as the actual mediwizards themselves.'

'What are you trying to say?' I asked, feeling an uncomfortable prickle of alarm creep down my back.

'No one seems to know just who they were.'

'And?' Lucius asked, to where Dumbledore had picked up his teacup again.

'And, I believe the Sudden Death Inquiry Squad are about to request that you postpone your funeral arrangements until they examine Abraxas's body for themselves.'

'So I just leave him rotting in the family crypt?' Lucius asked, his nose wrinkling in distaste. 'He's already been dead for almost two days.'

Dumbledore nodded. 'Indeed. It is all taking rather a long time, and I am not quite sure why that is. Normally those types of things are dealt with very hastily indeed.' He lifted yet another lemon tart to his lips, then seemed to change his mind, and turned to Sirius instead. 'If I were a gambling man though, I would be willing to wager that the fact that your father is on the advisory committee for the Sudden Death Squad might have something to do with the hold-up, Sirius,' he said, popping the next tart into his mouth.

'Like if he had anything to hide, he wouldn't care for those he bullied about at work to poke their noses where he didn't think they belonged?' Black asked. 'Just in case they found something?'

'Not the way I would have put it,' Dumbledore murmured, 'but I see you've caught my drift.'

They didn't stay much longer, just time for Dumbledore to drain his third cup of tea and munch his way through the remaining few tarts. Lucius took the step of accompanying them to the front door himself, something he had not done for any of his other visitors, and I had to remind myself that just because he was a charmer, did not mean he was to be trusted in full.

The last visitor of the day was no less of a surprise.

'Is it wise for you to be here without a chaperone, Miss Black?' Lucius asked, his eyebrow rising in surprise. 'And so late in the day.'

'Miss Black?' Narcissa queried, letting her own eyebrow rise; she seemed to have forgotten her curtsey. 'Have you forgotten my name, Lucius ... or do I call you *Mr Malfoy* now that you are the lord of the manor?'

'Perhaps you should not call me at all,' Lucius replied. 'Anyway, what can I do for you? I'm sure you can't have forgotten that I have already endured the mass Black condolences.'

'I haven't come to offer false condolences,' she replied, sitting down without invitation. 'I have come with a proposal.' She held up her hand as Lucius began to interrupt. 'Hear me out, Lucius. I may only be eighteen, but I am not an idiot, and despite your best efforts to present yourself as one, neither, I suspect, are you.'

Lucius sat back, clearly as intrigued as Black and I were, once again hidden beneath the charm. 'I permitted you entry to this room, Miss ... Narcissa,' Lucius said, 'so that observation might be in question.' He seemed to relax somewhat though, and I felt Black draw me an anxious look. 'But please proceed.'

It was difficult to believe that she was only eighteen, so assured and eloquent was she, and I had to admit even to myself, extremely comely. Her hair, as white-blonde as Lucius's own, was loose, tied up only by a green ribbon on one side, so that the mass tumbled over the opposite shoulder, and she had forsaken her black mourning clothes for a low cut, dark green velvet dress, which showed little enough cleavage to remain modest, but managed at the same time to hint of things worthy of the exploration of any man.

'Surely you know, Lucius, that you are about to be inundated by offers from the highest echelons of wizarding society for your hand in marriage. The daughters of the rich and important men of the world are about to descend upon you ... warts, fat thighs, huge dowries and all.'

It was the second time Lucius had been told the same thing in as many hours, and I suspected he was becoming a little nervous.

'Narcissa,' he said, rather more kindly than I had expected, 'I know that your father and mine concocted a plan between them, mapping out our futures, even going as far as to announce them to the world at large. I, for one, had no say in that, and now find I am free to make my own choices. I do not want to be unkind, but I do not intend to be railroaded by Cygnus Black, or by you. Go back and tell him that his clever ploy has failed.'

'You think my father sent me?' she asked. 'What do you take me for, Lucius?'

'A very clever girl actually,' he said, 'and an extremely pretty one. I am sure that the queue at your own door will easily rival the queue at mine.'

She snorted her derision at that. 'I'd have to get shot of Bellatrix first,' she said. She leaned forward in her seat, her eyes sparking in something that looked vaguely like mischief, and I began to wonder whether I had underestimated Narcissa Black or overestimated her. 'You couldn't talk Severus into taking her, Lucius, could you?'

Lucius eyes shot involuntarily to where he knew I was sitting. 'I doubt that,' he said. 'He is a bachelor at heart.'

'Yet, you Lucius, are not,' she said, cleverly taking the conversation in her own direction. 'Now would it not be better for you to settle for the devil you know, than the devil you don't?'

'I was rather hoping to do better than a devil,' he replied, and I had an ominous feeling then that he was about to lose the most important battle of his life, and perhaps that would not be such a bad thing after all. 'But I most certainly am not about to give Cygnus Black any more victories, real or imagined, over me.'

'I understand that,' she replied, leaning forward again. 'I would make you a good wife, Lucius. I would not curb whatever ... social excesses ... in which you like to indulge. We could lead separate lives, untrammelled by the tedious problems of love gone sour. We could present ourselves as a fitting couple to head the country's most important family, without the burdens that attach themselves normally to such a union.'

'You are asking me to marry you, whilst stating to me that you have no interest in actually being any sort of real wife to me?'

'No, Lucius. I am begging you to marry me to save me from the man next in my father's list of prospective grooms.'

'Who is next in line?' he asked, and I knew then that he was lost.

'Anatoly Karkaroff,' she said, bowing her head, and for a moment she disappointed me; I thought she was going to feign tears, but she didn't. 'I would sooner cut my throat than live in their cold wasteland of a country, with nothing but wild boars and snow and ice for company,' she said, raising her head again. 'That apart, Lucius...' But it was her turn to be silenced, as Lucius interrupted her.

'Why not palm Karkaroff onto Bellatrix then?' he asked, raising his eyebrow in a way that made me think he was enjoying the cut and thrust of her conversation as much as she had probably hoped. 'That way you get rid of them both.'

'I'm afraid that even Anatoly's skinny body and pimply face aren't that desperate,' she said.

'And you think Severus more desperate than Anatoly Karkaroff?' Lucius scoffed. 'I rather think not.'

'Of course not. I had just hoped that his straitened circumstances might make him settle for Bellatrix, where he seemed not to be interested in Andromeda,' she said, twisting what felt like a dagger into my heart. 'Anyway, Lucius, I have rather set my heart on being the lady of Malfoy Manor, and I think it's just a matter of time before you come to realise that, at least with me, you get what you pay for. Surely better me than some money-grubbing heiress of dubious bloodlines and uncertain fortune?'

'I shall not back down to Cygnus Black,' Lucius declared, his tone hardening, 'not ever.'

'I understand that,' she said, looking away from him in a way that made me think that Cygnus had regaled his family at some time with humiliations he had heaped on Lucius, and I wondered if she had made a mistake, and suddenly found that I was actually rooting for her. 'There is a way though,' she said. 'A way to get what is perhaps the best that life has to offer such ones as we are, not only without backing down to Cygnus, but by cocking a snook at him too.'

'How?' Lucius asked.

'I am a virgin, Lucius, unspoiled but for a few kisses and chaste embraces,' she said, without a trace of self-consciousness. 'There are no skeletons to fall out of my closet to disgrace you. You could, however, embarrass Cygnus deeply.'

'How?' Lucius repeated, and I felt Sirius slump in defeat at my side, as he finally accepted too that the battle was lost, and yet perhaps the war had just begun.

'If I were to become pregnant with your child,' she replied, 'of course, before marriage, in fact before anyone was even aware of any relationship between us. Remember,' she said, hurrying on, 'Andromeda may be unmarried as yet, and with child, but she was not under Cygnus's protection at the time. She had already flown the Black nest to make her own way in life, and Cygnus had already disowned her. I would have gone with her, you know,' she said reflectively, 'had I been just a little older. I would have escaped that way.' She sat back, her case presented, waiting for the verdict I felt sure she had anticipated would be in her favour. 'It could be a secret, Lucius, our secret,' she said, as though prompting the man opposite her to some sort of reaction.

'But it is not a secret.' Lucius sighed theatrically. 'I am very afraid, Narcissa, that we have not been the only ones party to this conversation,' he said, turning to where Black and my jaws dropped as one, and releasing the charm around us.

She spun round, eyes glittering. 'Thank you very much, Lucius,' she snarled. 'Did you have to let me get to virgin bit?'

'As you inferred, Narcissa,' Black replied for him, 'you wouldn't want him to unwrap any nasty shocks.'

'You keep out of it, Sirius,' she replied, and I could see that she wasn't really angry at all, in fact, if anything, she seemed rather amused. Then she turned to me, and I just knew what was coming. 'Severus, you would take Bella, wouldn't you? I'm sure you could handle her.' She seemed to take in my stony silence and think it indicted that I might want a little more persuasion. 'Oh, I know Andromeda always fancied you, but you didn't seem to want her ... but Bella's younger ... and she can have my dowry; I'm sure I shan't need it. It's just that it may be some time before I get through to Lucius,' she said, as though he weren't sitting opposite, with his eyebrow rising, the way it did. 'And if I have to keep slipping out to the manor to ... achieve our aims, it would be easier if she weren't around.'

'You will not find me as easy to soft soap as your fiancé,' I replied, acknowledging her victory over Lucius as my own defeat washed over me again. 'That apart, let me assure you that anyone considered as suitable for Anatoly Karkaroff, would not be any choice of mine, let alone anyone he would not even consider ... Bellatrix in particular.'

'I can't say I blame you actually,' she replied. 'In fact, I think I would have been very disappointed in you had you not refused her ... thrice now, is it not?' she asked, her mouth twitching in amusement.

'At least,' I replied. 'May I ask you something, Narcissa? Just where, I find myself wondering, does your father think so eligible a virgin has disappeared to ... on her own?'

She dipped into her décolletage, and for just a moment the three of us exchanged uneasy looks, but when she withdrew her tiny white hand she had it grasped around a fine gold chain. A little egg timer shaped charm dangled from the end, one that seemed to spin of its own accord.

'I see,' I remarked as she slipped the Time-Turner back to nestle between her breasts, and I resigned myself to the fact that Lucius had acquired a sister and a bride in the space of what was not much more than a few hours: not bad work, even for a Malfoy.

Narcissa stood up; she curtsied deeply, first to Lucius, and then to Sirius and me, so we had to share one between us, and threw us all what looked like a smile of victory. 'I must go now,' she said. 'I am sure you three have a lot to talk about amongst yourselves, whatever my list of failings is, not least of all.' Then she turned again to Lucius. 'I shall get away from the Blacks, Lucius, one way or another, and it is to Malfoy Manor that I shall come.'

She was casting an elaborate charm about herself, an intricate feminine one, when Lucius spoke again. 'Of course, Narcissa, there is one way in which I can deeply embarrass your father and have my own wicked pleasures, one that I think you have not thought through,' he said.

'You're wrong there, Lucius,' she said. 'Of course I thought of you leaving me in the lurch, holding the baby, so to speak, but I happen to think you're a better man than that.' Then she turned to me. 'Watch out for my father, Severus. He and his friends deeply resent your position of favour with Tom Riddle. Don't underestimate the type of men they are.' She gave me a long searching look, and I wondered if she were really trying to work out what type of man I was, and whether whatever she had been led to believe about me was true. She finished her charm and left the room, with us gaping after her.

'Well,' Sirius remarked eventually, seemingly having not much else to say.

'She's certainly a Black,' Lucius replied, giving Sirius a look as though to say that it was all his fault.

But I was thinking about another Black, and the fact that Lucius had been present when Dumbledore had told me that he had taken Andromeda to Nicolas Flamel, and whilst he seemed to have satisfied himself about Lucius for some reason, he had not done so about Narcissa. I was thinking, too, about the Narcissa Black who had been at the party, and her spiteful smiles and obvious confidences with Bellatrix, and even her anxiety to distance herself from Andromeda, and I was wondering just who the real Narcissa Black was. I stood up and made my way to the door; suddenly the amusement had seeped from me, and I felt all my doubts and troubled thoughts wash over me.

'Where are you going, Severus?' Sirius asked.

'To Spinner's End, I suspect,' Lucius replied for me, and I could tell he knew what worried me. 'You either trust me, Severus, or you don't,' he said. 'But I am finding it very difficult to work out which it is ... and very difficult to confide in you deeply because of that.'

I could understand that, but I didn't really have anything to say just then. I wanted to speak to Ethel, and I wanted to speak to Dumbledore, and I wanted to get rat-arsed drunk on my own because Lucius Malfoy was going to get his Black sister, and I wasn't going to get mine.

'I need you to do one more thing for me, Severus,' Lucius went on, and I rather thought I had done quite enough for Lucius Malfoy over the last few days.

'What?' I asked, trying to push my resentment back to where it belonged; after all, it was hardly Lucius's fault that I had made such a mess of my own personal life.

'I want you to take Lucretia back to Spinner's End with you,' he said. I was about to voice my protest, ask why I had to be the one to care for stray Malfoys, when Lucius raised his hand to stave off whatever objection I had. 'I want you to take her to Ethel, Severus. I want to know what has happened to her, and why, and how we go about giving her a normal life, and Ethel is the only person I can think of to help me there.'

I knew what he really meant; I knew he meant that Ethel was the only person he thought he could trust to find the real Lucretia Malfoy below whatever had been heaped upon her, and I thought he was right.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter 22 of 48

As Abraxas is buried something nasty is dug up.

I didn't leave the manor that night, perhaps because it would have been unrealistic to attempt to move Lucretia so quickly and with so little notice, or perhaps the real truth was that, however much I complained to myself about having Black and Lucius around, even in the short time they had been at Spinner's End, I had become used to their company. I had never had friends as such before, I suppose considering myself above all that nonsense, but I seemed to have found something in them that I valued, and I wasn't quite sure what that was. All that apart, I felt I owed myself a proper night's sleep.

The Ministry Investigators from the Sudden Death Enquiry Squad called the next day. There were two of them, one as fat and jovial as the other was thin and sour; they were unremarkable otherwise, apart from the fact that the thin one was James Potter's father. They had a few words with Lucius and then went to do whatever they were going to do with, or to, Abraxas's body. They were accompanied by one of Lucius's elves, a creature that kept casting them suspicious looks the whole way down the path, as though they were about to make off with the crypt's contents of stone biers and mouldering Malfoy bones.

When they came back to the house, they asked Lucius a few questions about his whereabouts at the time of Abraxas's death, and in view of the fact that his absence from the manor had been so avidly reported in the "Prophet", seemed content with the truth of the matter that he had been at Spinner's End. They had no interest in Black at all, seeming content to treat him as part of the furniture, and it was as though Henry Potter had never opened his home for two years to the young Sirius Black when he had fallen from his own family's grace. They asked me a little about what time I had left the manor, and where I had gone after that, and it was then that I noticed Black shoot me a warning look, but if the questions had been in any way loaded at that time, the investigators made no show of it.

Henry Potter gave Lucius a signed parchment of permission to hold Abraxas's funeral whenever he cared to do so, and apologised for not having been there sooner, and that seemed to be the end of the matter.

The funeral had been tentatively arranged for the next day, and Lucius seemed to be keen to get the thing over and done with, and I don't suppose I could blame him. Lucretia had joined us upstairs for afternoon tea, and I suggested to her that I take her to my home to stay for the duration of the funeral, in case she felt uncomfortable about so many people being around.

'And with whom shall I stay, Severus?' she asked. 'I have never been completely alone in a house before. What would I eat?'

I was struck by the simplicity of her concerns, and the validity. When I began to explain to her that my aunt lived in the house, and that she would care for her, Lucretia became excited.

'I have never met another woman before,' she exclaimed. 'I think I should like that very much indeed.'

Ethel was beside herself, both at us appearing so unexpectedly quickly, and for bringing Lucretia, and it struck me that she may have been feeling a bit lonely after all of the company she had had recently. That made me wonder how she had passed all the years that she had spent alive, and how many friends had passed through her life, and I was quite sure that she would remember every last one.

"*This one has a story to tell, Severus,*" she said to my mind as we sat down at the kitchen table, Black in his place with the ashtray, and Lucius where he always sat, and it was only when Lucretia sat down that I found I was the one displaced, the one who had to pull over another seat.

"*Can you cope with her until after the funeral?*" I asked Ethel back in kind, as Black stuck his cigarette in his mouth, and I only realised then that he had not smoked at the manor.

"*Yes, dear,*" she replied. "*I suspect it is as well that we are alone for a day or two.*"

"*Ethel ...*" I began, but she cut me off quickly.

"*No, Severus, she is not mad,*" she said, reading my thoughts more quickly than I could even clarify them. "*There is something strange though ... I'm not quite sure what it is yet.*"

The others were chatting away, unaware as always of our conversation, and I was glad that Lucius had suggested that we take Lucretia there. We didn't stay long, just long enough to check that Lucretia wasn't anxious about Lucius leaving, but she hardly seemed to even notice, finding something much more fascinating about walking in and out of Ethel's picture. That reminded me to try it for myself one day.

Abraxas's funeral was as interminably boring as I had expected it to be. Once or twice I saw Lucius stifle a yawn as the self-important, the imprudent, and those who were misguided enough to seek to ingratiate themselves to him expounded his late father's worth, whatever that might have been. One thing was extremely odd though; Tom Riddle was not present, and I could not understand why that was.

The buffet had been set up in the ballroom to accommodate the crowd, and the last of the mourners, if they could be called such, were on the point of leaving when two men crossed the room to where I stood alone. I noticed one of them was Henry Potter; the other was a man I didn't know.

'Mr Snape ... Severus Snape, would you come with me please?' the other man asked.

'Why?' I asked, noticing that neither Sirius nor Lucius was anywhere nearby.

'We would like you to answer a few more questions about the evening that Abraxas Malfoy died.'

'Why?' I repeated, casting my mind around for Black.

'From now until I let you know otherwise, Mr Snape, I shall be asking the questions ... all you need to do is answer,' Potter replied. 'Now we can either talk here, or in a more private room, or ...' He left the invitation to accompany them to the Ministry unasked.

I led him along to the small sitting room off the ground floor entrance hall, to where I sensed Black was, probably having a fly cigarette because it was raining outside. I hoped he had understood the necessity to conceal himself. I closed the door of the small, seemingly empty room and turned to face my inquisitor.

'What is this about?' I asked.

'I'd like you to give us an account of your movements on the day that Abraxas Malfoy died,' Potter replied.

'From when until when?' I said in a slightly cooler tone.

'From, let us say, your arrival at Malfoy Manor, and just keep going ... I'll let you know when I get bored.'

'I spent the evening with Tom Riddle,' I said. 'Then I went home.'

Potter gave me a hard look as I tried to force my mind to work, whilst clutching my hand around the white stone in my pocket.

'Doing what, Mr Snape?' he asked, and I had a suspicion he had at least one version of events tucked neatly under his belt before he asked.

'Talking most of the time,' I replied. 'What's this all about?'

'This is all about the fact that there seems to be some discrepancy about the times of your leaving Malfoy Manor and when you were seen arriving in Spinner's End.'

'Why don't you ask Tom Riddle?' I replied. 'I'm quite sure he will vouch for my movements.'

'And we shall, Mr Snape,' Potter replied. 'Just whenever Mr Riddle returns to Britain.'

'He's not in Britain?' I asked, and something cold slid through my guts.

'Evidently you didn't talk for long enough to know his immediate plans, Mr Snape,' Potter said with satisfaction, as though he had proven some point or other.

I had sat down, not feeling the need to ask permission to do so. 'Why don't you come to the point, Mr Potter?' I said. 'I have already told you that I spent the evening with Tom Riddle. When I left here, I went home. There is nothing more.'

'Who else was in the house when you left, Mr Snape?'

'Abraxas, Orion Black, Darius Shield, and Igor Karkaroff,' I said. 'I could not attempt to name the four whores who were here with them.'

Potter's face hardened. 'Whores?' he queried. 'You didn't mention whores before now, Mr Snape. Why are you mentioning them now?'

'You didn't ask me who was here before now, Mr Potter.'

"*This is a frame-up, Severus,*" Black snapped urgently into my mind, as though I had not already noticed the fact. Potter had turned to his side-kick, and the two of them were muttering. I wished I hadn't sat so far away from them. Black had heard them though, and I assumed he was actually standing behind them, and of course, once I assumed that, I could see him. "*They're going to take you in. I'll go for Albus and see if he can pull any strings. For fuck sake don't get too complicated.*"

Potter had stood up, and was crossing the room to me, holding out his hand. 'May I have your wand please, Mr Snape?' he asked.

'What?' I asked in a disbelief I truly felt. 'No, no ... actually you can't have my wand. Not until you tell just what the fuck's going on.'

'Very well,' Potter said, almost apologetically, nodding to the other man, who now had an Instant Quotes Quill in his hand and was scribbling on a piece of parchment. I could see the official Ministry seal at the top of it. 'Severus Snape, you are formally under arrest for the murder of Abraxas Malfoy. Anything you say from now on will be taken down and may be used in evidence against you.' His face hardened even more. 'You wand, Mr Snape ... or do you care to be dragged out of here in chains?'

Nobody wanted to know the truth, not that I told it all anyway. For four days I was alone in a holding cell on the third floor of the Ministry, and nobody was interested in anything I had to say in my defence. It was as though the scalp of any convenient Death Eater would satisfy the Ministry, and if it were one the rest of the men who had been present at the manor were content enough to point their fingers at, so much the better, so much less paperwork. I almost began to long for Riddle's return, and then I began to wonder if he would have been informed of my arrest at all, and doubted that. He had left the country, no doubt in a fit of pique at being so rudely upstaged by Lucius, probably with the intention of returning once Abraxas's funeral was over and any gossip about it had died down, and as I had no friends amongst the Death Eaters, nobody was likely to tell him the trouble I was in.

I was allowed no visitors, and had no way of knowing what, if any, story Black and Lucius were cooking up for me. And all the time the one bald fact remained: I had left Malfoy Manor shortly after midnight, and it had been almost five o'clock in the morning when we had gone back up to the warehouse to allow me to return to Spinner's End, apparently alone.

I had been stripped and searched and then permitted to dress once more in my own clothes. The only thing that had not been taken from me was the white stone, and that made me think that, as Albus had suggested when I expressed my concerns about Riddle finding it, it could not be found by others. I had tried to glean some help from it, but it seemed to have none to offer. That left me to fall back on the oldest and unlikeliest alibi of them all, that of having visited a woman, one whom I did not care to name, for the sake of her honour.

It only took Potter a couple of hours to attempt to tear that story to shreds, probably after having spoken to Orion, or one of the other men who had been at the manor.

'You must be very versatile, Mr Snape,' he said when he came back into the holding cell on the third day of my incarceration. 'Spending the whole evening in Riddle's bed, and then going to entertain a lady too ... for five hours.'

'Why are you doing this?' I asked, instead of attempting any reply. 'Why have you refused to get in touch with Tom Riddle?'

'Mr Snape, not everyone tugs their forelock to Tom Riddle,' Potter replied. 'That apart, how do you expect Mr Riddle to back up your story of a woman, if, as you maintain, you had already left Malfoy Manor ... and he had left before you?'

'And the rest of the men at the manor?' I asked, not that I hadn't asked several times before. 'Are they also under arrest yet? Or does your remit not cover the rich and powerful?'

Potter sighed. 'No, Mr Snape, they are not under arrest,' he said. 'But they all have alibis ... you, on the other hand, do not.' He had opened the door, and I could see another man out in the corridor; he held a parchment in his outstretched hand. Potter took it and read it, and turned to me with a wintry smile, one that I wasn't sure I understood. 'Your trial begins tomorrow morning at nine.'

I was led into courtroom ten at the bottom of the Ministry, in chains. I had a metal collar around my neck, and it had been chained to one around my waist in a way which didn't allow me to raise my chin from where it almost touched my chest. I hated that: the illusion of shame, the thoughts that would have run through the heads of the members of the court and the onlookers, that a man who does not raise his head and look his accusers in the eye, is a guilty man.

I caught sight of Black and Lucius seated in the front row of the public gallery. Neither made any attempt to speak to me, and I began to fear the worst, and then Barty Crouch Senior began to call the court to order, and I began to panic. I could not even reach into my pocket for the white stone, secured as I was, for all the good it had done anyway, leaving me with the worst alibi in the world. I began to wonder why I had not switched from it, and just told Potter the whole story of coming home and going back up to the warehouse; on the face of it that seemed like a better bet. It was too late for that of course; I'd burnt that particular bridge early on. Then I panicked again; Black had warned me not to get too complicated, perhaps that had been his way of telling me to tell the truth about the two trips from the warehouse, and perhaps Black and Lucius had been asked by the Ministry Investigators and had given that version of the truth, the real version, and I had ruined it all by concocting some ridiculous story about a nonexistent woman.

No witnesses were called at the trial, their testimonies having been deliberated over in private and accepted by the court. Instead Crouch read out the statements from Orion Black, Darius Shield and Igor Karkaroff. No mention was made of the whores, and I knew that they had been disregarded as an attempt on my part to blacken the names of the men at the manor that night. No testimony was read out from Lucius or Sirius either, and I didn't even know if they had been asked for statements or not. I, of course, was not given any further opportunity to speak; a Silencing Charm had ensured that my last conversation with Henry Potter was the one on which I rested my defence.

Crouch conferred with the members of the bench, and I really couldn't see why he bothered; there was nothing new to talk about, but I suppose he needed something to entertain the assorted press, who had gathered like a flock of vultures. At last Crouch banged his gavel on his block, and I wondered what the slam of a door in Azkaban would sound like, and found I was almost trembling.

"*Stop panicking. It's not going to happen, Severus,*" Black said into my mind, and I hoped he wasn't going to do anything which would result in him joining me in a cell.

'The evidence is heard, Mr Snape,' Crouch barked, snapping me out of my useless thoughts. 'It is this court's conclusion that Abraxas Malfoy died shortly before four-thirty in the morning of Thursday last, as the result of an Unforgivable Curse delivered from an unknown wand. You have maintained that you left Malfoy Manor at around midnight, and yet you were not seen returning to Spinner's End until almost five o'clock in the morning. As you do not see fit to tell this court, or the Ministry Investigators, what you did with the time between leaving Malfoy Manor until you were seen again in Spinner's End, we have reached the not unreasonable conclusion that you used that time to seclude yourself until you felt you could slip back to the manor and kill Abraxas Malfoy, and then dispose of whatever wand you used for the purpose.'

He lifted a sheaf of parchments from the desk in front of him. 'We have multiple testimonies to support the fact that you and Abraxas Malfoy had argued on several occasions, and that you resented his place in Tom Riddle's hierarchy.' He paused for a moment to sweep the court with his eyes, resting for a moment longer than I cared for on Lucius and Sirius. 'We have also been informed that you have had access to several wands over the past two weeks or so, something that further backs up our assumptions.'

He reached below his table to take a black velvet cap from where it sat on a ledge, and made a show of unfolding it, as the public galleries gasped, and Lucius and Sirius slumped back in obvious shock, and the press muttered amongst themselves, and I felt my knees almost give way. From the corner of my eye I saw Albus Dumbledore stand from where he had been sitting beside Minerva McGonagall; I had not noticed them before, but Minerva sat with her hand on her heart as Dumbledore strode across to the bench.

'Barty, Barty ... this is an outrage,' he began, but two stewards had closed in behind him, each of them taking one of his arms. 'I beg you to rethink this.'

Crouch turned to him. 'Albus, this court has made its decision. There is no appeal against facts,' he said, inclining his head to the man I knew was his friend of many years standing. 'Please return to your seat so that I can proceed.'

I watched Dumbledore turn and look once to where Black and Lucius sat in the front row, and that made me disappointed that they had left it up to an old man to make some sort of stand, however feeble it had been. Crouch watched Dumbledore walk heavily across the court, shaking off the stewards, and take his seat next to the sobbing Minerva McGonagall. Then he banged his gavel yet again to call order, and I wished he would just get on with it; there was no point in prolonging the inevitable. It was then that I realised that I could raise my head a little more, that the chain holding it in place seemed to have slackened somewhat, not much, but enough for me to properly see what was going on around me. I knew that had been Dumbledore's work, and wondered what sort of dubious mercy he had bestowed on me.

'In view of the preceding facts,' Crouch declared, 'this court has no option but to consider the act to have been a premeditated one, carefully calculated insofar as you, Severus Snape, even happened to have an unidentifiable wand on you. That said, we cannot consider that the act was a crime of any sort of passion of the moment, however heinous that would still have been. That fact limits my options further, and suggests that a custodial sentence is inappropriate.'

I had talked myself into accepting Azkaban and trying to prove my innocence from there, probably in the knowledge that Riddle would get me out somehow. He needed Aqua Vitae, and he needed me ... but none of that mattered. Crouch's black cap meant that he was about to pronounce a death sentence, and no one could help me if I were dangling at the end of a rope on Hangman's Common.

'You will be taken from this place, Severus Snape, at first light tomorrow, to a location which will not be disclosed. You will then be hanged by the neck until you are dead. May Merlin have mercy upon your soul.'

Bedlam broke out in the public galleries as people rose to their feet, some pumping their fists in the air and cheering, easily drowning out the few who called foul play.

Crouch raised his hand to restore order, and was just about to place the cap on his head to pronounce the sentence as irrevocable, when two things happened. The door to courtroom ten burst open, and Tom Riddle barged past the stewards and began to stride up the centre aisle, as different, more speculative murmurs broke out in the then subdued mayhem of the public galleries. But I wasn't looking at Riddle, I was looking to where Lucius and Black sat clearly stunned in the front row, and particularly at Lucius, who had turned to nod to someone a few rows behind him.

A young woman stood, and her voice rang out around the packed courtroom, as the scribes and cameras turned from Riddle's dramatic entrance to her.

'Stop,' Narcissa Black declared. 'I cannot allow you to forfeit your freedom, far less your life, for my honour, Severus.'

'Sit down, you foolish child,' Cygnus Black bellowed across the courtroom, as half the cameras tripods were turned yet again.

'No, Father,' Narcissa called back. 'I shall not allow this to happen.' She turned to address Barty Crouch, who favoured her with an ingratiating smile that spoke volumes for his dislike of Cygnus Black, and I almost fancied there was some sort of relief in his look too, as though he at least had some doubts, but had been overruled by those more powerful than he was. 'Severus Snape came to me on the night Abraxas Malfoy died,' Narcissa declared.

'Continue, if you will, Miss Black,' Crouch said, laying his black cap on the desk in front of him. 'Let me assure you that no one in this court will be permitted to either interrupt you ... or silence the truth,' he said, throwing a warning look at where Cygnus Black sat with Bellatrix.

'Thank you, Mr Crouch ... Your Honour,' Narcissa replied, and I noticed she avoided looking at me. 'On the night in question Severus Snape came to meet me ... we had planned a liaison. He was late for our meeting, and I had begun to worry that he would not turn up ... but he did. Horribly injured, and very late, but he came to me.'

'I see,' Crouch replied, and it was then that I stole a look at where Black and Lucius sat, and then to Dumbledore; the three of them seemed to be the only people unsurprised by Narcissa Black's outburst. 'And what were the nature of the defendant's injuries, Miss Black?' Crouch went on. 'He has not mentioned any such to the court or the Ministry's Investigators.'

'No ... no, he wouldn't,' she said, looking down demurely, and twisting a handkerchief in her tiny fingers. 'They were injuries of a nature that other men would inflict upon one they seek to humiliate in the most awful way.'

'Shut up, you meddling little bitch,' Cygnus roared, as Bellatrix stood too from beside her father, her eyes blazing hate at her sister. But Cygnus was cut off as Crouch's gavel came down on his block in three resounding cracks, and two Aurors moved to Black's side.

Narcissa looked up at Crouch again, as though in some sort of appeal that he not ask her to go into any sort of detail, and I wondered if the quite lovely rosy flush on her cheeks were embarrassment, or if she had performed some sort of feminine charm on herself; then I wondered why I was concerned about how pretty Narcissa Black looked when my life was hanging, quite literally, on the end of a rope.

Crouch had turned to where Cygnus was by then being forcibly restrained. 'Mr Black,' he said quietly in a voice that still managed to carry to the very rafters of the vaulted courtroom ceiling, and then to Cygnus, whose face was suffused with ugly red splotches of rage. 'This court will not tolerate interference of any sort ... by anyone,' he said, much less kindly than he had dealt with Dumbledore, or for that matter, Narcissa. Crouch looked to where I stood before him, still in chains, and then across to Henry Potter, who didn't look quite as disappointed as he might have, and nodded grudgingly, before he went on. 'Release the prisoner from his bonds, Henry, and take him to my chambers. This matter will be concluded in private.' Crouch rapped his gavel sharply on his block again and stood up, as the hostile murmurs rose around the court. 'This court is adjourned.'

I saw Lucius turn and give Cygnus Black an accusing look, the type of look one might give a sharp salesman who tries to palm off faulty goods as perfect; then he turned back round and sat murmuring to Sirius. The two of them looked smug enough to drink their own bathwater. It was then that I felt the white stone throb in my pocket, as though it were reminding me that it had been the one instrumental in making up the alibi I had had no trust in.

As I was led out of the court I caught sight of Riddle. He had sat at the back of the court, most likely when it looked as though Narcissa were about to steal a march on what he probably assumed was going to be his own eleventh hour bid to save my skin. He was clearly furious that once more someone else had stolen what he considered was his limelight; perhaps it was as well he didn't know it was again, however indirectly, Lucius Malfoy.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter 23 of 48

Severus gets off one hook, only to find himself on another.

I was still shaking inside when I sat at the kitchen table in Spinner's End. It had been a couple of hours since I had stood in Barty Crouch's chambers with Henry Potter at my side, while Narcissa had woven a tale of star-crossed love that would have wrung tears from a stone, and I understood that only a mystery woman could have saved my neck. I knew then that no information had leaked from the Ministry about the alibi I had concocted for myself, and as such there had been no way of anyone but my accusers knowing what I needed to back me up ... or, of course, the woman, if there were such a one. Both Crouch and Potter had been the very soul of solicitude to Narcissa, neither man cross-examining her in a way I would have expected, and that alone led me to believe that all they had wanted was a name on which to hang their hats. I was asked nothing; after all, I had no story to change, and it wasn't long until Potter nodded once to Crouch and turned to me.

'You may go now, Mr Snape,' he said, and his voice was neither warm nor cold; in fact, if anything, it was questioning. I knew he was not asking about my story though; his query was deeper, yet on a less personal level. 'May I suggest, Mr Snape, that you consider those in whom you trust ... aside from Miss Black, of course,' he said, but I knew Henry Potter was asking me just what side I was on, and I wondered why he had reservations that I was loyal Death Eater.

I found I was in two minds about Potter. He had seemed on the surface disappointed at his prosecution crumbling before his eyes, yet he had neither objected in the courtroom, nor in Crouch's chambers to the dismissal of the case, and I began to suspect that he had been placed in the position of Chief Investigator to maintain a respectable front by those who pulled the strings in the background. Potter was an undeniably wealthy man of prominent social standing, and it was well known that he saw his position in the Ministry, like many others of his ilk, as a public service more than a position of employment. That told me a couple of things, and the first one was that Tom Riddle had not infiltrated the Ministry quite as much as he probably hoped, and that other Death Eaters held positions of power there, behind the scenes, which they seemed to be jealously guarding from the very man they purported to back with unswerving loyalty. That made me worry a little about the safety of seemingly honourable men like Crouch and Potter, and how long their positions at the Ministry would be tenable. I sighed and put it away; I was too damned drained to think.

'She's a damn good sport, Severus. You've got to admit that much,' Lucius remarked as he shoved a glass of my whisky across the table at me, and Black stuck a cigarette in the corner of his mouth. The two of them seemed to be enormously pleased with themselves, and I couldn't really find it within myself to deny them their moment in time.

'Yes,' I admitted, totally at a loss as to what else to say, although I had considered asking Lucius and Black why they had waited until the noose was almost around my neck; I resisted though, I wasn't quite sure how I'd feel if it had just been for the maximum dramatic effect. 'Where is she anyway?' I asked, just realising I hadn't even asked Narcissa where she was going when Lucius had taken her arm outside Crouch's office, and Black had led me away.

'She's safe, of course,' Lucius replied a touch vaguely, sighing somewhat theatrically. 'She can hardly go back to Cygnus ... or Bella,' he added, and I was too tired to wonder what he was trying to justify.

'By the way, Severus, I'd stay well clear of Bellatrix, if I were you,' Sirius remarked through a cloud of blue smoke. 'She seems a little put out with you for some reason.'

'Let me assure you, Black,' I snapped, 'that I have never had any intention of going anywhere near Bellatrix Black. Speaking of Blacks ... it's not that I'm ungrateful,' I said, despite my good intentions of a couple of moments before, 'but why was it that you waited until I was almost dangling on the end of a rope to intervene?'

'We were waiting for Albus to let us know whether to go on or not,' Lucius replied.

'Dumbledore?' I asked, as though he had maybe meant another Albus. 'Dumbledore knew what you had planned?'

'Of course he did,' Black replied. 'He knew you were in deep shit ... he just didn't realise how deep it was. We were only to jump in with Narcissa if he stood up and addressed Crouch. I think he wanted to play it out as far as he dared, to see if he could work out just who was pulling what strings.'

'The death sentence threw us all a little though,' Lucius admitted with a shudder. 'The worst case we had allowed for was waiting for Riddle to return to see if he sprang you from Azkaban, or if we had to do it ourselves. I nearly had a fucking heart attack when Crouch took out that damn black cap.'

'Quite,' I remarked, stifling my own involuntary shiver of unease. 'I almost had one too, to save him the bother of a trip so early in the morning to Hangman's Common. Anyway, how did you know the type of alibi I had concocted for myself?' I asked.

'Black guessed,' Lucius replied.

'Malfoy guessed,' Sirius replied at the same time, and both men looked at one another and shrugged.

I felt myself smile inside at the thought of a little white stone that a small boy had found in a rock pool, and had kept for eight hundred years, and had handed to Albus Dumbledore on the day I was born. I was just about to say something about the stone when a wave of nausea swept over me, and I only just managed to stumble across to the sink to throw up the scant breakfast I had been given before my trial. When I sat back at the table I felt totally exhausted, and I reached for the whisky glass Lucius had filled earlier, only to find it had turned into one of Ethel's ruddy teacups, and was steaming back at me in some sort of accusation. As I lifted the cup, and caught the unmistakable whiff of something suspicious, I began to wonder if I actually had any control whatsoever over my life.

'How did you manage without your potion, Severus?' Black asked, nodding to the sink as though I had suffered some sort of withdrawal symptom, instead of the aftermath of sheer terror.

'I didn't,' I replied, slipping off one of my shoes, and releasing the charm that held the heel in place, to reveal a small compartment. It was filled with a blue paste of the concentrated Veritaserum buffer, enough for about three weeks. 'I don't take risks,' I said, and the statement even sounded a touch ridiculous to me. 'I hope you have both been taking yours. In fact, in view of what has just happened, I think I would feel more comfortable if I made some of this and had you both secrete it on yourselves all the time.'

'I don't intend to wear the same shoes every day,' Lucius said, as if the whole suggestion were in some way offensive to him.

'And I don't intend to sweat over a stove making enough damn paste to satisfy your sartorial excesses,' I snapped back, pleased to see Lucius draw back, looking a little surprised.

I looked across to see Ethel standing in the doorway between the living room and the kitchen, and Lucretia standing behind her. I had quite forgotten about Lucretia

Malfoy, and I'm ashamed to say I didn't feel much up to small talk with anyone, even someone as frail and concerned looking as she was. But Ethel took over, the way she did.

"*They just wanted to see you were safe, Severus*," she chided into my mind. *Lucretia seems quite taken with you, but considering how offhand you are, dear, I cannot fathom out why that might be.*"

I was about to compose a retort, and ask just who "they" were, when another woman came from the living room to stand beside Lucretia; it was, of course, Narcissa Black. She took Lucretia's hand in hers, and to me, despite what I had already assumed of Lucretia's troubled past, they both looked pale and innocent, as though too pure to have been spoiled by whatever darkness had surrounded them. I suppose even then I mentally added them to the list of those in need of protection. Of course, that was what the crusade of mine, the one that had sprung from such dubious origins, was all about.

They began to move into the kitchen, and it was as though they were moving in some kind of slow motion, much the way one moves from pursuers in a nightmare. I heard Black's voice echoing, rising and falling in some sort of concern I didn't understand, as I became aware of a sharp writhing pain in my left arm, and felt myself slump over the table. Then I found that I was no longer in the kitchen; I was in my own bed, and had no idea how that had happened, but I was too grateful to be there to even care. I was just dropping off to sleep when I caught the faint scent of Andromeda Black's perfume, and wondered if she had been concerned about me too, or if she had just assumed me guilty, as almost everyone else had. I wondered, too, what she would make of the next day's newspaper, which would undoubtedly make much of her youngest sister's dramatic declarations, the public ones at any rate.

The next thing I consciously knew was that someone was drawing my bedroom curtains apart to let what looked like early morning sun shine through the window.

'What time is it?' I asked, totally disoriented, as I heaved myself up on my elbows.

'Tomorrow, actually,' Black replied, sitting on the edge of my bed, as I resisted the urge to tell him to go and sit on his own bed. 'How are you feeling?'

'Fine,' I admitted somewhat grudgingly. 'Is Lucius still here?'

'Everyone's still here,' Black muttered. 'Dumbledore, Minerva, Narcissa ...' He trailed off, seemingly quite put out, and I wondered who had told him not to smoke at the table, as I groaned inwardly at the thought of being a spectacle once again.

'Go away, Black, I want to get dressed,' I said, hauling myself further upright.

Ethel had been at work again. The kitchen looked slightly bigger than it had done, and there were more chairs around the table, and I hoped, only a little sourly, that she had at least managed to remember one for me for a change. Then I remembered how the Dark Mark had burned on my arm before I had passed out, or whatever had happened to me, the late afternoon before.

'Did Riddle call last night?' I asked, finding I did indeed have a seat, between Minerva and Lucretia, and pretending I didn't notice that the numbers were nicely split between genders, and smiling to myself at the thought of Black's face if he realised I had, however jocularly, mentally paired him off with Ethel.

Lucius looked down at his own left arm in a way that made his answer superfluous. 'He's been around a few times,' he muttered uneasily. 'Ethel's got us battered down though, haven't you, Ethel?' he said, and I thought there was more appeal in his voice than just asking for confirmation.

'Yes, Lucius dear, but not for too much longer,' she replied.

'Are we hiding?' Lucretia asked.

Lucius gave her a long troubled look, before turning to Ethel in what looked like mild accusation. 'Apparently not any more,' he said, casting another nervous look at where his left arm would be burning in much the same way as mine was.

'Fuck him,' I snarled. 'I'm having something to eat first.'

'Do you mind?' Lucius snapped. 'I would prefer if you didn't swear in front of the ladies.'

Whatever my retort was going to be was cut off by two things, the first was an owl tapping on the window with the "Prophet", and the second was another owl tapping on the window with a scroll attached to its leg.

Minerva had unrolled the newspaper. It had gone for sensationalism, headlined as it was the caption, "Dead Man Walking". The picture below the headline showed me walking from the court with Henry Potter, repeating the few steps to the back court door from where I had stood chained in front of Crouch, again and again.

'For a man who has just had a noose removed from his neck, you look remarkably sullen,' Minerva remarked dryly, and I wondered if I always did.

There were no snide remarks in the report about friends in high places though, or aspersions about the validity of the dramatic statement by Narcissa Black, and I suspected that only meant that Riddle's people on the "Prophet" had made sure that only sanitised reporting actually appeared in print. There was, of course, speculation about Narcissa and my alleged relationship, and one columnist actually went as far as to say that we had been married in secret some weeks before, quoting the usual unnamed source close to the Black family, and that Cygnus's outburst had stemmed from his festering outrage that an impoverished half-blood had deflowered his youngest and prettiest daughter ... the one whom he had promised to Lucius Malfoy. A mystery source close to Lucius Malfoy had stated that Lucius had been concerned for some time about Narcissa's purity, and had now set his sights on her sister, Bellatrix.

That particular remark sent Lucius into apoplexy. 'Do something about this, Severus,' he snarled. 'I shall not have you blackening my name with Bellatrix.'

I didn't see fit to point out his hideous pun, remarking blandly instead to where he sat, pale with stifled indignation. 'I seem to recall that it was you and Black who concocted this situation between you, Lucius. Now behave yourself and pass me over that scroll.'

Lucius shot Black a murderous look that was totally lost on the Gryffindor, who was sharing a quiet joke with Minerva and Ethel at the time, as Dumbledore chatted with Narcissa and Lucretia, much the way any old grandfather would chat with two favoured granddaughters. That left Malfoy with me as the only focus for his self-righteous pique.

'And there had better not have been any hanky-panky between you and Narcissa either,' he added, giving me a mistrustful glare, as Narcissa looked round at him as though he were as idiotic as he had often purported to be in the past.

'Oh, I had thought ... from what you said, that the relationship between Severus and Narcissa was just made up to clear his name,' Lucretia remarked with a puzzled frown, turning her attention from Dumbledore.

'It was,' I replied. 'It just takes your brother a while to catch up ... even with his own ideas.' I was really thinking about the wider implications of Lucius's ludicrous statement though, in particular about his displeasure at the thought of any nefarious goings on between Narcissa and me, and why that should bother the man who had maintained that he couldn't marry that "shrew" only two weeks or so before.

'Where are you going to be staying, Narcissa?' I asked, really more to see how Lucius was going to rise to the bait I had cast, as I took the scroll from him and began to absently unroll it. 'It's from Riddle,' I said flatly, as any feelings of good-humoured teasing, and any pleasure in being around my own kitchen table with people whose company I found I actually enjoyed, evaporated like so much mist.

"My Dearest Severus,

I am writing to you as I have been unable to pay the visit I have longed to make since I left you last. There seems to be some kind of charm around your house which I am unable to penetrate, and as I am sure this is an oversight on your part, I am looking forward to your removing it so that I can at last see you again this afternoon. I shall call around two o'clock, and you can bring me up to date on the unfortunate chain of events that led up to your incarceration and subsequent trial.

Had I any knowledge of the situation in which you had found yourself, you, Severus my love, know that I would have been at your side, instead of your having to concoct your ludicrous fiction about Narcissa Black. After all, you were the one who told me not long ago that you had no interest in any 'Black hag', as you called Cygnus's daughters.

I also find that I am displeased with Orion and Walburga for not having informed me of your fate, and as such I find I no longer care to take up their offer of hospitality. I shall stay with you now, and thus afford us the time together which we both deserve. I promise to allow you all the time you need to carry out our work; I shall not disturb you at all. But, that said, by my staying at Spinner's End we need never really be parted, my Severus. Together we shall move to the future that beckons us so brightly, you at my side, me at yours.

I am now, and always, your Tom."

I laid the letter I had just read out loud onto the kitchen table and looked up into the silence. Seven pairs of eyes were watching me. I wondered just who was going to speak first; I knew I couldn't find my voice.

'Fuck sake,' Lucius muttered, seeming quite content to swear in front of the ladies himself.

I couldn't think; even worse, I could think, but not of a way out the god-awful mess. Suddenly the noose, or at least a stint sampling the dubious delights of Azkaban's kitchens, didn't seem such a bad option.

'What's the time?' I asked stupidly.

'Just after ten o'clock,' Minerva replied.

'Four hours,' Black muttered unhelpfully, as though I didn't have the mental capacity to count.

'Why don't we all move back to the manor?' Lucretia asked brightly, obviously with no idea at all of the gravity of the situation.

'Why not indeed?' Narcissa added with an arch look at Lucius which, despite my concerns, I didn't miss.

'The idea has its merits, Severus,' Dumbledore said, and I began to take notice, only to douse the solution as quickly as I had accepted it.

'I'm not leaving Ethel,' I said. 'And don't try to talk me into it.'

'Oh, but I shall come with you, dear,' Ethel said, leaning across the table to pat my hand.

'You told us that you had too much complicated stuff to do to move the last time Lucius asked you,' Black remarked.

'Stuff and nonsense,' she scoffed. 'You were in a hurry last time.'

'We're in a hurry this time,' I remarked, resisting the almost overwhelming urge to bolt for Wiltshire and let the rest of them follow at whatever pace they chose. Truth be known, Riddle's missive had rocked me. I had, I suppose, hoped that at last I could get some time to think about all the things I hadn't had the time to think about over the last few days, and now I found that Riddle was harrying me into yet another corner.

'The manor it is then?' Lucius asked. 'At least there's a bit more room there.'

'I don't recall inviting you to share my pittance of space,' I snapped.

Ethel had stood up from her little chair, as though she at least had already made her decision. 'Come, ladies, I shall need you all to help me with some of the trickier charms,' she said. 'We need to move the whole house.'

I didn't even attempt to contemplate just what she meant by that, but as I looked at the retreating backs of the four woman, it was with the feeling that I was once again being swept along in other people's ill thought-out plans. And yet, there was something comforting about that, something about the way we had closed our ranks.

'Do you want us to help too?' Black called to Ethel.

'Oh, no, Sirius dear,' she replied. 'Men couldn't possibly understand these charms.' I was glad I hadn't asked.

Dumbledore left Minerva to help Ethel, and went back to Hogwarts, seemingly content that we could handle things on our own, a somewhat brave assumption as far as I was concerned.

I wrote to Riddle, explaining to him that I had moved to Malfoy Manor where there was more room, thus allowing me to both work and keep my eye on Black and Lucius. It wouldn't stave him off for long; I knew that. All he would do would be to relieve me of the duty of watching the two others; it had been, after all, a task that I had complained about bitterly. As I sealed the scroll I found myself worrying through a load of hypothetical "what ifs".

'I'll keep hold of this until we're ready to move,' I said, tapping the sealed scroll as Riddle's owl sat watching me unblinkingly. 'I shouldn't care for Riddle to be waiting in Wiltshire with a surprise welcoming committee.'

'There's something I want you to do for me, Severus,' Lucius said quietly, breaking the thoughtful silence he had lapsed into. 'Something that may both help you with Riddle, and keep you at the manor in a way which he could not question. It would also do me a great service ... one which I confess I could really trust to no other man.'

'What?' I asked, trying to understand him.

He looked to Black, to where he had moved round to sit beside me when Lucius had waved his cigarette smoke out of his face once too often.

'Hear him out, Severus,' Black said, and I could see that whatever it was had been discussed on some level by the two of them.

'What?' I asked again.

'I would like you to marry Lucretia.'

'Have you taken leave of your senses?' I asked. 'I don't even know her.'

'It would keep you both an awful lot safer than you are right now,' Black reasoned.

'That's hardly a sound basis for marriage,' I retorted. 'Anyway, apart from the myriad of reasons why it would be ridiculous, there is something I doubt either of you have considered.'

'What?' It was Lucius's turn to ask the one word question.

'I have just made use of Narcissa Black as an alibi; how would it look if I suddenly married your sister?' I said. 'I'd have a ruddy noose around my neck in no time ... and Narcissa would probably accompany me to the gallows.'

'I forgive you for using Narcissa in that way,' Lucius said magnanimously. 'However, if we are very careful, we think we could carry this off.'

'We?' I gave Black a cool look. 'Why were you even discussing this? You didn't know Riddle was about to attempt to move in here.'

'No ... but something was bound to happen,' Lucius replied a bit uncomfortably. 'We ... Damnit, Black and I think that Riddle seeks to dominate you ... physically... and in so doing attempt to stifle your spirit. In short, we don't think he trusts you, but if you give him an undeniable reason for refusing him, one that even one as blinded as he can see, he might at least back off ... from the physical abuse.'

He was right, although I was nowhere near ready to admit it, but if anyone understood how Riddle's power could poison, I supposed it would be Lucius Malfoy.

'She really likes you, Severus,' Black put in, as though that were all I was waiting to hear.

'I cannot use another person like that,' I said. 'She has, at last, her own life to lead. Let her meet a man who loves her ... and whom she loves. She deserves a husband and a family after whatever she has endured,' I said, wondering if Ethel had plumbed any of her depths in the few days I had been absent, and regretting again that the pile of questions I had to ask was only eclipsed by the problems I was facing, and wondering how it had all happened.

'What chance has she got, Severus?' Lucius asked. 'Whom could I ever trust her to?'

'It's still not fair,' I said. 'That doesn't mean it wasn't a good idea,' I admitted finally, 'because it was. It's just not for me.'

'Damnit, Severus, you're not going to get Andromeda Black,' Lucius snarled. 'Get over it, and start living as best you can.'

I only realised my mouth was hanging open when I felt it snap shut. I threw Black a withering accusatory look, stood up from the table, and began to walk towards the living room as Sirius's thought snapped into my mind. *"I didn't tell him, Severus. Ethel told Lucretia why you would be unlikely to consent to marry her."*

'This subject is closed,' I called over my shoulder, as though I didn't really care. 'I've decided to stay here and take my chance.'

'You fucking selfish bastard,' Lucius spat after me. 'What about everyone else's chances? Or does your fucking false nobility only stretch as far your fucking self?'

'Shut up, Malfoy,' Sirius said in a low growl. 'Just leave him to it. We'll work something out to keep the girls safe ... without his help. If necessary, I'll marry Lucretia.'

'I should have asked you in the first place,' Lucius muttered back, 'and kept it in the family.'

I wondered just how small I intended to let myself feel before I turned round, as the implication of what Lucius had just said sank in, and I realised just what he had done to get me off the hook that no one but myself had hung me on. I suppose it was only when I opened the door between the kitchen and the living room, that resistance seemed pointless. Little Ethel was standing with an ancient carpet bag at her feet, probably containing a thousand years' worth of her treasures; she was flanked by Narcissa, who had her arm linked through Ethel's; and Lucretia, who held her other bony little hand. Behind them Minerva McGonagall stood, her nostrils flared and her lips pursed together, in her most imperious stance. All four women were watching me, waiting for me.

"It won't be difficult, Severus dear," Ethel said in that way she had of touching my mind, and I suppose my heart and soul too *Neither of the men are looking to score a point off you."*

I did turn, and once I began it wasn't so hard. 'Family?' I repeated, looking from where Narcissa stood blushing prettily, the way she had in court, to where Lucius sat watching me. 'Just what have I missed?'

'Nothing yet,' Lucius admitted. 'Miss Black has asked for time to consider my proposal.'

'Your proposal?' I asked, totally lost. 'I was there, Lucius. The proposal was hers.'

'Now you know why I steer clear of women,' Black remarked. 'I told him that.'

'And what happened to your plans of humiliating your father by becoming pregnant?' I asked Narcissa.

'Lucius informed me that he had always intended to marry a virgin,' she declared, and I was struck by the fact that, for a girl who had bandied about that description of herself on more than one occasion in my hearing over the last week and more, she had been remarkably willing to cast herself as a love-struck wanton to Crouch and Potter. 'And I rather think Cygnus got about as much humiliation in court as his heart will stand for a few months. Don't you, Severus?' She raised her blonde eyebrow. 'That doesn't mean that I shan't go back for dessert at a later date.'

'I shan't encumber you, Severus,' Lucretia said, stepping forward from where she stood at Ethel's side, to add her own fuel to the fire. 'You will, of course, live your life as you see fit. I do not expect false affection ... I have no need of such.'

Fuck, I snarled to myself; they had all ganged up on me to shove me into a corner ... yet surely a kinder one than the one Riddle was trying to back me into.

'Do you understand what you are trying to do, Lucretia?' I said. 'You are trying to give up your chance of a normal life with the happiness you are entitled to ... the chance of man you truly love.'

'That chance was taken from me many years ago,' she said. 'But I shall not beg, Severus. I am not the one in such danger ... you are. Lucius merely sought to protect, not only me and Narcissa, but you too.'

I can't recall feeling so humbled before, and by so many people; it was a tortuous experience, and I really had no personal familiarity of backing down in the way I had to then. Unpredictably, or then again, maybe not, it was Black who came to my rescue.

'Do you think he doesn't know that?' he said. 'I think we've been a bit unfair, presenting him a fait accompli,' he added, and then looked to where I stood between the two groups who closed in on me like a trap springing shut. 'There's no time, Severus. If we make decisions on what is right at the time, it's the best that we can do ... and at least we know we're making them for the right reasons.'

'I just hope one of you has a very bright idea of how we pass this off to the world at large,' I said, seizing on his lifeline. 'Not only do we have to overcome my apparent philandering, Narcissa's public confession of a tryst, and Lucius's willingness to be a cuckold ... but Lucretia's very existence,' I said. 'Any ideas?'

'We were rather expecting you to come up with them, Severus,' Lucius drawled in his most superior way. 'After all, we've done everything else.'

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter 24 of 48

Lucretia's story.

I felt as though I would settle rather more quickly and comfortably into Malfoy Manor than I had expected. When Ethel had said that she had wanted to move the whole house, she hadn't only meant its contents; somehow she had actually brought Spinner's End with us. Not the street, or the physical building as such, but she brought everything from behind the peeling front door, right down to the little terrace outside my kitchen, the one that she had created as a replica of the manor's own. I pushed the thought from my mind that she had done that little enhancement on Spinner's End to prompt me in my wooing of the woman I had thrown away.

I cannot even attempt to explain, nor to fathom out how it all seemed to fit in, as though it had been part of Malfoy Manor's original plans when it had been created as the seat of the Malfoys some four centuries previously, but it did, and left me feeling more secure for doing so. Ethel had made modifications, the way she was always changing things, and I found I had a workshop with my mother's old stove in it, just off my kitchen, which was in turn just off the manor's main kitchen, so that that area alone should have taken up a sizable part of the back of the manor's ground floor, which, of course, it didn't. She was inexhaustible, and I noticed that Lucretia and Minerva, and Narcissa to a lesser degree, seemed to be struggling to keep up with her. I felt such a welling of affection for Ethel that it quite took me aback.

'Enough, Ethel,' I said, taking her small bony hand and sitting her down in her own little chair, the one at my own kitchen table. 'We're safe for now ... thanks to you.'

It had only been four hours or so since I had dispatched Riddle's owl from Lucius's kitchen garden, and it was by then a good couple of hours past the two o'clock he had said he was going to call at Spinner's End. I doubted it would be much longer before he came a-calling to the manor, and I knew he would be very displeased to do so. But I needed time with Ethel, on her own, without Narcissa and Lucretia hovering in the background, or Minerva sitting under the table eavesdropping in her Animagus form, or any other distractions I somehow felt Ethel welcomed. I had an uneasy feeling I knew why that was. I thought Ethel was trying to keep me at bay, keep me from asking questions I needed to ask, and hearing answers I didn't want to hear.

'You've been avoiding me,' I said, leaning across and taking her hand in mine. 'What's troubling you?'

She looked across to me in some kind of appeal; it was something I didn't recognise in her, something almost alien that frightened me. 'So many secrets, dear,' she said, looking to where the sound of elves busily preparing dinner issued from the main manor kitchen.

'In this house?' I asked. 'Shall we go back to Spinner's End?'

'No, Severus dear, that won't be necessary; everything we want of Spinner's End is here.'

'What kind of secrets, Ethel?' I asked. 'Is it something we need to defend ourselves against?'

'No, I do not believe there to be anything inherently evil about this house,' she said. 'It is, however, uneasy ... as though it has hosted many evil people and many unspeakable deeds. It has a bloody past,' she said, nodding slowly.

'The Malfoys?' I asked, stating the obvious, as it was the very Malfoys who had had the house built during the sixteenth century, on the site of an ancient pagan burial ground. I almost gasped as I understood the implication of that, not only that it was one of those little gems of knowledge that Ethel saw fit to implant into my mind to save herself the bother of explaining it, but also that the very act of building on what would have been regarded as sacred ground would render the house, in the eyes of many, to be cursed.

'Some of them,' she agreed. 'But more often those who sought to associate themselves with what they saw as the Malfoys' worth.'

'Ethel, what has this to do with us?' I asked, remembering only then that I still hadn't asked her about Lucretia's secrets.

'I'm not sure, Severus. But ancient magic protects this house and those in it ... some of it very Dark Magic indeed.'

I thought of the sarcophagi in the cellar, the ones that held the remains of Astoria Malfoy, Lucius and Lucretia's mother, and wondered why I had not puzzled more over how her awareness had been preserved for the twenty-nine years since she had died giving life to not only her son, but the daughter who had been hidden from view for so long. I felt a pang of what I could almost regard as guilt that we had all but abandoned Astoria's remains, when they had watched over her child for so long.

'Not for as long as you think, Severus,' Ethel said, snatching my thoughts from where they had barely coalesced. 'Astoria Malfoy did not die until Lucius was seventeen.'

I sat back stunned. 'It was Astoria's funeral that Lucius was taken away from Hogwarts to attend?' I asked. 'When he thought it was Lucretia's? But that doesn't make sense. If Astoria had been alive when I had visited the catacombs as a schoolboy, her remains could not have been what I sensed at that time in the stone coffins.'

'I have spoken to Astoria, Severus,' Ethel said. 'Her tale is grim indeed. But you are right, it is not, and never was, Astoria's remains that inhabit the sarcophagi.'

'What is it then?' I asked, feeling the hairs on the back of my neck begin rise.

'It is the remains of Astoria Malfoy's lover,' she said. 'Lucius and Lucretia's father.'

'Impossible,' I gasped. 'Why would Abraxas allow his wife's lover to inhabit Malfoy Manor ... in any capacity?'

'It was the only part of Abraxas's act of revenge that went awry ... had he but known it,' Ethel replied. 'The remains had been charmed to make sure they did not permit anyone with intent against the House of Malfoy to pass. He had not bargained on you acting on Lucius and Lucretia's behalf. In his vanity he quite forgot he was not the only Malfoy.'

'Are you telling me on one hand that Abraxas was not Lucius's father, but on the other that Lucius's a Malfoy?' I asked, as confused as I was stunned. 'How?'

'Oh, yes, he is, dear. He just wasn't Abraxas's son ... the man Astoria had a love affair with was Abraxas's brother Valerius.'

She looked across to the door to where Lucius was then standing, and I suspected he had been there for some time, and that Ethel had known that.

He crossed the room and sat beside me. 'I think you had better tell us it all, Ethel,' he said.

'And I think we should wait for Sirius too, Lucius dear,' she replied. 'Are you comfortable with that?'

'I could not understand at first why I was unable to find out from Lucretia how she came to be imprisoned. I should have been able to read her memories even of infancy, when she so willingly allowed me access to her mind,' Ethel said. 'Parts of her memory had been very skilfully Obliviated, and as you know the memory is not just subdued, but is actually removed. But something puzzled me about such an eloquent young woman of such undoubted and unaffected poise ... and that was just who had taught her her social graces: who had taught her to dress, and to play the piano, and how to conduct herself? Not the elves of Malfoy Manor surely; the elfin peoples do not have our skill with language, they use an altogether different means of communicating with their own, one that is unable to be understood by humans. I knew a woman of high station had in some way brought up Lucretia, and it was only when we came here today that I fully understood just who that was, and how it had happened.'

'But Lucretia told us that she had never met another woman before,' I argued, harking back to Lucretia's excited pleasure at the thought of meeting Ethel.

'It was every memory of her mother that was Obliviated from her, Severus dear,' Ethel replied. 'It was one of the odd things I felt about her when we first met.'

Ethel told us how her first stop, once she had set the other three women to working on her charms, was to the cellars to where the sarcophagi were, and thence to the Malfoy crypt, to where the memorial to Astoria Malfoy was, the one I had assumed was empty of her remains. She was a bit vague about how she actually communicated with Astoria, but none of us saw fit to ask her to explain; we had too much else to listen to.

Abraxas Malfoy had been the second son of his generation of Malfoys, his elder brother Valerius being his father's favourite, and Abraxas being his mother's, and as such Abraxas stood to inherit only a relatively modest living from the Estate. Valerius had not married by the time Astoria came to Malfoy Manor, having said he had no inclination to settle down and produce an heir to the Malfoy name much before he was thirty, concentrating instead on travelling the world. Ever encouraged by his mother, Abraxas resented him, always having considered himself to be more worthy of inheriting the vast Malfoy Estates than his playboy brother.

His dotting mother had secured a match for Abraxas, a seventeen-year-old French aristocrat whose family had fallen on difficult times, and Astoria was brought to Wiltshire under the domineering thumb of Abraxas's mother, and the cold brutality of the man she was to spend her life with.

By the time Valerius returned from his latest visit to the mysteries of the Orient, Abraxas was already married. Valerius recognised the beautiful young woman, who was his sister-in-law, as being bullied and frightened, and he befriended her, eventually becoming her lover. What neither Valerius nor Astoria knew was that Abraxas, in common with the second sons of the precarious Malfoy line, whilst by no means impotent, was sterile, and that it would only be possible for his wife to conceive if he used potions produced by Dark Magic to boost his fertility. Abraxas had not seen fit to tell his wife of this, knowing that within a year or so the potions he took would have sufficiently empowered him to father a child.

Astoria, however, became pregnant after only six months of marriage, and as her lover was the dashing, but very Malfoy, Valerius, she had no worries that even if the child she carried were not her husband's, of passing him off as Abraxas's; she did not know yet that two babies slept below her heart. On hearing the news of his wife's pregnancy, Abraxas took to having her movements shadowed by the Malfoy elves, and, of course, the elves, having no contrary orders from the elder Malfoy brother, followed his instructions and reported her clandestine meetings with Valerius.

Abraxas did not wait until the babies were born. He took his wife, ostensibly to show her something in the cellars, and bricked her up, alive and pregnant, and without food and water, whilst he went in search of the brother who had once again travelled abroad. Abraxas told his parents he had taken Astoria with him. Fortunately, if fortune could in any way be called her fate, he was only away for a week, and Astoria had survived: weakened and terrified, but alive. When Abraxas came home he confided in his mother, and they both went to the cellar to see if Astoria had died.

His mother nursed Astoria back to health, convincing Abraxas that he would do well to have an heir in place, to preserve the lineage. Astoria thought that she had found an ally in the woman she had hitherto come to fear. She was wrong through. One day, not long after Abraxas's return, mother and son went to Astoria and told her that someone purporting to be her dear friend wanted to keep her company. They had three elves with them, each elf bearing a burden bigger than itself. One bundle was Valerius's legs, another was his arms and head, and the third was his torso. Astoria was once again bricked up, this time with some bread and water, her dead lover and his unborn children for company.

'Fuck sake,' Black muttered, the first one of us to interrupt Ethel.

I was watching Lucius though. We had all been silent, but he was more than silent; he was pale, and looked almost as though he had withdrawn into himself in some sort of defence against his shock.

'Is there much more of this, Ethel?' I asked, but she had reached her hand across the table to lay it on Malfoy's.

'Can I ask something?' Lucius said quietly to her, drawing his hand away, and I thought his voice sounded dead and flat, like something broken. I understood then, too, the contempt that Abraxas had always shown for the boy he had passed off as his son, the one who was to succeed him as master of Malfoy Manor, and I regretted I had not been the one to deal out his death.

'Of course you can, Lucius dear,' Ethel replied. 'Try not to burden yourself too much though, dear ... try to remember it is all past, and Lucretia is safe and free.'

'Was I ... were we born in that cellar? In that prison?'

'Yes, dear,' she replied. 'Astoria never left those rooms again in her lifetime. She thinks she died of a malady ... and is not sure what that was.'

'You think otherwise?' Black asked.

'I know otherwise,' Ethel replied.

'And was she used?' Lucius asked, and I wished there were something to move him away from his line of questioning. 'Was she forced to entertain other men ... in the way Lucretia seems to have done?'

'Yes, I'm afraid she was. Her daughter's safety was her priority, her only focus,' Ethel said. 'She taught her the way any mother would teach a high born daughter. You see, Lucius, Astoria always believed that one day Lucretia would be free ... that one day Abraxas would die, and her daughter could join the world she belonged to ... and even beyond this world her heart is now rejoicing.'

'And me?' Lucius asked, even more quietly, as I heard Black draw in a stifled sigh. 'Did she ask about me?'

Ethel said nothing for a moment, and I wondered just how much worse this could get. Then I actually felt her pass some kind of mental balm onto Lucius's mind; I could almost see it travel the short distance between them. 'Lucius ... dear,' she said, 'Astoria was told that you had died. It was only after Astoria had died herself that Lucretia was told that you were alive, and living as Abraxas's son.'

Lucius dropped his head to the palm of one hand, and let his fingers splay through his mass of white-blond hair.

'I think we've had enough for one day,' Black said, failing to hide the emotion in his own voice.

Malfoy had straightened up though, his face taut. 'I want names, Ethel,' he said, his voice hard, brittle. 'I want the names of every ... I shall not call them men ... I want every name of every savage that violated my mother and my sister.'

Ethel sighed. 'Yes, dear,' she whispered. 'And you will have them ... on one condition.'

'What condition?'

'That you swear to me on the lives of Lucretia and Narcissa that you do nothing that will endanger your life or your freedom as part of your revenge.'

'I can't do that,' Malfoy replied.

'In that case you do no justice to your sister or the woman you intend to make your widow, Lucius,' Ethel replied firmly.

I hadn't noticed that Black had stood up until he sat back down and shoved three glasses of my Glenfiddich around the table. 'That's enough for today, Lucius,' he said. 'We'll work the rest of this out in colder blood than we have just now.'

Malfoy looked ready to object, and then seemed to change his mind, lifting his glass instead, and tossing the heavy measure of malt over his throat in one go. He stood up and left the room, and we could hear his heels clipping on the stone floor of the main kitchen, and out into the back hallway.

Riddle didn't call that day, and I began to wonder if he were expecting me to contact him. I didn't care much one way or another, finding myself content to enjoy my freedom and begin to take stock of what was happening around me, and perhaps more importantly, what I needed to do. I had to find a direction of my own, instead of waiting to be pushed in one by Tom Riddle. I was at my desk, surrounded by my own belongings and flicking absently through "Die Letztendliche Wahrheit?" when I became aware of being watched. I raised my head, expecting to see either Ethel or the equally ubiquitous Black, and found the steady but slightly disconcerting gaze of Lucretia Malfoy instead.

I only realised I had not said anything when she raised her eyebrow and gave me a quite breathtaking smile. 'May I come in, Severus?' she asked. 'Or shall I just speak from the doorway?'

I stumbled belatedly to my feet, rather like a schoolboy caught out with his manners lacking. 'Of course you may come in,' I said, pulling a chair aside for her, without noticing that I expected her to sit at my desk too, instead of one of the settees Ethel had brought to Malfoy Manor for me.

'I hope can be friends, Severus,' she said. 'I know you have been rather railroaded into coming here ... and pushed into whatever may happen next.' She looked away from me for a moment, but I could see it was to save my discomfort, and not hers. 'I know you love another, Severus, and that you have lost her for now ... but I swear to you that if you find Andromeda becomes ... available,' she said, shaking her head as though the word were not the one she was searching for, 'I would not expect you to stay with me.' She looked up again, and I was struck by her sincerity. 'But for all that, I hope we can be friends.'

'I thought we already were,' I replied.

'That's good,' she said, and nodded, and it was only when she seemed to relax that I understood how tense she had been. 'May I talk to you about Lucius now?' she asked. 'I'm very concerned about him.'

'Of course,' I said. 'Do you want to sit by the fire and have some tea? I'm sure it must be teatime ... it always seems to be.'

We moved across to the fire, and when she began talking I remembered that she was not a child, not an eighteen-year-old girl, but a woman of almost thirty, who had endured and survived what I could barely imagine.

'I know Lucius is terribly upset,' she said. 'Oh, I know why that is ... Ethel has already told me everything she told you all. You have other concerns surrounding me too, not the least being how to introduce me to the world at large, as you indicated yourself.'

'You have a suggestion?' I asked.

'I have a suggestion.'

'And does that suggestion involve telling the truth?'

'Yes, Severus,' she agreed. 'That suggestion involves telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.'

I thought about that for a moment, no longer feeling as self-conscious as I had under her scrutiny. 'What did Lucius say to that?' I asked at last.

'I have not discussed it with anyone,' she admitted. 'I rather thought it was my place to put it to you first.' She gave me a somewhat roguish smile which was filled with challenge, and laced with a warning that, whilst she might consider herself to be my equal, she did not consider me to be her superior. Maybe it was that alone that made me realise that I would get on very well with Lucretia Malfoy, perhaps even very well indeed, and that prospect cheered me enormously.

'If we could convince him ...' I trailed off for a moment as something else occurred to me. 'In fact, the truth is actually a far stronger standpoint for Lucius, is it not? The fact that he was the son of Valerius Malfoy, the elder Malfoy son, actually means that Abraxas never had any claim to Malfoy Estates Lucius not only is, but was from the day he was born, the true lord of Malfoy Manor.'

She was nodding vigorously, her soft blond curls rippling on her shoulders. 'Exactly!' she exclaimed. 'I confess it is very refreshing to talk things over with one who so readily understands. I had not fully understood how engaging conversation could be.' She looked away, blinking quickly. '... I feel like a bird that has been freed from a cage ... I ... I'm sorry,' she said, stumbling to her feet, her pale green silk dress catching on the small side table and upsetting her teacup. 'I promised myself I would not burden you thus.'

I found I was on my feet too, reaching for her, feeling my arms close around her in a gesture solely of comfort. 'You cannot burden me,' I said as softly as I could, into her hair; it smelled of violets and something else I couldn't identify. 'Now sit with me for a while so that we can work out how best to go about this ...' I trailed off; that was not what she wanted to hear. 'Just sit with me for a while.'

I could see Lucius had been drinking when we sat at dinner that night. Minerva had gone back to Hogwarts, and it was just the six of us; I was glad of that much, and found I was beginning to accept Narcissa Black as a permanent part of our circle too.

I should have handled it better; I know that, but I had not accounted for too many things, most of them Lucius's vulnerabilities.

'We think we have worked out a way to address one of our problems,' I said, glancing once to Lucretia.

'How?' Black asked, looking up from the lamb he had been attacking with the vigour of one on the edge of starvation.

'With the unadorned truth,' I said. 'We bring Lucretia into society with the truth.'

I watched Lucius pale, and mistook it for something other than the fury it was.

'In the long run the truth is always preferable,' I went on. 'So much harder to disprove, if it comes down to that.'

'Preferable to whom?' Malfoy asked, and it was only then that I realised he was angry.

'To all of us, Lucius,' I said.

'I see,' he retorted coldly. 'I'm sure if you examine that, Severus, you'll find it is just preferable to you.'

'I resent that, Lucius,' I said. 'I am not the only one who finds this suggestion to be the right one ... Lucretia herself agrees with me.'

'You resent that?' Lucius replied. 'Let me tell you what I resent. I resent the fact that you see fit to use my sister's past as your own political platform. I resent the fact that you have even seen fit to discuss any such thing without me present. In fact, Severus ... I rather fancy I resent you even being here.'

I said nothing. He was drunk, and I had made a bad mess of handling a very delicate subject. Instead, I took the coward's option, excused myself from the table, and went to my room. It was about two hours later when Black knocked on my door and poked his head round, without waiting for an invitation.

'You didn't do that very well, did you?' he said, leaning back against the door he had closed; at least he hadn't sat on my bed.

'I don't suppose I did,' I admitted sourly. 'I still believe it's the right thing to do.'

'It is,' Black agreed. 'Anyway, Lucretia gave him a good dressing down, and told him she had gone to you with the idea.'

'I was not looking to be rescued by yet another woman,' I retorted.

'Oh, get over yourself, Severus; you're worse than he is,' Black muttered, patting his pockets down for his cigarettes. I was just about to tell him not to even consider lighting up in my bedroom, when he passed the pack across to me, and I took one instead. 'He seemed to quieten down a bit when Lucretia told him how you had worked out that he had always been the rightful heir to Malfoy Estates ... above Abraxas. In fact,' Black said, warming to his subject, 'I think he now sees this as some way of getting his revenge on Lucretia's visitors.'

'How?' I asked, not sure I liked this bit of the turn of events.

'It was Narcissa's idea, actually,' Black replied, squinting against the smoke from the cigarette he had left in his mouth as he spoke. 'She suggested that Lucius makes formal representation to the Ministry of Magic for help in tracking down whoever they were ... not that we don't already know, of course ... but it could make things a little embarrassing for the parties concerned.'

I didn't like that at all. 'I think that's inviting trouble we don't need, Black,' I said.

'Well, I shall leave you to talk Lucius out of it then,' he said grinning like the maniac he truly was. 'He's drunk right now ... maybe he'll have forgotten in the morning.'

'Was Ethel party to this insanity?' I asked, disappointed that she had not managed to nip it in the bud, so to speak.

'Yes, she thought it would work, with a little modification on Lucius's more radical ideas ... like public castrations, and so forth.' He became serious. 'Look, Severus, he had a bad day; his return to Malfoy Manor was not what he had hoped for. Give him a day or two. I'm sure you can sort it all out,' he added with a confidence I didn't feel.

'Maybe I should go and talk to him just now,' I said.

'He's asleep,' Black said, heaving himself off the door as though it had been his only means of support. 'Which is just what I'm about to do as well. I suggest you do too. By the way,' he added, digging into his pocket again and flinging a banana across the room to land beside me, 'I brought you dessert.'

I picked the fruit up and gave him a hard look. 'What am I supposed to do with that?' I snapped.

He grinned again. 'I bet you wish you hadn't asked me that.'

I watched him leave, laughing like the schoolboy I had begun to suspect he still was, wondering just what on earth I had unleashed.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Chapter 25 of 48

Severus gets two unexpected visitors.

Black wasn't my only visitor that night. I had just come out of a long hot bath and was towelling my hair dry, when there was a soft knock on my door. I pulled it open, half expecting an elf with a mug of cocoa or something of that sort. Who I didn't expect was Lucretia Malfoy, certainly not dressed in a diaphanous nightgown of pale green silk that clung to her body in all the right places.

'Don't you think I am in enough trouble with your brother?' I asked, standing back to allow her to pass me, not failing to notice the scent of violets again, the way it invaded my senses. 'At the risk of sounding rude, Lucretia ... what can I do for you?'

'Well, you could close the door first, Severus,' she said, sitting down on the little bedside chair.

'Lucretia,' I said, still holding the door ajar, 'don't you think we should talk in the morning? I was just about to go to bed.'

'I assumed so,' she replied, making no effort to stand. 'That's why I am here. Now, Severus, close the door, your mouth too, and come here.'

'Lucretia,' I tried again, 'it is customary in most societies for a couple to wait until they are married to spend time alone with one another in bedrooms ... it's the way things are done,' I finished lamely, pretending to myself that I hadn't noticed my pulse rate increase.

'Are you a virgin, Severus?' she asked.

That word again, it seemed to be haunting me. 'No ... no, I'm not.'

'How many times have you been married?' she asked.

'Never,' I replied. I could see where it was going, and I hadn't a clue how to stop it.

'So, it is just me that you do not care to ... to spend time alone in your bedroom with?'

I closed the door, but stayed quite resolutely standing bedside it. 'That's not true,' I said. 'But ...' She was laughing at me; I knew that. 'I don't think tonight is the right night for this,' I said.

'I see,' she replied, not at all put off. 'If it is Lucius you are frightened of, he is drunk and asleep ... and Sirius is with him. So even if he wakens sober, he is unlikely to come calling on you.'

'Black?' I asked dumbly. 'Of course, I'm not frightened of Lucius ... Black?' I repeated.

'Yes ... oh, I didn't think that was a secret,' she said. 'Lucius is almost as fond of the boys as he is of the girls. Have I offended you?' she asked when I failed to answer.

'No,' I said, giving up, and going to sit on the edge of the bed, making sure the towel I had wrapped around my waist didn't fall apart.

'Severus, if we are to be married, don't you think we should check that we are at least compatible?' she asked. 'I mean, it's allowing a rather large margin of error to wait until our wedding night to find out things aren't what they should be ... and I, for one, do not intend to spend the rest of my life shackled to a man who, for want of a better description, is a lousy fuck.'

That time at least I knew my mouth was hanging open. 'Do you think we could start again?' I asked, wondering if Black had been giving her lessons in picturesque speech. 'Only I'm beginning to feel a little foolish.'

'I'm sorry,' she said, 'I'm being unfair. Perhaps you're right, perhaps tonight is not the night.' She began to stand, her gown slipping to caress her body in a way I wanted to. It was quite deliberate, quite contrived, but no less appealing for that. She dropped her gaze and began to move across to the door, and I could tell she was secure in the knowledge that I was undone and would not let her leave.

All I really had to do was to get her into bed without seeming to back down; it was going to be tricky, but I was sure I would manage somehow.

I had taken her for a tiny frail little thing, something to be treated as though made of fragile glass held together by cobwebs, a notion she disabused me of quite quickly. All of my other preconceptions about her had been wiped away earlier, as I had come to realise that what I had assumed at first for an almost backward reticence, when we had first discovered her, had been nothing but a woman unsure of whether the men who had come to her had come to free her, or just have her swap one life of servitude for another of a different sort.

Even in the few days I had been held at the Ministry, the change in her had been astounding. Lucretia Malfoy had emerged, and I couldn't help drawing a parallel between her and Sandro Botticelli's Venus emerging from a seashell. That thought made me smile, something I only ever did either grudgingly or unwittingly.

'Are you laughing at me, Severus?' she asked, crossing the room to put one of her hands on my bare shoulder and the other on the towel at my waist, and I noticed her touch was like a feather.

'No ... I rather thought you were laughing at me,' I said, dropping my head to plant a kiss on her hair, the hair that glowed like spun silver and gold, and smelled of violets.

She was small and slim, yet endowed in all the ways that mattered to make any man's blood run hot; she was strong and nimble, and her hands and mouth so dextrous that her every touch surprised and pleased in equal part, and made short work of leaving me desperate with desire to please her too.

'I think I am content to toast our engagement,' she whispered much later, twisting her fingers in my sweat dampened hair, as I collapsed on top of her a second time, my breath heaving and my heart hammering. 'What say you, Severus?'

I wasn't really in a fit state to speak at all, but I suppose I made some sound of agreement because a few moments later I felt her shift below me, and just remembered I was still pinning her down. 'Sorry,' I groaned. 'Have you suffocated?' I slid over onto my side to lie facing her, watching the way the light from the waxing moon caught the silver and gold lights in her hair, and I knew then I could care for Lucretia Malfoy, and maybe one day, if Merlin were kind enough to us both, I could love her dearly. But for then, I was content too, and felt myself drifting off to sleep.

The popping of the champagne cork almost made me dive out of bed in search of my wand, shocking as it was in the soft dreamy silence of post-coital repose, until I heard her laugh. And then she was straddling me where I had sat up to rest my head against the bedstead, and she was pouring Lucius's best Krug into my mouth in little dribbles, and I did my best not to laugh at her delight, as she bent her head to my chest to lick away what she had spilled.

I had a moment of panic when I woke, that she was perhaps still by my side, and about to be discovered by whoever was knocking on my door. It was late; I could tell that much as my sleep-fogged brain reminded me that Lucretia had left me at first light to go to her own rooms, and I had fallen back to sleep.

'Who is it?' I called, dragging myself upright in the devastation of my bed.

Lucius took that as an invitation.

'Why did you not come down for breakfast?' he asked, sitting down on the chair beside the bed, where his sister had sat only a few hours before.

'I should have thought that obvious,' I replied. 'I was asleep.' He seemed unsure of how to go on, and I suppose I realised I was being a bit unfair. 'I handled things very badly last night,' I said, trying not to choke on my words. 'I'm sorry.'

'Don't be stupid, I was drunk,' Lucius muttered, waving his hand in dismissal, and I could see that was not why he had called. 'I ... I thought you'd left the house,' he added, 'or were avoiding me.'

'I was asleep,' I repeated. 'What's wrong, Lucius? You might as well spit it out, or it's going to be a very uncomfortable day for us both.' He looked away from me, and a rather unwelcome thought occurred to me. 'Have you come to tell me you have changed your mind about my marrying your sister?' I asked.

'Merlin, no ... I suspect she would skin me alive if I did that,' Lucius said with some feeling. He put his fingers to his forehead as though he was trying to rub away a headache, and I knew he was struggling with his emotions. 'You were feet away from them, Severus ... we both were ...' He trailed off as I understood what was haunting him, and cursed myself that I had not thought of it before.

I needed to talk him through this, and I knew I had let him down by not following him out of the kitchen the day before when Ethel had disclosed Astoria's fate. I should have done it then, instead of leaving him on his own to get drunk and dose himself with Merlin alone knew what self-recriminations.

'Let me get dressed. I'll see you in the library in ten minutes, Lucius,' I said, hauling myself out of bed. 'Make sure Black doesn't trail along. I want to speak to you alone.'

He gave me a long troubled look and then nodded, heaving himself off the chair. Then he looked around the carnage of my room, as though seeing it for the first time: the wreckage of my bed; my clothes lying scattered where I had taken them off before my bath; the towel I had had wrapped around my waist, the one that Lucretia had flung over her shoulder to land and drape itself over a candelabra; the two crystal champagne flutes, and the almost empty bottle of Krug.

'You're rather untidy, Severus. I do hope you don't expect my elves to lift and lay after you,' he remarked, seemingly quite himself again, stooping to pick up a small pale green silk handkerchief. He held it out to me, letting his eyebrow rise in something that wasn't quite accusation. 'Yours?' he asked, looking down at the embroidered letter L.

'It's in my room,' I replied.

'You won't forget she is my sister, Severus, will you?'

'No, but I shan't hold it against her either.'

The fire in the library had already been lit, and Lucius was sitting in the leather armchair Tom Riddle seemed to favour. He had just laid his empty brandy glass down on the mahogany side table, and was in the act of lifting the decanter once more. Before I sat down, I crossed the room, took the decanter from his hand, and took it and the glass to the chiffonier on the wall beside the door.

'Do you mind?' he said, spluttering his indignation. 'I believe you are the guest in this house, and I am the host. As such, I'm in charge of the brandy. You may have one if you wish.'

'I don't drink at ten o'clock in the morning, Lucius,' I said. 'And I'm not talking to you if you're drunk either.'

'Don't tell lies, Severus, you drink at any hour of the day or night,' he muttered. 'Although I have noticed you've become almost abstemious by your own standards these last few days.'

I ignored his jibe, and the truth in it. He needed to talk, and I needed to listen, but not about meaningless drinking habits. 'You can't blame yourself for this, Lucius,' I said, diving in at the deep side of the river. 'You were a baby.'

'I can't get it out of my mind,' he said, looking down, and I realised he was really struggling. 'We were there,' he said, looking back up at me in some sort of appeal. 'That day when Abraxas and ... and his wife were away in Romania. When we were in the cellars, you were only a few feet away from them. If I hadn't called you back ...' He trailed off hopelessly. 'In a way I killed her, you know ... I killed my own mother.' I let him talk on, let him vent everything that haunted him. 'If I hadn't let Rabastan talk me into going down to the stupid cellar, she might still be alive,' he said. 'I signed her death warrant.'

'You could look at it that way ... but only if you want to torture yourself,' I said. 'But you'd also have to look at the fact that if we had not gone down, I would not have seen the sarcophagi ... and if I had not seen them, Lucius, I would not have mentioned them the night we came here, the night after Abraxas died ... and Lucretia would still be imprisoned, probably for the rest of her life. As to whether your mother ... whether Astoria would still have been alive, is a moot point ... but it is likely that Lucretia would just have pined away, and died in captivity.'

I suspected he had tried all that out on himself already, and I thought he was only half listening.

'In a way you saved her life,' I said, ignoring his snort of derision. 'Oh, I know, it took a long time ... but she is alive, and well, and blossoming at a rate I find hard to believe of the frightened little mouse we found a couple of weeks ago.'

'Don't you think I've tried to tell myself that?' he snarled, his emotions flooding dangerously to the surface.

'Lucius, I don't know what to say to you to help you to try to handle this,' I said uselessly. 'I don't know how I would cope with the hideous facts that were thrown at you yesterday ... but you've got to look at the one positive aspect ... the very fact that Lucretia is alive.'

'I know,' he whispered.

'What would help you?' I asked. 'Do you want me to send Ethel to you? Or Narcissa?'

He shook his head as though I had offered him a sticking plaster for a Cruciatu's Curse. 'No, I'm going to stay here for a while.'

'No, actually you're not, not on your own,' I said, looking deliberately to the decanter of amber cognac. 'I'm not leaving you to sit here drinking on your own.' I thought for a moment, turning the white stone absently in my pocket as I tried to find something he might want to do, something meaningful, and latched onto an idea at last. I felt rather proud that I had thought it out myself, and smiled inwardly at the almost crestfallen little throb of approval the stone gave. 'I want you to help me do something anyway,' I said, 'something I think should be done, although it is not my place to make the decision.'

'What?'

'I think it would be fitting to move the sarcophagi to the crypt ... perhaps to lie beside Astoria,' I said, letting my eyebrow rise as I sensed his interest. 'Would that not be some kind of tribute to your parents ... to let them lie together in some sort of peace?'

'Yes ... yes, I think I would like that,' he said. 'Why didn't I think of that?'

'There's something else too,' I said, now that he had shed a small part of his morbid self-reproach. 'You are making Lucretia nervous by treating her as though she were made of eggshells.'

'When you know better?' he asked, his own eyebrow rising in some vague challenge.

The three of us went down to the catacombs; we hadn't told Lucretia or Narcissa what we were going to do, although I knew better than to suspect that we kept it secret from Ethel. We reached the end of the corridor where the bookcases hid the stone coffins from view, and I thought it odd that it seemed more eerily dark because it was daylight in the rest of that part of the world, and wondered if I had felt that way twelve years before, when I had gone there first. I had to push away my own stab of guilt that I had been so near to Lucretia and her mother, and had sensed something, but had not had the presence of mind to investigate. I tried to push it away again, telling myself I had only been just under fourteen at the time, and hardly a match for all of the other older boys there.

'Severus?' Lucius's voice sounded unsure in the slightly echoing darkness. 'You go and check everything's all right first. Black and I shall wait here.'

'All right?' I asked, turning so that the glow of my torch bounced off the stone walls, casting deeper seeming shadows. 'Of course it's all right. Stop being such a coward, Lucius.' I moved forward again, pretending my heart rate hadn't increased, and my mouth didn't feel dry, and trying to fool myself that I had only accidentally clutched my hand around the white stone in my pocket. Something passed in front of me, and it was all I could do not to let out a yelp of fright, even though I realised it was only a ghost. I hadn't sensed one on any of the other occasions I had been down there, and wondered why it had chosen that day to appear.

'Grandfather?' Lucius said warily from much closer behind me than I had thought he was. 'Grandfather, is that you?'

'Lucius,' the ghost of Atticus Malfoy murmured as he moved right through me to where his grandson stood stock still in the shock I felt. 'Have you come to claim your rightful sire at last, boy?'

I heard Black let out a gasp, and then felt him slip into my mind. *'We're surrounded, Severus,'* he said urgently. *'There's about a dozen of them.'*

'Killed us all,' Atticus said, cocking his head to look behind Lucius to where the ghost of a woman, who could only have been Astoria Malfoy, and a man who was so like Lucius, except for his short hair, that if Lucius had not been standing there, I could truly have believed he had died. 'Speak up, boy,' Atticus said, 'so that I may hear what is in your heart ... so that I might see for myself that you are the son of your father, and nothing of the other ones has left its mark on you.'

'I only came to lay him to rest beside my mother, Grandfather,' Lucius replied, and the panic seemed to have fled him, leaving him calm and somehow sure of himself. 'May I speak with them? The only parents I ever knew until now were Abraxas and that woman he took as his second wife ... I never even knew I had real parents.'

'A fitting gesture, Lucius,' Atticus replied. 'You may not speak to them though, but know that they pride themselves on you and your sister ... and that I am gratified to see the House of Malfoy fall to its rightful heir.'

'These men are my friends, Grandfather,' Lucius said, waving his torch in my general direction and then Black's, so that the shadows flickered with the shades of Malfoys past in some kind of ghostly waltz. 'May we move my father's remains to lie with my mother's?' he asked.

'On one condition, Lucius,' Atticus replied, 'and that is that you lay your guilt to rest with them, boy. It does not belong to you, and will not serve you well,' he said, and with that he disappeared, and the rest of the ghosts of Malfoy Manor disappeared too, even the insubstantial shades that had been hovering about Black.

It was no difficult job to levitate the sarcophagi to the crypt, and I didn't fail to notice that I manoeuvred one, and Black the other, whilst Lucius seemed content to issue orders. We laid one on each side of Astoria's memorial, and Lucius changed the inscription from "Astoria, beloved first wife of Abraxas Malfoy" to read "In perpetual memory of Astoria and Valerius Malfoy, together forever, from their loving children Lucretia and Lucius", and I was only sorry that Abraxas was not alive to see it.

There was still no call from Riddle that day, nor the day after, and I resolved to make up something as an excuse to call him. Much as I loathed the thought of any contact between us, I recognised that any distance was even more dangerous. I had spent a little time thinking over the meaning of Atticus's words, when he had said that Abraxas had killed them all, but could take no meaning from it, other than Abraxas having dispatched his own father in the wake of his brother, to save him waiting for his inheritance. I didn't suppose it mattered much then anyway.

It was only when the "Evening Prophet" arrived late the next day that I understood that Riddle's absence was because he had been busy with other things.

"SWEEPING CHANGES AT THE MINISTRY"

The Daily Prophet has been asked by the Ministry of Magic to inform its loyal readership of several changes that have taken place in the Ministry's administrative staff and in other positions, a full list of which can be found on page four.

The main casualties in this week's announcement are in the Sudden Death Squad, and although it is not this paper's place to speculate, we find ourselves wondering if the dramatic dismissal of the case of Abraxas Malfoy's murder, particularly the acquittal of the Death Eater Severus Snape, has anything to do with the sudden fall from grace of Henry Potter, hitherto regarded as one of the backbones of the Squad.

Mr Potter was not available for comment when our reporter called at his home, but issued a statement through his son, James, to the effect that recent goings on at the Ministry led Henry Potter to the conclusion that his position at the Ministry was no longer tenable, hinting that he had left of his own accord, a point refuted by the Ministry. Henry Potter will be succeeded in his post by Barty Crouch Junior, who, although he is young and inexperienced, we are sure will be able to call on his father's vast reserves of experience in these troubling times."

I laid the paper down, feeling somehow responsible for Potter's demise, and frowned at Black, who had been reading it over my shoulder. Truth be known, I had already begun to consider leaking the story of Lucretia's existence, and I had been swithering between casting Henry Potter or Arthur Weasley in the role of the man to do the actual leaking.

'Barty Crouch,' Sirius muttered darkly. 'That's a cat amongst the pigeons, if there ever was.'

'You haven't spoken to James Potter, have you?' I asked. 'Since we saw him in Hogsmeade?'

Sirius shook his head. 'I haven't have the chance ... I wasn't really looking for it though. Why?'

'I was just wondering how close he was to his father,' I mused, the thought of using Henry Potter refusing to leave me.

'Not particularly,' Sirius grunted. 'James always thought old Henry lived below his station in life ... all that Gryffindor honour, and spending more time courting the unwashed masses than flashing his cash around to entertain the rich and powerful. I liked him actually; he gave me a home when I needed one.' He gave me long look. 'Why the interest in Henry Potter of all people, Severus? Last I recall, he was trying to put a rope around your neck. In fact, it was only a few days ago.'

'Yes,' I agreed, but somehow I didn't think Henry Potter was the one making the noose. 'That was rather a pity.'

'What are you up to?' Black asked, pouring himself another shot of my whisky and sticking a cigarette in the corner of his mouth.

I was just about to reply when the door to my living room swung open after a soft knock, and one of Lucius's elves came in; it was holding a silver tray on which it had placed a small white visiting card. I couldn't read it from where I was sitting, but I had a rather ominous feeling that, despite the fact I had not felt his presence, Tom Riddle had arrived.

'A gentleman to see you, sir.' The elf bowed, holding the tray out to me, but I looked past it instead of looking at the card, to a hooded and cowed man.

'Come in, Mr Potter,' I said. 'We were just talking about you.'

'You amongst many, Mr Snape,' he replied, sitting down opposite me, and beside Sirius.

I lifted the bottle of malt, absently noticing there wasn't much left, and reminding myself to make sure I had more than the one full bottle in my desk drawer. I poured a couple of fingers and passed Henry Potter the glass. 'How can I help you, Mr Potter?' I asked.

He tossed off about half of the whisky and laid the glass down, and I had an idea he suddenly had reservations about being there, like a man who had worked out what he wanted to say and do, but had forgotten to work out how to get there.

'What's wrong, Henry?' Sirius asked. 'Are the family all right?'

'Yes, yes, of course ... thank you for asking,' he replied. 'I ... I am unsure if my coming here is wise,' he said, 'based, as it is, purely on gut feeling.' He looked from me to Sirius and then back to me. 'May I ask you something, Mr Snape?' he said.

'I had rather thought that you had asked me quite enough over the past while,' I replied, and then did my best with a smile, probably making him think I had eaten something too acidic for lunch. 'But ask away ... as long as any reply I make does not involve my being arrested again.'

'No ... of course not,' he replied, and then I rather fancied he had taken stock of us both and had not found us wanting. 'There are two things, two major things I would like to know, before I come properly down to my reason for calling here today.'

'I am going to ask you something first,' I said. 'How did you know I was here? I have, after all, a home of my own ... or was that gut feeling too?'

'Nothing as mysterious, Mr Snape. You weren't in Spinner's End, and when I looked through the windows the house was completely empty ... it didn't even have any internal walls. That led me to believe that you had not just packed for a brief holiday. Now, may I ask my questions? I would prefer not to be here for too long.'

I didn't think he meant that as an insult of any sort, more that he was cautious for some reason. I raised my eyebrow in invitation.

'Why did you take the Dark Mark, Mr Snape?'

'What is the other question?' I asked coldly.

'What is the truth of the night Abraxas Malfoy died?'

I stood up, intending to send him packing. 'I did not kill Abraxas Malfoy, Mr Potter, which is actually something I have come to deeply regret,' I said, my tone hardening. I was disappointed in him; for just a few moments I had almost thought he was a man I could trust, we could trust, despite his being James Potter's father. 'That is all you need to know.'

He wasn't about to be dismissed though. 'Of course you didn't, Severus,' he said, using my given name in a way that made me stop in my tracks on the way to opening the door. 'How could you have killed him, when I did it for you?'

Chapter Twenty-Six

Chapter 26 of 48

Henry Potter begins his tale.

'Before I turn the question back to you, Mr Potter,' I said, stifling the shock of his revelation as though he had just told me that he had had a cheese sandwich for his lunch, instead of having told me had killed Abraxas Malfoy, 'I think I would like to invite Lucius to share this conversation.'

Lucius wasn't long; in fact Henry Potter hardly had time to become uncomfortable by the time he marched through the door in a way that made me think had been informed by his elves that I had a visitor, who was not Tom Riddle. Never a one to move terribly quickly, that told me Lucius had probably been on his way anyway to where my living room from Spinner's End sat neatly between the small sitting room in the downstairs entrance hall, and the dining room, in a space that had never been there.

'Potter,' he remarked, quite taken aback, but I wasn't watching Lucius, I was watching the way Henry Potter started back for just a moment when Lucius had walked in with his tied back, so that it looked short. 'What on earth are you doing here ... drinking Severus's whisky, if I'm not mistaken ... unless he has laced it with something nasty?'

'Mr Potter has something interesting to say,' I replied. 'Or should I say, he has said something rather interesting.'

'I had come here to ask you some questions, Severus ... ones which, of course, you are at liberty to refuse to answer,' Potter said, rather coolly, 'not to defend my actions.'

'What actions,' Lucius asked. 'What's going on?'

'Henry has just mentioned that it was he who killed Abraxas,' Sirius replied. 'Haven't you, Henry?'

Potter glanced quickly to me and then to Lucius, and I fancied he was wondering whether he should draw his wand, and deciding he would be much safer trying to talk himself out of whatever he had just talked himself into.

'I forgive you, Potter ... Henry, if I may?' Lucius said magnanimously, smiling like a dangerous shark that had missed lunch, 'the fact that you seemed happy to allow Severus to hang in your stead notwithstanding. Now why don't you tell us just what this is all about?'

'He was never supposed to hang,' Potter snarled. 'That was Cygnus Black's little intervention ... one that Crouch forgot to mention to me. He was only supposed to go to Azkaban.'

'Only?' I asked. 'What age are you, Mr Potter?'

'Fifty-five, why?'

'I, Mr Potter, am almost twenty-five. The sentence for ... what did Crouch call it again? ... Ah yes, a premeditated act of murder ... is life imprisonment in Azkaban ... I'll allow you to do the arithmetic.'

'You were never going to stay long,' Potter replied. 'A few days at the most. We had our own alibi ready in the wings.'

'Really? But not in the court where I would have needed it, had not I had a perfectly good alibi of my own ... the one you did not care to believe, despite my assertions.' I was angry; in fact I was finding it hard to even think. 'And just what good would your fucking alibi have done me if I were dead?' I stood up and began to move from the room.

'Wait, Severus,' Lucius said, surprising me somewhat. 'I think I should like to know the truth of this, and just why Mr Potter has come here. Surely not just to tell you that he almost got you hanged by mistake. After all, it would be a brave, not to mention foolhardy man who came here to do that.'

Henry Potter's tale was so unbelievable that it had to be believed. He had been at the Ministry on the night of Abraxas's death, when an owl was received from a whorehouse in Knockturn Alley to say that urgent help was required in dealing with "trouble with some powerful people". Their intrigue piqued, the two men working late that night, Henry Potter and an Auror called Anton Meadowmarch, decided to investigate, and went straight to Knockturn Alley. The Madame of the house told them that a young prostitute had escaped from Malfoy Manor and had come to her, babbling somewhat incoherently about abuse of her sister workers beyond anything acceptable, even in the dive she worked for. She maintained that Dark Magic was being used, in the form of Imperius Curses, to have the girls perform certain sexual acts, involving not only the men whom they entertained, but also house-elves, about which they were very superstitious, and some inanimate objects likely to cause lasting physical harm.

The girl said that the men involved were drunk, and that a brawl between them had broken out, and she seemed genuinely fearful of the other girls' fate.

'I came here to the manor with Meadowmarch,' Potter went on. 'I had an axe to grind of longstanding with your father anyway,' he said, nodding to Lucius, seemingly not noticing that he stiffened. 'Apart from that, I confess we were hoping to find Tom Riddle.'

'And was Riddle here?' Lucius asked. He had stood up, and instead of watching Potter, was looking out of the window at the gathering gloom of the late autumn afternoon, and I had the feeling he was feigning having lost interest.

'No, not then, although he did come just before we left,' Potter replied. 'By which time your father was already dead.'

'I see. Please go on, Mr Potter,' Lucius replied, still looking out of the window, and I wondered if Potter had noticed that had dropped the more friendly "Henry" rather quickly.

'We found three whores and four men, none of whom were really in a fit state to be interviewed. We called for help, and the girls were taken to the Ministry, and thence to St Mungo's to be treated for various injuries of both a sexual and magical nature; thereafter their memories, and those of the Madame and the girl who had escaped, were Obliviated. The men, as I said, were all drunk, and seemed to be under the influence of some illegal plant or herb.' Henry Potter paused there, and sensing no deeper hostility than what he had already invited, he looked to Sirius, perhaps assuming him to be the only one amongst us not ready to hex him into the next week. 'I am laying myself open to more trouble than I think I can handle,' he said, but once again it was Lucius who answered him, as though it were by then his show, and I was only a side issue.

'You have my word, Mr Potter,' he said, turning from the window at last, 'that not only will there be no recriminations from this house stemming from what you have told us ... thus far ... but also that, if it were within my power, I would have you decorated with an Order of Merlin for killing Abraxas Malfoy.' He crossed the room and sat beside me, opposite Potter.

'Go on, Henry,' Sirius urged too. 'I think you have already realised you can trust us enough to tell us the rest.'

'Very well,' Potter said, heaving a sigh, as though reluctantly accepting that he had, for the time being, ceased to be the inquisitor. 'There had obviously been some kind of brawl; furniture was upended, and there was broken glass lying around. As I said, the men were insensible, none more so than Abraxas. The Aurors we had called to take the girls to St Mungo's had returned, and Meadowmarch had left the room with them, and Orion Black, and Igor Karkaroff, and I could hear them arguing. Both Darius Shield and Malfoy were unconscious in the room I was in. I bent over Abraxas, and he began to haul himself to some kind of consciousness, and, Merlin forgive me, I took the opportunity I had never thought would be open to me, and would never be likely to present itself to me again ... and I killed him.'

None of us spoke; it was almost as though there were too many questions to ask, but Potter seemed content to go on with his story.

'I called Meadowmarch through to confirm that Malfoy was dead; he and one of the other two Ministry men ... John Sanquar it was both examined him and pronounced him dead too. We rounded up the rest of the men and their wands, and took them to the Ministry. Of course, their wands were all examined, and none was found to have delivered a Killing Curse recently, although they had all performed both Cruciatius and Imperius. Naturally, my own wand was never tested. We went with the convenient story of a heart seizure ... it suited me, I confess, and the three other men seemed content to let that go. Something was happening in the background though, and Orion Black came to me the next day to say that he had changed his mind, and now wanted a thorough investigation into Abraxas's death, as he was not known to have a heart condition of any kind. I was left in the position of having to come back here with another Ministry Investigator, as you know, and it was he who identified the cause of death.' He turned to me, to where I had been sitting silently listening and evaluating what he said, and looked down for a moment. 'And that was when you came into the story, Severus,' he said, and I almost asked him to revert to his "Mr Snape" form of address.

'How?' Lucius said. 'And while we're at it, when did Tom Riddle appear on the scene?'

'Riddle? He arrived here just as we were leaving, looking for Severus, and left again almost immediately,' Potter said. 'But at the Ministry, Severus's name began to crop up from all of the men as having been present at the manor, and having left not long before we arrived, and as none of their wands had killed Abraxas ...'

'Mine was a convenient hook on which to hang your hats,' I snapped, 'and me too, come to think about it.'

'It was never supposed to happen the way it did,' Potter said quickly, as though he were trying to distance himself from what had happened afterwards. 'I had no way of knowing that anything other than a lengthy prison sentence would be handed out to you. It's years since anyone has been hanged ... Anyway, I had my own alibi set up for you. I knew your own assertion of a mystery woman was untrue, having been told by not only the other men, but the house-elves too, that you had spent the evening in Tom Riddle's ...'

'Just pass that bit,' Lucius interrupted him again. 'Let us go on to just why you killed Abraxas Malfoy, Mr Potter. I am interested to know why you did that, why you almost got my ... my friend hanged to kill a man you hardly knew.'

'He killed my best friend in cold blood,' Potter said, 'and I owed him for that.'

'Why not just drag him through the court for that, instead of dragging Severus through the court for your own crime?' Lucius asked, and I could see he was becoming angry too.

'It was many years ago ... I had no proof, nothing anyone would believe,' Potter replied. 'I was young at the time, and other things were happening in my life. That said, it has festered with me for a long time.'

'And just who was this best friend of yours whom you thought deserved the life of not only Abraxas, but Severus too?' Lucius asked, his voice rising dangerously in challenge.

'It was no one you knew; he died before you were born, but for whatever record you may care to keep, it was Valerius Malfoy ... Abraxas's brother.' Henry Potter looked around us, stopping at Lucius, quite unsure of what he had said to drop a silence over us that seemed almost tangible. 'You didn't know your father had a brother, Malfoy? An older brother? Of course, Abraxas would not have talked about him. In fact, when you came in earlier I was almost taken aback at just how like Valerius you are; I had not really noticed it so keenly before.'

'I think we should tell a story of our own!' Black's voice said into my mind.

'Allow me,' Lucius added in the same way. He stood up and looked once to me, until I nodded my own agreement. 'Come with me, Mr Potter ... Henry,' he said, oozing his Malfoy charm again. 'I have something I would like you to see.'

Potter was wary, as well he might have been. 'I'll just stay here,' he said quickly. 'In fact I really should be getting back home; my family will be wondering where I am.'

'Come, come, now, Henry,' Lucius replied. 'I'm sure a man who can spend all night at the Ministry, and then drop off at Malfoy Manor to commit murder on the way home, does not have to make excuses for his absences.'

'It's all right, Henry,' Sirius added. 'He's just being Lucius. He really does have something to show you. Something I think ... no ... I'll let you decide what to think.'

I suppose it was only Sirius's presence that coaxed Potter to where the Malfoy family crypt lay at the top of a hedge-lined path at the eastern side of the manor. Lucius lit the torches at the entrance; they then bent to the ones next to them, and so on to their neighbours along the walls, lending one another their light, until the interior of the grey granite mausoleum was flooded with flickering torchlight.

'Along here, Henry,' Lucius said, moving through the two stone statues that jealously guarded the final resting place of the Malfoys. He stopped in front of the memorial to

Astoria Malfoy.

'Sweet Merlin,' Potter breathed, turning to Lucius. 'Sweet Merlin, man, I should have known.'

'I only just found out myself,' Lucius murmured.

'Lucretia?' Potter queried, looking at the inscription on the memorial stone that Lucius had changed only a couple of hours before. 'A sister? I didn't know you had a sister ... but how? Abraxas and Astoria were only just married; you were the first child, and she died in childbirth.'

'Come back up to the house, Henry. There is someone I should like you to meet,' Lucius said, taking his arm. 'But before we do that, I shall fill you in with a few details of just how deeply Abraxas Malfoy's treachery went.'

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Chapter 27 of 48

Henry Potter has a few more revelations.

Henry Potter sat toying with his whisky glass, his face hardening as he listened to Lucius tell a slightly sanitised version of Lucretia's past. Instead of mentioning Ethel, who had not left her picture since he had arrived, he had told Potter that he had spoken to his mother's portrait, and had found the truths that Ethel had told, from Astoria instead.

'It is important that we introduce Lucretia to the wizarding world at large, Henry,' Lucius said, glancing once to me. 'And I know that Severus had considered asking your advice, or that of Arthur Weasley. Of course,' he added, 'that was before your own little revelations of today. I confess I'm not quite sure how he feels now.'

I had said very little, wanting to concentrate on reading Henry Potter on a different level entirely and, aside from the fact that he had almost got me hanged, I could find little to actually dislike about the man, despite the fact that his name was Potter.

Potter glanced at me again, one of a series of looks he had drawn me, perhaps wondering why Lucius should be concerned with my view on the matter at all, before turning his attention back to Malfoy. 'Tell me, Lucius,' he said, 'have any of the men whom you assume abused your sister made any attempt to tell you of her existence?'

Lucius shook his head. 'No ... In fact they came here to offer their sycophantic false condolences, en masse,' he said. 'Perhaps in the midst of their grief they forgot.'

'I see,' Potter replied, and I could see the rage building up inside him; he covered it well, but it didn't stop the little tic at the side of his eye, or the bitter twist of his lip. 'So as far as they are concerned, Abraxas is dead, they have no more sport with the woman we assume he led them to believe was his daughter, so it is acceptable for her just to waste away and die..? Forgive me,' he said quickly, as Lucius whitened in his own choking fury, 'that did not come out the way I intended it to. But ...'

Lucius waved his hand in dismissal. 'I understand what you are saying ... It is something that has haunted me too. Whoever these men are, and I am not prepared to speculate with names at this stage, they have no way of knowing if Lucretia, even now, is not starving to death.' Lucius let his grey eyes hold Potter's for a long moment. 'I want some sort of ... reparation.'

'I take that as a euphemism for revenge. And Lucretia?' Potter asked. 'Is that what she wants?' When Malfoy failed to reply, Potter went on. 'Will you let me think about this? Think how best to go about it without further damaging your sister? I'm sure you would want that much for her.'

Lucius nodded, and I thought he was about to say something, when the drawing room door opened and Narcissa walked in with a scroll in her outstretched hand. 'Just wait until you hear this,' she declared, brimming with an odd combination of girlish amusement and indignation, and then stopped short. 'Oh, I'm sorry ... I didn't realise you were entertaining,' she said, looking at the back of Henry Potter's head. 'I shall come back later, sorry.'

Henry Potter turned from where he had his back to the door. 'Oh, that's all right, Miss Black,' he said, giving her a surprised but knowing look, one that told me he had read the situation, and completely misunderstood her presence, 'I was just leaving.'

'Nonsense, Henry,' Lucius said, standing up and clapping Potter's shoulder like an old friend, and it did indeed seem that the common ground of Valerius Malfoy had caused the two men to take rather an unexpected and unlikely shine to one another. 'Narcissa, my dear, I wonder if you would find Lucretia, and if the two of you would join us when you are ready. Henry will be staying for dinner ... No, no, I insist,' Lucius went on as Potter began to object, and then dropped back to his seat, his head bent to the scroll Narcissa had handed him.

'Cygnus Black seems to think that Narcissa is staying with her sister Andromeda,' Potter remarked to the top of Malfoy's head, as Narcissa closed the door. 'At least that is the story he has put about.'

I felt my insides turn over at the thought of the woman I had tried so hard to put from my mind, and almost told Potter not to speak of her, much the way a reformed alcoholic would ask people not to drink in his company.

'So it would seem,' Lucius replied, rolling the scroll up, and smiling as though he were a large cat who had just found a sparrow chick having a bath in a bowl of cream. He tapped the scroll against his open palm, and smiled again. 'This is from Andromeda,' he said, shooting a cautious look to me and then back to Potter. 'She is reluctant to say where she is staying just now; I suppose in case Cygnus finds out. His owl did, of course, manage to find her, and it seems that he has written to her to say that he forgives both of his beautiful daughters for their transgressions ...' He trailed off as Black interrupted him with a snort of derision.

'What he means there is that he's stuck with mad Bellabitch for company, and she's giving him earache, because of Narcissa stealing Severus from under her nose,' Sirius drawled, without removing the cigarette that seemed almost permanently attached to the corner of his mouth. 'Almost makes me feel sorry for the old boy.'

'Quite, Black,' Lucius went on. 'That is not all though. Andromeda says that Cygnus had written a separate message to Narcissa; it was enclosed in the scroll he sent. Andromeda read it, of course, and Cygnus says that he has been making overtures on Narcissa's behalf to one Lucius Malfoy, and is now confident that he, too, will forgive her lapses with what he calls unclean blood ... That will be you, Severus,' he said, nodding to me, as Black let out a guffaw of laughter. 'Not only that, but Cygnus has also managed to reach an agreement that Lucius Malfoy will once again be willing to accept Narcissa's hand in marriage ... suggesting a joint marriage celebration, and that he will comply with Tom Riddle's wishes, and permit his beloved Bellatrix to marry too.' Malfoy finished with a wider smile, one that had traces of triumph and somewhat malicious delight, and I began to worry what he thought he had up his sleeve apart from his arm.

'Just who is the lucky man who has not been fleet enough of foot to avoid Bellatrix?' I asked, not really caring, now that my blood had mercifully failed to pass muster.

'It doesn't say, but I doubt it's you, not with your ...' Lucius trailed off wisely, refilling his glass once again, then leaning over to top up Potter's too, leaving me and Sirius to help ourselves if we so wished.

'And so, does the fact that Narcissa Black is here, and not with her sister Andromeda, as her father believes, mean that she is truly to become Mrs Snape?' Potter asked, his tongue loosening with the effect of the whisky he was consuming at an admirable rate. 'I confess that I had doubted that.'

'Mrs Snape?' Lucius expostulated. 'I think not, Potter. Miss Black will quite shortly become Mrs Lucius Malfoy.'

'I see,' Potter returned, obviously not seeing at all. 'I am only disappointed in how much that will please Cygnus. Except for that epistle,' he said, nodding to where Lucius had laid the scroll on the side table, 'he has been rather quiet about your asking for his daughter's hand of late.'

'I wasn't going to tell Cygnus Black, actually,' Lucius replied. 'And I most certainly shall not be asking him.'

Potter laughed, a thin reedy laugh that matched his frame. 'I fear he will tell the world otherwise, Lucius ... and yet equally sure that you will take every opportunity to disabuse the world of the same notion. Interesting times ahead, I suspect.' He looked across to where I sat smarting yet again at the references to Andromeda. 'I had wondered that there would be a Mrs Snape at all.' He trailed off too, and I realised he was yet another mistaken in my own predilections.

'I am going to be taking out a full page advertisement in the "Daily Prophet", Potter,' I said sourly. 'Preferably the front page, if they can manage that. It will be to the effect that I am not, never have been, and do not intend to be at any time in the future, homo-ruddy-sexual,' I said, refusing to be amused at the way in which Black and Lucius drew back in feigned shock. 'The fact that I have never married at the ancient age of twenty-four, is merely because I had not found anyone with whom I cared to spend my life. That has now changed.'

'You're going to marry Lucretia?' Potter asked, his eyebrow rising in belated understanding.

'I am going to marry Lucretia,' I said, not failing to notice how the words seemed to choke me, as though in accepting that fact I had also accepted my defeat. 'Tell me, Potter,' I said, dragging the conversation away in what I mistook for a different direction. 'Just who was the alibi you had safely tucked up for me?'

He gave a little laugh, and I knew I was not going to be amused. 'I had thought of asking Bellatrix Black, little knowing of course, you had her younger sister under wraps,' he said, as I drew myself up and Black snorted into his whisky glass. 'But what with Cygnus's involvement in the Sudden Death Squad ... Well, I decided that wasn't the best option. It was actually James who came up with a better solution.'

'James Potter?' I said, feeling myself bridle even more, as though I were about to be made a laughing stock, not a notion I cared for. 'And what painted floozy did he think I would want paraded through the "Daily Prophet" as my saviour?'

'Lily Evans, of course,' Potter replied.

There wasn't a lot I could say to that; Lucius saved me the bother anyway. 'Tell me, Severus,' he said grandly, 'why is it, I wonder, that a man so undeniably ... well, ugly ... not to put too fine a point on it, has so many beautiful women falling about him, wanting to sacrifice their honour for him?'

I didn't bother to point out that most of the women I had known had sacrificed their honour long before they ever got to me, apart from Narcissa, but of course, I had never been alone with her, and at that moment decided I would make quite sure I never was. But there was no time to dwell on my thoughts further, the drawing room door had opened, and the ladies came in. They were dressed for dinner, and quite as lovely as they ever were, and I put it away; there were worse ways of serving out a life imprisonment than with Lucretia Malfoy, and I suspected I would do well to remember that.

Henry Potter had been a year below Valerius at Hogwarts, and the two boys, despite one being a Gryffindor and the other a Slytherin, had forged a lasting friendship. Potter seemed genuinely fond of Valerius, and even if his memories were a bit rose-tinted by age, I took them at face value. Henry had always been encouraged to do something useful with his life, whilst Valerius was every inch the rich playboy, and had travelled widely in the years since he had left school. Just before Valerius's death, Henry had received an owl; the message it bore from Valerius asked Potter to meet him in Paris, to discuss a delicate matter of lady with whom Malfoy had become besotted.

'I was surprised,' Potter admitted, beginning to glow somewhat with the twin effects of Lucius's rather excellent 1956 cognac, and a Malfoy Manor dinner, one in which the elves had managed for once not to overcook the lamb, in a way that made me suspect that Ethel might have drifted out of her picture and lent an interfering hand. 'He had never seemed to me as the marrying kind, although his position would dictate that as a necessity at some time, I suppose. He never got the chance to sit at the top of this table the way you do, Lucius.' Henry looked to where Malfoy was sitting at the head of the table, with Narcissa on one side and Lucretia on the other, very much the lord of the manor. 'You're so like him in so many ways though. He even dressed like you ... flamboyant ...'

'... Like a dandy?' Black suggested, and I thought of the words pot, kettle and black, the colour. 'Did you meet him in Paris?' Sirius asked, sticking a cigarette in the corner of his mouth and lighting it, as Lucius glared at him for yet another transgression, and Narcissa and Lucretia both dug Lucius in the ribs with an elbow they seemed to have specially sharpened for the occasion.

'No,' Potter said. 'I couldn't get away at such short notice. My wife had just lost the baby she was carrying ... it was to be our first child ... and I suggested that he wait in Paris, and I would meet him a week later.'

'And?' Lucius asked.

'He never replied. It was almost a week later when I learned that he had died of what was supposed to be a fever. The date of his death was reported to be the day he wrote to me asking me to go to France. I didn't know what to make of it, except that he had mentioned in his letter that his mother and brother would be less than happy about the woman with whom he was having an affair.'

'Yes, well, I can understand that,' Lucretia remarked. 'What happened next?'

Potter favoured her with a smile, something I suspected he did as rarely as I did. 'I came here, of course, to express my condolences. I was shocked; he had been my best friend and had made no mention of being unwell. When I came here I was met, not as I expected by grief, but by a wall of silence that was almost hostile, and looking back it was as though they had thought themselves rid of Valerius, only to have me turning up on the doorstep instead. I didn't mention the letter; I had intended to, but something about the way I was treated prompted me to keep my counsel.'

'What about Grandfather?' Lucretia asked. 'Surely Atticus would have spoken out about the son he so dearly loved.'

'I was unable to see Atticus, Lucretia,' Potter replied. 'He had taken to violent tremors and stomach pains; in fact he only lived a short time after Valerius died. The family, your grandmother and Abraxas, put out the story that he had pined away after the death of his eldest son, something the papers made a great deal of. I doubt that; he was a stronger man than that. I think they poisoned him. I never saw Astoria either, but I had never met her and thought little of it at the time. The next I knew, Lucius was born, and Astoria had supposedly died in childbirth. And that, gentlemen, ladies, is all I know.'

We had told him a little about our own story of the night Abraxas died, of Sirius and Lucius coming to the manor for me, and how we had made the two trips from the warehouse, and I knew then that that story would not have washed well at my trial; the lie had certainly been the safest bet. It answered one of his original questions though, sort of giving him a part of a quid for his own pro quo.

I'd begun to wish he would go home; I needed to think, and to speak to Ethel, and, though I hardly admitted it to myself at that point, I needed to speak to Black. I seemed to be moving away from what should have been my focus, constantly being dragged in another direction by events around me, and Tom Riddle seemed to be slipping into the background of my thoughts where he certainly didn't belong. But Lucius was still plying Potter with almost as much brandy as he was drinking himself, and I wondered

what his game was; it seemed I wasn't the only one.

"*Can't you stop Lucius drinking, before he becomes even less discreet than he usually is?*" Black's thought shot into my mind.

"*You do it,*" I replied in kind.

"*You're almost family,*" he snapped back. "*Anyway, he's not frightened of me.*"

"*Behave, both of you,*" Lucius's thought drifted into the odd three-way mental conversation. *I am not drunk, but I am rather hoping that old Henry will be soon. I always think it's a good measure of a man if he says the same kind of things when he's horizontal, as he does when he's vertical.*"

'Well, well, well,' Potter said, sitting back as his glass was filled once again with brandy, and I felt myself draw Lucius a hard look. 'It is the season of marriages it seems; James, too, is about to marry Lily, something I had rather hoped would happen, but feared would not. I know there is a certain amount of bad blood between you and my son, Severus,' he said turning to me, 'but that does not make either of you bad men. Most things James is, are of my doing.'

'Really,' I remarked, stifling what was quickly becoming boredom.

'Ah, yes. When my wife lost her first baby, just when Valerius died, we were told by the mid-witches not to raise our hopes of another chance. And then, when James was born, I confess I was at fault for spoiling him, and perhaps he grew up with the notion that the world had been made just to give him something to stand on whilst he entertained himself. Granted, he is arrogant and selfish, and to a degree elitist ... and I blame myself for that, but for all that he is not a bad man, and he has learned from me, I hope, the basic value of decency too.' He looked around the table, pausing to let his eyes rest on Lucius. 'He is not the only one in this world like that, is he?'

I reflected on the truth of that; it was undeniable that Lucius was of the same mould as James Potter, although not coming from a loving family. He too was arrogant, selfish and elitist, yet Lucius Malfoy was not a bad man either. It didn't make me despise James Potter any less, but I put his character flaws aside in mind perhaps, and mentally concentrated on the other aspects about him that caused me real concern. Potter wasn't finished though; he had another couple of things to say that made fairly short work of some of my other concerns.

'Speaking of James, Sirius,' he said turning to where Black was flirting with his cousin, and from her giggling blushes, I suspected he was telling her dirty jokes. 'He was turning the world upside down looking for you and Snape a while back ... did you see him?'

'Depends on how long ago it was,' Sirius replied evasively, as my interest piqued again.

'Not long before Abraxas ... died,' Potter said. 'In fact he just missed you the night you got arrested. That reminds me,' he said, turning to Lucius. 'I meant to ask who gave you authority for what was reported as an arrest.'

'A gross overstatement, Henry,' Lucius replied airily. 'Can one not meet an old acquaintance nowadays without being accused of something?'

Potter narrowed his eyes, but went back to talking about his son. 'In fact James even had Alastor Moody hanging about in Spinner's End, dressed up like a pussycat, to see if you were at Severus's.'

'Really?' Sirius replied with his Gryffindor grin, as I ticked another mystery off my list with some degree of relief. 'Why would he think I was there?'

Potter shrugged. 'You were seen talking to Severus at a party here a few days before, probably that's why.'

'No ... I haven't seen him recently,' Sirius said; apparently he too was satisfied about why Moody had been in Spinner's End. 'What did he want me for anyway?'

'I suppose that brings me full circle,' Potter admitted, and I realised he wasn't any more drunk than any of us. 'I think James was concerned at why you were with Severus, in view of ... other events of that night,' he said, shifting his gaze to where Lucretia and Narcissa were chatting and pretending not to listen to what we were saying.

'You may talk in front of the ladies,' I said.

Potter shrugged again, and seemed to weigh his words very carefully before he spoke. 'I came here with two questions which I wanted answered, before I stated my real reason for calling here, Severus. I have asked them, and you have, for whatever reasons, not seen fit to directly answer one of them ... that of why you took the Dark Mark. That aside, I find I am going home with even more questions ... but somehow easier in my mind.' He gave me a long level look. 'You're only a boy,' he said, and yet I could tell he meant no insult as such. 'You can't take him on on your own.'

'I don't know what you mean,' I said.

'Very well ... but remember one thing, Severus. You may have the dubious honour of being Tom Riddle's current favourite, if what I hear is true, but in so being you have already made enemies in high places ... on both sides. Surely the events of the last couple of weeks show you that much,' he said. 'Seek to keep what friends you still have.'

'Why did you come here, Potter?' I asked, and I noticed that Sirius and Lucius watched on in silence.

'The truth?' he asked, obviously not expecting an answer. 'I don't think you're any more of a Death Eater than I am ... and that said, I wanted to read you, and, more importantly, let you know that there are some people you can trust, if you find you need to.' He raised his hand to stifle any reply I might have had. 'Don't say anything, Severus. I don't need affirmations or denials ... at least I don't think so. I've said what I wanted to say, the rest is up to you ... if the time comes.'

He stood up, nodded to where both Lucretia and Narcissa were watching him, and then to Lucius. 'Excellent brandy, Lucius,' he said, letting his slightly sour smile creep across his face. 'Another few and you might well have managed to get me drunk.'

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Chapter 28 of 48

Severus has a visitor to the manor; one who is expected, rather than welcomed.

'Well, well, well,' Lucius said eventually, when it seemed that the rest of us were bereft of anything sensible to say.

'I wonder why he came here,' Black mused. 'Surely he could have expected a hostile reception at best.'

It was much what I was thinking, and yet I didn't feel I mistrusted Henry Potter perhaps as much as I failed to understand his motives. Certainly, he could not have cobbled up the story of Valerius at short notice; he would not have known whether Lucius would refute his story with known facts of his own, so that had to be believed.

'I need to think,' I said, rising from the table, hoping no one would follow me.

'I don't even know why you're still sitting here,' Lucius remarked. 'I am quite sure Black and I can manage to entertain the ladies without your input ... the loss of your sparkling repartee notwithstanding.' He gave me a tight smile. "*Perhaps it's best if you do not do any nocturnal entertaining, Severus. You seem to have quite enough to think about.*" His remark popped into my mind as I turned away, but I knew he was concerned, despite his levity; I knew he was worried about the fact that I had barely looked at Lucretia, and, in fact, was almost on my way out of the door before I even remembered to bid the ladies goodnight.

I had written the letter four times before I satisfied myself, and called Ethel. She sat in her own little chair, making a great fuss of arranging her skirts so that they were just so, and I felt overwhelmed with affection for her, and realised how much I missed the times when it had just been her and me at Spinner's End. I missed sitting and drinking whisky, and reading without a care of the time or day, whilst she busied herself in her garden, occasionally popping out of her picture to make tea, or bring me some little treat or other.

'You can't go back, dear,' she said, patting my hand. 'Perhaps one day, but for now we make the best of what we have brought here.'

'Ethel ...' I didn't go on; I didn't know how to say what lay on my chest like gossamer shrouded in lead.

'I shall speak to her, Severus,' she said, understanding everything there was to understand about me. 'But will marrying her be such a sacrifice, Severus dear?' she asked. 'As long as she understands that your love is spoken for. There is a great deal to be said for friendship, and fondness too, dear. After all, is that not what we share?'

'Oh, no, I truly love you, Ethel ... but I know what you mean,' I said, as she held her head to the side, like a coquette, so her snowy-white fluff of hair bounced around her head like a private cloud, and I laughed in the way that only she could make me laugh. 'I shall ask her to be my wife then,' I said.

'Try to be a bit more enthusiastic, dear,' she murmured. 'Now let me see this letter you have written to the Dark One.'

"*My dear Tom,*" she read aloud. "*I am writing to you from where I have now settled into Malfoy Manor. I think you will be pleased with the arrangement: one that allows me my own privacy to deal with our private business, and yet keep an eye on Lucius and Black, and whatever callers there are to the manor. I have two reasons for putting quill to parchment though, Tom, and the first is one about which I am very concerned. I have not heard from you since I wrote to you last, on the day I came here, and I suspect that you are angry with me. Please don't feel snubbed ...*"

'No, no, no,' Ethel said, breaking off reading from the scroll. 'That is far too submissive, Severus. It won't do at all.'

'Just tell him you're here, and he can call and look over the arrangements, but you'd prefer if he didn't ... And say you hope he's been put out by your move,' Black said from the doorway. 'He's going to come running anyway, isn't he?'

'What are you doing here?' I snapped. 'I thought I made it clear I needed some peace.'

'No, you make nothing clear actually, Severus,' he replied, sitting down on one of my settees and sticking a cigarette into his mouth, belatedly offering me the pack in the hope I wouldn't tell him not to dare light up. I snatched one from his pack, hoping he wouldn't read that as a sign that I was actually glad of his presence, something I had no intentions of even admitting to myself.

'What's Lucius up to?' I asked.

'Worrying.'

'About what?'

'You, I suppose, or more precisely you and Lucretia. He thinks you're going to back out of marrying her,' Black replied, sitting back and making himself more comfortable than I felt. 'You don't want to marry her, do you?'

'Since when did what I want matter to anyone?' I snarled. 'But he's wrong, I shall do ...' I broke off as I felt Ethel watching me. 'Damn it, I need to make her understand ...'

'I don't think you've made any attempt to make her understand, Severus. Fuck sake, have you even spoken to the woman?' Black demanded.

'Not really, not in the way you mean,' I admitted, thinking of the one serious talk we had had, and how I had failed to make my own position as clear as I might have.

'Well, don't treat her like the idiot she clearly isn't.'

He was right; everyone was right it seemed, except for me.

Lucretia didn't call to my room that night, something that puzzled me as much as it relieved me. It did make me resolve to speak to her the next day, and I only waited until we had all breakfasted, something that took the better part of the morning in Malfoy Manor.

I looked at Ethel's picture as I sat at my desk, but she had had the good grace to make herself scarce; that only made me wonder where else she was hiding eavesdropping instead. I didn't spare it any more thought; a light knock had sounded on the door and I watched it open.

Lucretia sat on one of my settees and held up her hand. 'Let me speak first, Severus,' she said. 'I think I owe you that much.'

'No, no,' I said; I had no intentions of letting her ride roughshod over me with Lucius's grand ideas, and having me agree to anything I didn't really agree to, just for the sake of propriety. 'I have asked to see you, Lucretia, and I would like to speak first.' I paused only for a moment, to give her the best I could do with a tight smile, which I doubt was very impressive. 'We have not talked properly at all, Lucretia, and that is my fault. I should have made time to sit alone with you and discuss this ... joint future ... we are about to embark upon.' I stopped myself; I sounded as though I was discussing some kind of formal business arrangement, and although that was to a degree true, I knew I had to do better.

She was watching me; there was nothing wary about her though, and that made me suspect that she had not the fears her brother had about me backing out of the position I had been coerced into. I understood something else about Lucretia Malfoy then, something I confess I should have recognised earlier, something that was not her fault. She had really no idea of relationships, be they friendship, or love affairs, or any other sort of romantic or social associations. Of course, how could she have? She had been locked away in a series of underground rooms for her whole life, with nothing but a few house-elves and some drunken opportunists for company. What could one such as she have learnt about how to deal with the normality of day to day life?

I felt an unaccustomed smile tug at the corner of my mouth, and went to sit beside her; she really was rather fetching, after all: a delicious confection of lace and velvet and

silvery-blonde hair and porcelain skin.

'I would like to marry you, Lucretia,' I said, almost smiling again at her startled look. 'And if you permit me, I shall ask your brother for your hand in marriage this afternoon.' I had to hurry on, before she decided deliberately or otherwise that she didn't need to hear any more. 'That said, I have to make you understand some things ... about me and about you.'

'I've been unfair,' she stammered out, and I didn't think she was feigning whatever chagrin she was showing. 'I ... I shouldn't have come to your room ... I didn't mean you to feel trapped the way you do. I didn't intend that.'

'Hush,' I said, putting a finger to her lips. 'I am, after all, big enough not to be trapped by a little slip of a thing like you, am I not? Now, listen to me carefully, Lucretia, because I would not care to hurt you at any time in the future...'

'I meant what I said ... about Andromeda,' she said quickly, cutting me off.

'I know you did,' I said, pushing aside the thoughts I could no longer afford. 'And it is about Andromeda that I have to make you understand.'

'But, Severus,' she said breathlessly, 'you must listen to me too. Narcissa wants Andromeda to be her maid of honour. She is very fond of her sister ... and Lucius is considering marrying very soon.'

'I shall handle that when the time comes,' I said. 'But can you handle knowing that the man you marry may care deeply for you, be a true and faithful friend, and even your closest confidant ... and yet know in his heart of hearts that he loves another he cannot have?'

Her look was firm and determined, and I could see she did indeed understand, perhaps more than I gave her credit for; although Lucretia Malfoy was unskilled in social interaction, she was no man's fool. 'Yes, Severus, I can handle that,' she declared, 'but I am concerned that perhaps you cannot.'

'Is it good enough for you if I swear to try?' I asked, and I tried to fool myself that I asked the question of her, and not of myself.

'It is good enough,' she replied, and at last let a radiantly happy smile cross her lovely face, one that reminded me once again that I could have done a lot worse.

I took her small white hand and in mine and raised it to my lips. 'Will you marry me, Lucretia?' I asked, without the rest of the conditions I had set down at the start of the conversation.

She gave me a very roguish smile. 'I shall think about it,' she said, blushed prettily, and left the room, leaving me quite speechless, and wondering at the duplicity of women.

Lucius, Black and I had spent a while the next day with Lucretia, going through old photographs from Abraxas's personal collection, and from back issues of the "Daily Prophet", in an attempt to properly identify the men who had used her. Interestingly, she did not identify Tom Riddle, and I suppose when I thought about that, I wasn't surprised. I tended to agree with Black, too, when he suggested that that might be something we could use in the future, although I couldn't really see how that could be.

I was glad of the time I was finally getting to think clearly. So many different things had been piling up that I had felt swamped by unanswered questions and ill-thought-out moves. And yet, once I was able to think things through, I believed we were making some sort of headway, even if it was only being settled in the manor, and to a degree at least, having trust in one another. I was already beginning to understand that it would be difficult to keep Lucius in the dark for much longer about Aqua Vitae though; however dull his curiosity was, it was going to become piqued eventually. Black agreed, and also suggested that the girls begin to take the potion we all took by then, the one that would act as a buffer to Veritaserum if it were ever used on us.

I also had what I thought was a solid base on which to begin my false quest for Aqua Vitae then, one that I hoped would convince Riddle that I had been working on his behalf in any spare time I had had, not that there had been much of that. I lifted "Die Letztendliche Wahrheit?" where it had fallen open, and fingered the little book, reminding myself that it was a fake, a ruse conjured up by Ethel and Dumbledore to get me out of a tight spot. I smiled to myself as I thought through the plan I had discussed with both Black and Ethel, the one at which they had drawn uneasy looks with one another as I went through it, and finally, but very grudgingly, admitted that it might work.

The timing wasn't good; I hadn't allowed for that when I'd opened the window and sent Lucius's eagle owl on its way to find Riddle, and it was only as it circled once in the late afternoon sky that it struck me that Black would be away from the manor that night. I certainly couldn't go with him to the Shrieking Shack that night, not that there was any necessity.

Lucius had taken Narcissa to Nicolas and Perenelle's, to see Andromeda, and I hadn't failed to notice that although Lucretia had gone with them, I hadn't been invited. Perhaps that was for the best; it had left me the time I had needed alone with Black and Ethel. That aside, they would be back from Brighton soon, and I could not leave Lucretia and Narcissa alone with just Lucius in the manor, in case Riddle called straight away.

I was just stirring another batch of the buffer potion in my workroom, on the old stove of my mother's that Ethel had brought for me from Spinner's End, when Black came in, unannounced, as was his habit.

'You're remembering I'm going to see Lupin?' he asked.

I nodded.

'When are you sending the owl to Riddle?' he asked, wrinkling his nose at the acrid fumes emitting from the pewter cauldron.

'It's just gone.'

'Why didn't you wait until tomorrow?'

'I forgot about the moon,' I confessed. 'It's late now anyway, he won't call tonight,' I said with a confidence I wasn't entirely sure of.

'I'll wait here until Lucius comes back,' Sirius said, slumping down in one of my settees.

'I have plenty to do here, Black, without you hanging around under my feet, and fouling the air with those damn things,' I muttered, as he lit up one of his cigarettes.

He gave me a doubtful look that didn't fool me one bit; I knew he wanted to see Lupin, and although I was slightly concerned that he would not be at the manor, I didn't want him to feel obliged to stay with me either.

'Go away, Black,' I said, picking up "Die Letztendliche Wahrheit?", and noticing it fell open at the page it always seemed to fall open at. 'You're ruining my concentration.'

He gave one almost reluctant look to the window. The evening was falling fast, as evenings do when winter's almost there. It looked damp and bleak, and downright unfriendly, and I felt just a little smug that I was the only one of us, Ethel apart, who had not been foolhardy enough to either leave the manor, or be on the point of doing so.

'Go, Black,' I urged him. 'Lucius will be back soon, though what possible help he would be in any type of emergency leaves a fair bit of room for speculation ... and not much else.' I unscrewed the gold cap on the Glenfiddich and poured a killer measure, one I was rather looking forward to.

I don't know whether I fell asleep, or whether I was just so deep in thought that I didn't notice that the evening had slipped away so quickly, but the next thing I realised was that it was pitch black outside, and Lucius had not returned. I hauled myself to my feet, deciding to raise the wards on the manor and let him slice through them when he came home, but as I did so I felt my heart drop, as the gong in the hallway announced a visitor.

I waited in my living room, straining my ears to hear the sound of Lucius's voice, or that of Narcissa and Lucretia; I don't know why I bothered, not when I had already felt the malice of Riddle's presence, the way it invaded the very atmosphere.

He was preceded by one of Lucius's elves, a frightened looking creature that backed away as he swept into the room, leaving the four men who accompanied him in the hallway.

'Well, well, well, Severus,' Riddle said, closing the door and flinging his travelling cloak onto one of my settees, before sitting on the other. 'The mountain has had to come to Mohammed, after all.'

'I did not know where you were,' I replied as coolly as I dared. 'You said you were leaving the Blacks.'

'Do not seek to score points off me, Severus,' he said, letting a dangerous smile cross his features. He looked around the room we were in, and I could see he was resisting commenting on the fact that it was the same room he had visited in Spinner's End. 'Why, I find myself wondering, have you come here, when I was unable to persuade you to stay here not so very long ago?'

'Things change,' I replied. I unscrewed the cap of the whisky bottle, and nodded in invitation to a glass. He ignored that, but I poured one for him anyway, and laid it on the table beside him. Then I played my best card, instead of keeping it for later, just in case I didn't get the chance to use it. 'I felt isolated ... let down, Tom,' I said, feigning the reproach I had practiced with Black. 'I almost had a noose around my neck.'

He stood up quickly; concern, most likely false, lined his features. 'My Severus,' he said, crossing to where I had sat back down at my desk, and bestowing his two kisses on my cheeks. 'I came the moment I heard. How could you think that your Tom would not save you? How could you think I would not come running?'

Truth be told, where I had loathed his manic utterances before, they relieved me in part then. 'There were other reasons that we came back here,' I said. 'Things that you know nothing about. I needed protection, but I wasn't the only one. There is one you know nothing about, one who has been the victim of those who sought to frame me.'

'Are you telling me you didn't kill Abraxas?' he asked, and I could see the question was genuine, and I admit it hadn't occurred to me, even after Potter's revelations, that anyone actually believed I had done so.

'No, I didn't. I waited for you that night,' I lied, 'but you never came back. And I left here for Spinner's End.'

'And just who is this other who is worthy of your protection, when you do not see fit to live under mine?'

I played my second best card, and told him about how we had found Lucretia Malfoy, changing the date to after he had left the country, and how I had been arrested just after that, and had not had the opportunity to even send him an owl. He listened carefully, and I could almost see his delight in having so hefty an ace up his own sleeve for playing against the Blacks at some time in the future, and I foolishly thought it was going quite well. He even seemed to accept that Lucretia would be a suitable bride for me, after I presented that to him in a way that made it look as though I were complying with his once stated request that I marry.

I had just told him that we had spoken to Lucius's mother's portrait, and what we had unravelled of Lucius and Lucretia's real parents, and it was all news to him, and I truly believed I was strengthening my position at the manor, building a solid reason for staying right there.

'This all fits rather well, Severus,' he said. 'I had wondered how to go about sidelining the Blacks, without alienating them, in favour of someone else ... in a certain position of power that they seemed to have taken for granted as theirs by right.' He smiled again. 'Now, not only have you presented me with a perfect candidate, but a perfect way of us keeping the Blacks, and their little circle, in line ... without having to concern myself about any sensibilities they clearly do not have anyway.' He shook his head in disgust. 'To treat a pure-blooded aristocrat in such way ... It beggars belief,' he said, obviously failing to remind himself that he had treated her brother, and me for that matter, not that my blood was any purer than his own, to much the same physical abuse.

I didn't ask him what he meant by a candidate for a position of power, instead turning to how I thought I had a thread to begin unravelling in "Die Letztendliche Wahrheit?", when one of Lucius's elves tapped on the door, and brought in a scroll.

'From the master,' it said, and I froze, as Riddle held out his hand, and the terrified elf handed him the scroll meant for me.

"*Dear Severus,*" he read aloud.

"*We have decided to stay the night here, and shall return first thing in the morning.*

Andromeda sends you her regards.

Yours, as always,

Lucius."

My hand was in my trouser pocket, fumbling for the white stone I knew was in my frock coat pocket, upstairs in my bedroom, where I had left it that morning. The next thing I knew was that I was lying on the floor, writhing in agony I cannot even begin to describe, except that it was red.

'Where is she?' Riddle hissed down at me, pointing his long white index finger at me, his face contorted in rage. 'You will tell me, Severus, or you will die.'

'I don't know,' I gasped, as my vision starved, and I felt the pain-induced nausea rise up inside me as I tried to find a way out, even knowing there was none.

'CRUCIO,' he screamed at me, and the red agony turned to a merciful black.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Severus finds he has to accept the unacceptable.

Author's Note: Please heed the individual warning of violence for this chapter.

I seeped back to painful consciousness with the uneasy feeling that I had blacked out for longer than just a moment or two. Something about Riddle had changed; he was no longer demanding, in fact he was almost solicitous. I was slumped against the wall opposite the fireplace in my living room, and he sat at my desk; I could tell he had been flicking through "Die Letztendliche Wahrheit?".

He turned slowly to me when he sensed I was alert, and gave me a rueful look.

'Why didn't you tell me, Severus?' he asked, rising from his seat. 'It could have saved all this unpleasantness between us.'

'Tell you what?' I asked warily.

'That you are in love with Andromeda Black,' he replied.

It was then I felt Ethel slip into my mind, with relief, not realising how short-lived that was going to be. *"I think that was the safest way to go about this, Severus,"* she said. *"It will satisfy him as to why you have kept any knowledge of her secret, and yet enable you still to say you do not know where she is."*

'I don't know what you mean,' I replied to Riddle through a nauseating miasma of pain, in what I hoped he would take as an automatic denial. I wanted to think through what Ethel had said, what had sounded like a good idea, but I needed to keep my wits on Riddle; I didn't even realise then what injuries he had inflicted on me, but I knew I didn't want to risk any more.

'Come, come, Severus, do not be coy with me,' he said. 'I have it on excellent authority now.'

'What authority? I don't understand you.'

'On the authority of the crone you took in as a retainer to allow you to inherit her brother's vast fortune, Severus,' he delivered in triumph.

I was trying desperately to keep up with Ethel's babbled confirmation that she had indeed told Riddle the story he had just presented me with, when he turned to the door.

'Bring her in,' he snapped.

Ethel was shoved in the doorway by Rodolphus Lestrange, so that she went sprawling across the floor. I tried to scramble to my feet, belatedly realising that my left ankle felt as though it were broken, and I ended up toppling ignominiously in an agonised heap at Lestrange's feet instead.

'Touch anything of mine again, Lestrange, and you will regret it,' I snarled, refusing to be cowed by the fact that he stood over me with his wand drawn as I began to drag myself towards Ethel.

Riddle laughed in delight and turned to Lestrange, with his hand outstretched, and the Death Eater backed away, his face contorted in pain.

'Now help the lady up, Rodolphus,' Riddle said, switching to his cold voice. 'And apologise to her for your treatment of her. This was not a case of finders keepers,' he said. 'Anything of Severus's must be treated in the same way as if it were something of mine.' He raised his hand again, and Lestrange gasped in fear, as Ethel once again slipped into my mind.

"Don't worry about me, Severus, I am just fine," she said. *"And he didn't find me; I had to pop up under his nose for him to even notice me."*

Lestrange had bent to Ethel, and was about to put a hand on her shoulder.

'I told you not to touch her, Lestrange,' I said quietly, watching him freeze in some sort of confused apprehension, as Riddle laughed in malicious glee.

I didn't want to play with Ethel's dignity though, and I edged across the floor to her, my leg dragging behind me, and agony shooting through me with every movement, until I almost reached her.

'Can you manage to get up?' I asked, ignoring our unwelcome audience.

'So kind, master,' she whined in a voice I had never heard. 'You were always such a kind master.'

'Get out, Lestrange,' Riddle snapped. 'Apologise to the lady first though,' he added.

Lestrange turned at the door, swallowing his frightened humiliation. 'I apologise, madam,' he said, inclining his head to where Ethel looked up at him, like some dull-witted simpering old hag.

'So kind, sir, she whimpered. 'Just like my master, so kind.'

Riddle watched the door close behind Lestrange, before turning to me.

'Now, Severus,' he said. 'I find, in view of what this ... this ...' He trailed off for a moment, nodding to where Ethel had turned from me to gaze up at him. 'In view of what I have learned, I find I am willing to reconsider the Andromeda Black situation ... now that I understand your unswerving loyalty to her,' he said, his face hardening in a way I didn't like at all. 'If, that is, you demonstrate your own unswerving loyalty me.'

'I don't know what you want, Tom,' I said, not needing to feign confusion.

'I want the proverbial quid for my pro quo, Severus, of course,' he said.

I didn't say anything as I tried to work through the muddle of emotions in my mind.

'Now what shall I offer you in return, my love?' he asked, as though he were considering exchanging some inanimate object for one I would value more.

'I don't understand,' I said. 'In return for what? What are you asking of me?'

'Your loyalty, Severus,' he said. 'I thought I made that clear. I want a demonstration of your loyalty, something you have managed to wriggle out of showing thus far.' He seemed to think for a moment, as though turning over different possibilities in the mind he had probably already made up. 'Lucius, perhaps? No, no, I have plans for Lucius that do not include his imminent death ... not unless he steps out of line, of course.'

I said nothing; my eyes were riveted on the tiny woman who had moved away from me to prostrate herself at Riddle's feet, mewling like a whipped pup. She turned to me, tears leaking down the wrinkled furrows of her face. *"You cannot harm me, dear, trust me in that. Nothing you do to me can harm me, Severus. I am not of this world"* Her words slammed into my mind, belying the quivering wreck who had started to crawl across the floor to where I dragged myself again to sit with my back against the wall, watching in horrified fascination.

'Master, master,' she blabbered, a long string of drool trailing from her mouth. 'Have I not always served you well? Did I not care for you when your heart was broken?'

Riddle was watching Ethel as well, with a smile on his face. 'What for this crone, I wonder, my Severus?' he said, glancing to where I refused to meet his eye. He tapped his index finger on his teeth, and smiled again. 'I know, my Severus, I know. A deal? If you demonstrate your love for me, I shall demonstrate my love for you ... doubly. How does that sound?'

"We may do well from this, Severus." Ethel's voice slipped into my mind, as she continued her outward begging for mercy. *"Just keep remembering, dear, you will never harm me, not ever."*

I shook my head; the surreal situation had my senses reeling. 'I cannot do that, Tom, I cannot.' And I could not, I had sworn to myself long before that I would never use an Unforgivable Curse unless to save a life, and even then Avada Kedavra was the exception; those words would never fall from my lips in anger. 'I cannot, Tom. I have never killed anyone, and shall not.'

'Yes, yes, so you said, Severus,' he replied, as though tiring of his own arguments. 'But as you said yourself, things change. Now kill the crone.'

'No.'

'CRUCIO.'

I barely had time to register the searing pain that shot through my already battered body than Ethel was upon me. 'Master, master,' she wailed, 'save me.' At the same time she was pouring words of solace and calm at me, telling me then was the time to succumb, before the Dark One turned his real anger to me instead of her. *"You cannot harm me, Severus dear, but he can harm you beyond my help."*

By the time my head cleared, Riddle was standing over me. 'A deal, Severus. Just say the word ... two words to be precise, and we have a deal,' he said. 'The crone's life ... for that of Andromeda Black and her unborn child.' He smiled in victory as I looked up at him.

"Take it, Severus," Ethel's voice snapped into my mind. *"Make him swear to you, perhaps on your own life, and take it and run, dear."*

'I cannot,' I said, as much to Ethel as to Riddle.

'Severus, Severus, Severus,' he said. 'I had not taken you for a fool. If you cannot demonstrate your love for me in this way, everyone loses ... even me. You die, Andromeda Black dies, and of course her child with her ... and the crone dies anyway. Sort of heads I win, tails you lose.' He dipped his hand into the long velvet jacket he wore, and drew out an ebony wand, holding it out to me. 'You cannot blame yourself for this, my Severus ... my love. You see, I have made your mind up for you. Now ... kill the crone, and do it before I withdraw my offer.'

"Now, Severus, do not push him any further," Ethel said urgently. *"We have done well."*

I had to pull my scattered wits together, remember that the crone prostrated on the floor, weeping and wailing like a lost child was not the reality; whatever mystery was Ethel's reality was speaking to me on another level.

'You swear to me?' I whispered to Riddle. 'You swear you will spare her and her child?'

Riddle's eyes narrowed, and for a moment I thought he had seen through Ethel's act somehow, though I couldn't think how, but something completely different had crossed his mind.

'The child Andromeda Black carries, Severus,' he said, 'is it yours?'

'No,' I said quietly, wondering if I should have said yes instead.

'True love indeed then,' he said, and something crossed his face that might have been regret. 'I swear to you on my love for you, that Andromeda Black will no longer be hunted; she may stay concealed if she feels safer doing so, but I shall call off my search for her. A girl child is not the one we seek anyway,' he added, not even noticing that he was cheapening his deal.

'Swear to me on Mordestone,' I said, as some trace of my senses returned.

'I knew you were worthy of my love, Severus,' he said, his face lighting with triumph as he dipped into his pocket.

I watched Mordestone throb in his hand, and then it was almost as though it actually spun in his palm to face me, and I felt the Dark Mark on my arm rise up, and I knew if I had looked at it then, the flesh would actually have risen too.

'I swear to you on Mordestone, as it is part of you and part of me, that I shall spare Andromeda Black and her child...' he said, '... if you kill the crone now.'

"Remember, Severus dear, I have been dead for a hundred years," Ethel said into my mind. *"Do it now, dear; this is the time."*

'Merlin forgive me,' I whispered, taking the ebony wand from Riddle's hand, and pointing to where Ethel had raised her head, whimpering in terror, yet with a smile on the old face I loved. 'Avada Kedavra.' The words felt dark and ugly as they fell from my lips, leaving them and the rest of me numbed in horrified self-loathing.

I watched her little body hurtle across the room in a bolt of green light, and slam against the opposite wall, broken and twisted like a discarded rag doll, as Mordestone flared a dull, but somehow all-conquering red in Riddle's palm, and the Dark Mark on my arm rose in hellish delight.

As I dropped my head in some torment I couldn't even describe to myself, I heard the ebony wand clatter to floor, rolling away from me. I sensed Riddle stoop to pick it up, instead of levitating it into his hand. The room was filled with a hideous screaming silence, like the aftershock of an outrage, and I wonder still just how many innocent wizarding homes had felt the same gut-wrenching horror as I felt then.

"I'm here, Severus dear." Ethel slipped in to caress my mind, but for once I found no peace in her words, not with that tiny corpse-like figure lying broken opposite me. Even knowing she was already dead, and that the Curse had meant nothing to her, I felt as though I would never forgive myself that act of barbarity. I felt then that I had become what I had purported to Riddle to be, a Death Eater, and my shame burned inside me.

"Severus ... dear." Her thought was just an anxious whisper. *"Hold on, dear. Even now Sirius is on his way, and Lucius too ... he has taken the ladies to Albus, and he is on his way too."*

I couldn't respond.

I don't know how many seconds, or even hours, it was before Riddle dropped to my side; I didn't much care. I didn't even care when he put his arm across my shoulders and pulled me to him, or even when I felt his mouth at my neck in the way my very being had rebelled at it before. I felt in a way that his victory over me was even more profound than if I had actually killed a real person in anger, that he had been able to force me into turning against the thing I loved most dearly, just because of my own inadequacies. I had reached out to embrace the Darkness, and it had not found me wanting.

'I am very proud of you, my love,' he breathed into my neck, pulling me closer still. 'Do not think for a moment that I do not feel the turmoil inside you, or that it makes me

love you less. In fact, your very vulnerability makes me love you more.' He pulled back a little at that, and tried to catch my eyes, but I looked steadfastly at the floor, or the wall, or anywhere that wasn't Riddle, or the desecrated little figure at the other side of the room. 'I shall never ask you to kill again, my Severus ... never. From now on, I shall do your killing for you.'

I half listened in dull shock to his plans, for Lucius and me, and to a lesser extent, Black, without commenting. I could think of nothing but what I had allowed to happen, not even that, what I had done of my own volition. I couldn't turn away from it, or blame anyone but myself. I don't know when he left, or even if he said anything else, but I don't think he did. The next thing I was really aware of was that Ethel was at my side, like a grandmother holding a shocked child, and Sirius had dropped to his haunches at the other side, and someone had fulfilled the ultimate act of mercy to me at that time, and had moved the thing from the opposite wall.

The next moment, Lucius stalked into the room, and I had never seen him look as furious as he did then. He stooped to Black, and grabbed his shirt at his neck with one hand, and swung a punch that connected with Black's jaw, with the other.

'You selfish bastard,' he snarled as Black slumped back in shock. 'You left him alone, you ... you ...' He trailed off, seemingly unable to find a description even in his enviable vocabulary.

'Leave him, Lucius,' I murmured, hardly realising they were the first words I had uttered since the two that had betrayed everything I believed in. 'It was no one's fault but mine.'

Chapter Thirty

Chapter 30 of 48

Severus gets yet another surprise visitor

I couldn't stop shivering, as though I would never feel warm again. Every time I thought it had stopped, it began again, running through me like a river in spate, until I found myself clutching the white stone for some sort of comfort. I had sipped at the dark, suspiciously-scented tea that Ethel had produced, as she went about dressing my injuries and setting my bones, and Black and Lucius sat at either end of the kitchen table, sending waves of hostility and accusation at one another.

'It's not his fault,' I repeated to Lucius. 'Black could hardly be expected to baby-sit me when he had much more important things to do. That apart, I should have raised the wards when he left.'

'Nothing was more important,' Lucius snapped back.

'Who's with him now?' I asked Black, turning from Lucius's anger. It wasn't my place to give Lupin's secret away, but I suspected that Black would then.

'With whom?' Lucius demanded, before Sirius got the chance to make any reply.

'Minerva,' Black replied, ignoring Lucius too. 'Dumbledore sent for James when Minerva went up to get me, and she's going to wait with him until James arrives.'

'With whom?' Lucius repeated.

'Have you taken Lucretia and Narcissa to safety?' I asked Lucius, although I knew the answer, in some sort of attempt to distract him.

'Of course I have,' he snarled back. 'Andromeda too. Some of us take our responsibilities seriously.'

'Speaking of Andromeda,' I remarked blandly. 'Had you not seen fit to mention her name in the message you sent me, the one that Riddle read instead of me...' I didn't get the chance to finish, as Black seized on the remark as though it were an unexpected lifeline.

'*He what?*' he bellowed, standing from his place, and moving to the other end of table. He grabbed Lucius's cravat, as though he were about to choke the life out of him, and swung a punch at him instead, one that connected with the Malfoy jaw in the same way as Lucius's fist had connected with Sirius's.

'I think you're even now,' Ethel said with mild reproach. 'Now sit back down and behave, dears. We have more important matters to discuss than misplaced blame.'

They were suitably chided, although Lucius still had another dig, one I found I could hardly blame him for. 'You know, I would find it much easier to trust you both, if you were to extend me the same courtesy,' he said.

'He's right, dears,' Ethel replied, to Black and me this time, in both of our stead. 'You are being a little bit unfair.'

Unsurprisingly, I suppose, the thought of trying to bluff Tom Riddle by brewing a fake elixir of life in Aqua Vitae seemed to frighten Lucius. I could hardly blame him there either; it frightened me too. It was the other secret, the one about Lupin, that really got a reaction though.

'*A werewolf?*' he repeated for about the tenth time. 'A real werewolf?'

'Stop saying that, Lucius,' Black remarked. 'It's becoming boring.'

'Werewolves are many things, Black; boring is not one of them,' I said, 'the fact that Remus Lupin is one, notwithstanding.'

He shot me a hard look, one that I ignored as I felt yet another tremor run through me, leaving me feeling sick and sweaty, and I found myself clutching the stone in my pocket again, the one I never intended to leave a room without, not ever again.

'As Ethel said, we have more important things to discuss,' I said. 'Riddle's plans for us, being the most important.'

To give them their due they had set aside their hostility, perhaps in the way that only the open show of aggression between them could have precipitated; in that way it hadn't had room or time to fester. They sat back listening, as Ethel fussed about the stove, humming to herself, occasionally bringing delicious little savoury delicacies over to the table that I doubted even had names. I tried to stop myself glancing at her every few seconds, as though she would disappear, and tried to remind myself that I

couldn't have killed anyone who was already dead, far less Ethel, and that I had known and fully understood that when I had aimed that dreadful curse at her, and none of it helped me a bit.

I told Black and Lucius everything I remembered of what Riddle had told me, everything I had managed to take in. It was his immediate plan to pull the rug from under Cygnus Black's feet and propose Lucius as Minister of Magic, Barty Crouch Senior having expressed no desire for the post. 'Propose is a euphemism for demand, of course,' I said, as Black sat up straight from where he had been slouching over the table, and Lucius looked somewhat pleased with himself, for just a moment though.

'That would mean I would have to go into the Ministry,' he said with a rather pained expression. 'Every day.'

'That's a bummer when you don't get out of your bed until lunchtime, isn't it?' Black grunted.

'I think things could work very well to our advantage,' I said, ignoring both of their input, 'if we are very careful.'

Black looked thoughtful. 'I think Severus is right,' he said grudgingly to Lucius. 'You could keep an eye on Riddle's doings in the Ministry, particularly Barty Crouch the younger,' he said. 'That just leaves us with the problem of who's keeping an eye on you.'

'You are, Black,' I said as Malfoy's nostrils flared in anger. 'I forgot to say that you were mentioned in dispatches as being the one to keep the rest of the Blacks in check, without stepping on anyone's toes. Riddle seems to feel that your having a position in Ministry, and keeping it in the family, will soften the blow.'

'He obviously doesn't know my family,' Sirius said sourly, and I'm not sure whether watching the Blacks or playing second fiddle to Lucius Malfoy was more distasteful to him.

'He also wants another of his parties organised. One of his rallies,' I went on with some measure of disgust. 'Here, of course. I suspect it is his intention to announce his plans at that gathering.'

'Good,' Lucius said, with what I thought was a rather dangerous smile. 'I have one or two little announcements to make myself.'

Black gave him a long look that I didn't much like the look of, and then a rather evil grin that I liked even less.

'Please don't become inventive, Lucius,' I said. 'Nor you, Black. Neither of you have the mental capacity to carry it off.'

I went to bed not long after that; I was tired and mentally exhausted, and terrified of whatever self-examination I was about to submit myself to. I stripped warily, leaving my shirt to last, as had by then become my habit, as though taking advantage of every last second that the Dark Mark was concealed. It was benign though, almost as though it too had had a taxing day, and sought only rest, and I tried not to think of how I was allowing my own body to be its bower. I fell asleep almost immediately though, and woke only when I sensed something or someone in my room. I sat bolt upright, one hand clutching for the stone and the other for my wand, to discover the curtains being drawn by nothing more hostile than one of Lucius's uglier elves.

It was only after breakfast, once Sirius had left to go to see Dumbledore, and collect Lucretia and Narcissa, that Lucius told me what he had arranged when he had been in Brighton, and I confess it came as a bit of a shock to me. Up until then the word "marriage" had been only that, a word to describe some vague event in the future, and Lucius had suddenly brought that future down to two weeks thence. He had arranged for Nicolas Flamel to bring the required documents from France, along with a French wizarding magistrate who was empowered to conduct the necessary ceremony. I found it was hard to fault Lucius, apart from placing me in a corner I couldn't escape from. The old French magistrate had been a friend of Valerius, someone he had met on his travels, and as such, using him meant that Riddle would be unable to have his suspicions aroused by someone like Dumbledore conducting the ceremony, and would be unable to use his own spurious powers to officiate. All in all, it was a sound plan; in fact the only problem I had with it was the fact that at the end of the day, not only would Lucius be married to Narcissa, but I would be married too... to Lucretia Malfoy... until death us did part. It seemed like an awfully long time.

'Have you spoken to Cygnus?' I asked.

Lucius looked at me blankly, one of the few arts he had perfected. 'About what?' he asked.

'About the small matter of marrying his youngest daughter,' I replied, as though Lucius could not have been expected to work that much out for himself.

'Certainly not. I have nothing to say to Cygnus Black,' he said. 'Not just yet, anyway.' He looked away for a moment, and then turned to watch me carefully. 'Andromeda will be coming, Severus... for Narcissa,' he said. 'That is something you can handle, I trust?'

'What do you take me for?' I snapped. In truth, all the direct and oblique references to Andromeda that last day or so were beginning to take their toll on me, and I found myself bitterly regretting having allowed myself to be steered in anyone's direction but my own, something I knew would change once I saw Lucretia again. I knew it wasn't that I disliked her, far from it; in fact I was as fond of Lucretia as such a short acquaintance could merit. But I did resent her, perhaps not so much her, just anyone who stood between me and Andromeda, and although Andromeda was out of my reach, I felt that I had become proactive in placing yet another obstacle between us.

Lucius had just looked away again, and I wondered if he was having reservations about my marrying Lucretia too, when there was a tap on the drawing room door.

'A gentleman to see you, sir,' the elf said, bowing to me.

'Who?' I asked, shocked by the jolt of fear that ran through me, as I found the white stone in my hand.

'Mr Potter,' the elf said.

I groaned inwardly in what I refused to recognise as relief; I didn't really want to have another mental duel with Henry Potter though, but could think of no good reason for sending him away. 'Oh, very well,' I snapped, 'but let Mr Potter know that I only have a moment or two to spare.'

'Don't be so discourteous, Severus,' Lucius chided once the elf left, and I could see he was a bit put out that Henry Potter had come to see me, and not him, as though Potter's friendship with his father meant it was reasonable for Lucius to stake claim on his friendship too.

It was only when the elf arrived back at the door a few moments later that I felt my jaw drop in surprise, as Lucius, despite his criticism, spluttered as discourteous a welcome as I had heard.

'What the fuck are you doing here?' he snarled. 'Who the fuck let you in anyway?'

'Lucius,' James Potter said curtly, nodding to Malfoy before turning to me. 'Snape,' he added, as though mentioning our names were sufficient reply to be going on with.

'What on earth are you doing here, Potter?' I asked with little more grace than Lucius had shown.

'My father was with Dumbledore when Phineas Black's portrait told him that you were alone here with Tom Riddle, and were in trouble,' Potter replied. 'He asked me to come here once I was finished my other business of the day, to make sure that everything was all right.'

'And Lupin?' Lucius asked.

Potter gave him a wary look; one I suspected he didn't manage to arrest quickly enough.

'He knows,' I said. There was no point in playing silly games; I had enough of the lies and deceits when I was talking with Riddle anyway.

'Lupin is fine,' James replied. 'Do I take it that everything is all right here too? What's going on, Severus?' he asked, surprising me by using my given name without twisting it into some kind of insult. 'Why is my father suddenly so concerned about the goings on at Malfoy Manor that he sent me to see that you are safe?'

'Perhaps you should ask your father that,' Lucius answered for me.

'Oh, don't worry, I shall,' Potter replied, turning to the door. 'Thank you for the fabled Malfoy hospitality, although frankly I can't see much to write home about.'

I was about to let him go, and I could see that Lucius had already dismissed him in his mind, when a thought occurred to me. 'Tell me, Potter,' I said, 'why is it that one so vociferously against the Death Eaters and Riddle's teachings sees fit to hobnob with the likes of Barty Crouch Junior,' I asked, letting my eyebrow rise. 'Or perhaps you are going to claim that you do not know he is a Death Eater himself.'

'Of course I know,' he replied just as coolly. 'Why don't you curry favour in your way, Snape, and leave me to curry favour in mine? That way neither of us will step on one another's toes.'

I understood what he was saying: that neither one of us was going to back down, that each of us would do our watching in our own ways, that for all the hostility between us, there was no enmity.

'As you wish,' I said.

'Oh, one other thing,' he said, pausing with his hand on the door. 'Father said you should know that he has heard that there are to be some changes at the Ministry. He seemed to feel that you would understand that you should accept what is being mooted, and look upon it as an opportunity, instead of a demand. Does that make sense?'

'No,' I lied, 'but what the fuck has sense to do with anything?'

For just a moment he let the superiority drop, the Potter arrogance, and let a quick smile touch his lips; I don't know whether it was some sort of grudgingly subconscious acknowledgement of my own loyalties, but whatever it had been, I would have missed it had I blinked at the wrong moment. 'Fuck you, Snape,' he said, pulling the accustomed mantle back into place. 'You too, Malfoy.'

The weddings, as weddings go, were private affairs, conducted in Lucius's drawing room. The only people present, apart from Lucius and Narcissa, and Lucretia and me, were Black, Ethel, the French magistrate, and Andromeda. Dumbledore had seemed a little put out that, not only was he not going to be invited to conduct the brief service, but he wasn't going to get a Malfoy Manor lunch either. For my part, I thought Lucius was being a little unfair to Narcissa, by not just pretending to make some sort of peace with Cygnus Black, and letting Narcissa enjoy the splendid affair it should have been, at least that was until I found out that it had been her specific wish that the whole thing be conducted in private.

I began to wonder just what made her so driven to deny her father any victory over her groom, that she in turn denied herself what would have been the fantasy of most witches of her age. She was marrying the wizarding world's most eligible bachelor, the man of her girlhood dreams, and no one even knew. In fact it was only when Andromeda pulled me aside that I finally understood the depths that Cygnus Black had stooped to.

'Ever since our mother died he abused her, Severus,' she said, nodding to where Narcissa stood chatting animatedly with Black and the magistrate. 'From when she was eleven years old.'

I shook my head in disgust, pushing down a cold knot of fury at what some men would do. 'At least she will be safe here,' I said, just managing not to say that if anyone knew about parental abuse, Lucius was the one.

'Yes, I suppose so. I didn't desert her, Severus,' she said, searching my face for some sort of understanding of what had not even occurred to me. 'I made sure she could defend herself before I left home, made sure she parried his attacks by threatening to tell her prospective husband, whoever he might be, that she was despoiled in the worst possible way.'

I thought about that for a moment, and how Narcissa had been so forthright in the proclamation of her virginity, and just what an accomplished liar she was. 'Lucius is in for a disappointment then,' I said. 'He is expecting her to be the virgin she claims to be.'

'Lucius has no such expectations,' Andromeda replied. 'Not now. And in some way I think it is a measure that he is a better man than I ever thought him to be, that he has not dropped Narcissa like the proverbial hot brick. But,' she said with a sigh, 'I wonder how long it will be before he tires of her and her girlish ways, and seeks pastures new. He is, after all, a known philanderer... a bit like his true father was, I believe.'

'But not a bad man for all that, Andromeda,' I said, unsurprised that she knew of Lucius and Lucretia's true sire; after all, they had had all day and most of the evening to fill in when they had all been at Flamel's house in Brighton.

'You've done well, Severus,' Andromeda said, changing direction, her eyebrow rising in something that might have been challenge, as she looked across to where Lucretia stood with Lucius. 'I hope you love her.'

I wanted to tell Andromeda that I loved only her, but that part of my tongue was tied.

She looked away for a moment, as though to check we were alone, and that Black wasn't standing eavesdropping as was his habit, before turning back to face me, and it was only then that I remembered something I should have remembered long before then. Dumbledore might have erased her memories of the time we had spent at Spinner's End, but he had never known about the conversation that Sirius had had with Andromeda on the night of the party at Malfoy Manor, the night that Sirius had told her I was in love with her. Andromeda put her hand on my arm and squeezed it, and it was all I could do not to gasp at her touch.

'Time and circumstance have been unkind to us. I do know you, Severus,' she said, and the regret in her voice tore my heart. 'And I know that you would have found it difficult to come to me without any encouragement on my part, but now at least, I hope you understand why I could not come to you. I could not leave her, not then, not when she was so young. And then later... well, then we had both gone our own ways, and it was too late.'

I nodded, unable even to meet her eyes, frightened to read what might test my resolve to breaking point. I saw Lucius across the room, exchanging a few seemingly anxious words with Black as he shot a look in my direction. He began to move away, towards where Andromeda and I stood, only to be pulled back by Lucretia, and I knew Lucretia fully understood, and that she would perhaps not be the wife I had longed for, but she would be a fitting wife for all that.

'Be happy,' I whispered, leaning across to kiss Andromeda's cheek. 'Be as happy as I would want you to be.' I moved away, towards where my bride was watching me, serene and beautiful, and assured of her own peculiar place in what passed for my affections, without waiting for Andromeda's reply.

Chapter Thirty-One

Chapter 31 of 48

Severus settles into married life only to find that the way before him has already been mapped out by others.

It was two days after the weddings that Riddle next called, ostensibly to offer his good wishes and his blessings, one of which we could have done without, and the other which he had no right that I could think of to bestow. He didn't take long to get to his real reason for calling though, and waited only until he had made himself comfortable, and me extremely uncomfortable, in the seat at my fire.

'Have you suggested to your brother-in-law yet the little matter of the party I had wanted him to give?' he asked, giving me a look that invited me to sit at his side.

'Yes, I have, Tom, but I have done nothing else about it yet,' I said, sitting quite deliberately at my desk, and finding my hand had dropped to "Die Letztendliche Wahrheit?". I found myself frowning as I picked it up, so sure was I that it had been on my bookshelf. 'I have much work to do, Tom,' I said, using the book as a prop, 'and what with the weddings, and settling in, I have left the arrangements to Lucius.'

'Ah yes, his upbringing will ensure that the affair is as suitably tasteless as it is ostentatious,' he replied, and something about that annoyed me.

'Have you come here just to try to demean Lucius in my eyes, Tom?'

'No,' he replied, his tone hardening to let me know that whilst I might think I could best him in a duel of words, it was the only one I could ever hope to win. 'I have come to let you know that Lucretia Malfoy will not come between us, my love. Do not worry about that.'

'Lucretia Snape,' I replied.

He let the cold smile touch his lips, the one that didn't know the way to his eyes. 'As you wish, my Severus,' he said. 'May I meet her?'

I had known that would be inevitable; Lucretia herself had pointed out as much to me, and I knew that even then she would be preparing herself for the meeting. 'Of course you may. It will be my pleasure to introduce her to you.'

I left him in my sitting room, and when I got back, with my wife at my side, he was sitting in the same seat he had occupied when I had left, but I fancied he had made use of the few moments to go to my desk and see if he could make any further sense of the small book.

He stood up when Lucretia entered the room and bowed formally, like the gentleman his façade fooled the unwary into thinking he was. Then he took her hand in his and kissed it, and I felt such a welling up of outrage that his lips could desecrate her so that I almost reached for my wand to blast him away, even with his ever present escort of four Death Eaters just outside the door.

'You may leave us now, my dear,' I said to Lucretia. 'Perhaps you would be good enough to ask your brother and Black to join us though.'

She nodded uneasily, as I pretended not to notice Riddle's little flash of annoyance that we would not be alone, but then, that had been his own fault; he was the one who had given me the opening by asking to meet Lucretia.

'Do I take it that Severus has informed you of the position I would like you to take up, Lucius?' Riddle asked once Malfoy and Black had joined us.

'I had thought that Barty Crouch was the favoured candidate for the post,' Lucius replied. 'And what with his son at the Ministry too, that you were trying to keep it in the family, so to speak.'

'Things change, Lucius,' Riddle replied, omitting to mention that Barty Crouch the elder had made it clear in some circles that he had no further interest in not only the ultimate post, but the Ministry of Magic as a whole. 'Your own circumstances make you the obvious choice,' he said, looking around my sitting room as though he were seeing the whole of Malfoy Manor.

'My own circumstances do not dictate that I work for a living, as such,' Lucius replied. 'In fact, work is not really something for which a Malfoy cares to gain a reputation.'

'Of course not,' Riddle agreed, with a toned down version of his dangerous smile. 'Look upon it more as your civic duty,' he said.

I was tiring of the masquerade of manners. 'Tom, can we get to the point? I have work to do,' I said, as meaningfully as possible. I had actually been hoping to find out where he was staying, but dared not ask, in case he turned that into an invitation to stay at the manor, as one so skilful with words could quite easily do.

He stood up though, as though dismissing himself before anyone took it upon themselves to do so instead, and I knew he was paying some kind of court to Lucius and the power of the money behind him, that he was still trying to work out how best to settle the Malfoy millions firmly on his side of the table.

'It would be an honour to have you as the head of Ministry, Lucius,' he said disarmingly. 'It would be a fitting title for the head of this country's most important house.'

'I have not refused, Tom,' Lucius replied.

'You have not accepted either.'

'I do now,' Lucius said quietly, and I thought he had struck the perfect balance between allowing Tom Riddle to ask him more than once, and waiting for him to demand.

I saw Black sit back in what might have been relief, and although he had said nothing at all, I thought we had all done quite well, and I think Tom Riddle thought so too; I wasn't sure if that was good or bad.

Lucretia and I had the whole of the upper west wing of the manor to ourselves, and I found I had frequently to remind myself that I was there by marital right and no longer a guest. Lucius and Narcissa had the east wing, where Lucius's rooms had always been. Black had also made himself quite at home, taking up a considerably larger space than any temporary resident could be reasonably expected to do, inhabiting the whole of the area between the two top wings, behind where the third central staircase rose to the bell tower. It was all very comfortable of course; not only did we all have our bedchambers, and their various dressing rooms and so forth, but we all had our own private sitting rooms: the two ladies' rooms overlooking the east and west rose gardens, and the men's overlooking the kitchen gardens to the duck ponds beyond. None of us really ventured into each other's private sanctuary, except for Black of course, who seemed to think it behoved him to mind everyone else's business apart from his own. The upper corridors of the manor became cold and draughty as winter set in though, and I found I was downstairs in my old Spinner's End rooms most of the time. All in all we had spread out in the huge gothic pile in such a way as to leave no room for even an overnight visitor, something I suspected we were all quite happy about.

Ethel seemed always to stay in what had been her old domain too, although one day, not long after Riddle's visit, I found her in the cellar. I happened upon her quite by

chance, when I had gone down to examine the bookshelves beside the hidden chambers, drawn there by I knew not what. She was talking, and at first I thought she was talking to herself, something not really out of the ordinary, just a small step from the way she would hum to herself, and I thought little of it, except that it was strange that she had chosen the dusty catacombs to do so. It was only when I got to the chamber she was in that I found she had taken the trouble to bring her little chair and her tea down with her, and that she had an audience of sorts in the throng of unquiet spirits that inhabited the manor's netherworld.

The door was almost closed, and I could only see her back. I hadn't been noticed, and drew back to eavesdrop, much the way Black would do, justifying the action by telling myself that she would know I was there anyway, in the way she always did.

'Has he attempted to break through again?' Ethel asked.

'No, not since the last time the Dark One was here,' the ghost of Atticus Malfoy replied. 'It is only when the Dark One is here that he becomes restless.'

'You must move Severus along, Emeline my love,' a deep rich voice added, using Ethel's real name, as I frowned, wondering at the strength of timbre from what must also have been a ghost. 'We cannot allow the other to gather strength from our world too; to do so could indeed make him unstoppable, and bring the chaos a thousand years of work and watchfulness has held at bay.'

'The pieces are almost in the place,' she said. 'Even now the dancers are taking up their partners for the waltz.'

'The final member has joined them?' Atticus asked. 'Well done, Emeline.'

'Not quite, Atticus,' she said. 'But even now, both he and Severus are breaking down their old barriers.'

Someone chuckled and the deep voice spoke again. 'And do they know that, Emeline?' it asked. 'Or are you working your mysterious ways again?'

'Now, now, Godric, be nice,' she said, and I drew further back, stifling my gasp. 'Leave me to draw our line together, and I shall leave you to keep tabs on Salazar's.'

'On the Malfoys, you mean?' Atticus queried, but I could sense amusement lacing his voice.

'Indeed not, Atticus,' Ethel replied. 'Your own family has anchored itself firmly to the Blacks again, our side of the Blacks that is, but it is not the Malfoy side of that alliance that troubles me.'

'The Blacks then?' another voice said, one that I vaguely recognised from somewhere, but couldn't think how that could be.

'Quite,' Godric Gryffindor confirmed, as I tried to search my memory for a name to put to the other voice. 'For every good apple that was ever plucked from that particular family tree, a rotten one always fell to the ground too.'

'Is it wise then to have so many of my family in this inner circle of yours, Emeline?'

'We must, Phineas,' Godric replied for her, confirming what I had just guessed, as I recognised the voice I had often heard muttering from the portrait in Dumbledore's office. 'They are of my line too, and it is the very fact that Sirius Black's line runs through both the Slytherins and Gryffindors, with the same even-handedness as the Princes, that makes him so important an ally for Severus. He and his brother Regulus are the epitome of that very split in the Black line, and the fact that neither he nor Regulus will have heirs means that when they die, that peculiarity will die with them.'

'They must both die?' Phineas asked. 'Sirius too?' he said, with what sounded like genuine regret. 'I confess I had hoped...' He trailed off.

'All men die,' Godric replied. 'Some sooner than others, Phineas. But I did not say it would be soon.'

There was a silence for a few moments, as each seemed to mull over what they had talked about, and I stood hardly daring to breathe, as I waited for whatever revelations were still to come. It was Atticus who broke the silence, turning in yet another direction.

'Has the Malfoy line been secured yet?' he asked.

'I think so,' Ethel replied. 'I think that even now Narcissa Black carries your great-grandson below her heart, although neither she nor Lucius knows that yet.'

'And Lucretia?' Atticus asked, as I felt myself squirm in a discomfort that had nothing to do with standing stock still in a dark dusty passage, and wondered if there would ever be anything I would do that was not dictated by some higher force.

'Not yet, Atticus,' Ethel replied. 'I am unsure if the potions that Abraxas dosed her with to ensure she did not bear children will ever be properly purged from her.'

'Does Severus know of this?' he asked. 'After all, when a man takes a wife it is fair for him to expect his line to be perpetuated.'

'I don't know if that is a distraction that Severus can afford, Atticus,' Ethel murmured. 'He has quite enough people to look after without his burden being unnecessarily increased.'

I felt like an insubstantial pawn in a game I had not asked to play, somehow embittered that I was being discussed in such a manner, until I was brought up short again.

'The Dark One is searching for heirs of the lines,' Ethel said. 'Severus believes Riddle knows that any half-blooded male children of the Blacks, the Potters, the Dumbledores and the Princes are the ones he should seek out as his vessel for Aqua Vitae. He would seize upon the dilution in Severus's blood as sufficient, if he were to be thwarted for too long. Let us hope that Lucretia does not provide him with another dagger to use on Severus's heart, and let us not provide him with a choice of babes to harvest.'

'Does Severus still believe that the book is naught but a ruse to free him from a difficult situation?' Godric asked.

'I'm sometimes unsure just what Severus thinks,' Ethel confessed. 'But he seems to keep returning to it, and I have now charmed the necessary pages. I shall just say that I suspect that he suspects.'

I sensed they had said most of what they were going to say, and I was about to move away, hopefully undetected, when something tapped on my mind, something that didn't except to be denied entry. "*Show yourself now, my boy,*" it said. "*We have indeed said all that you need to know for the time being*"

It was only then that I realised that someone else stood in the shadows opposite me, and I wondered how I had not sensed him immediately, until I understood just who it was. He seemed also to have been summoned, and began to move towards the little chamber. Acknowledging me as absently as I acknowledged him, Albus Dumbledore pushed the chamber door open.

I don't know whether I expected to be met by the ghost of Godric Gryffindor, or even his original portrait looking down on me, but what Ethel had actually done had been to take her fire down with her. As she had told me once before, the living were not permitted to speak to Godric, and whoever else was part of what she had referred to as the highest court of our people, and so her fire was just that then, a merry blaze flickering in the middle of the floor, casting dancing shadows on the stone walls that I could even see through the rest of the assembled ghosts. Phineas Black was in his portrait, and that made me wonder if Dumbledore had been invited from Hogwarts to bring it with him, or if, like me, he had just been drawn there.

It was Atticus who turned to me first. 'My grandson-in-law,' he said dryly, 'if such a relationship exists.' I nodded back to him, quite at a loss as to how to proceed, or indeed if I should do so at all, but he went on without seeming to expect any response. 'You understand what we have discussed here, Severus?' he asked. 'And, of course, why

you could not be party to our meeting until now?’

‘I think so,’ I replied, noticing that Dumbledore had taken a seat beside Ethel, and realising that the only reason that he too had had to wait outside the chamber was because of Godric’s presence. It was odd, but I could almost feel Godric Gryffindor’s aura in the air, in a kind of equal yet opposite way to the way I felt the menace of Riddle’s. ‘I have to use the book?’ I asked. ‘It is genuine, after all?’

‘Oh, yes,’ Dumbledore replied. ‘It is not even one of the five original copies,’ he said. ‘It is the actual book.’

‘How can that be?’ I asked. ‘The condition of the book is... is of this era... of this time. The original codices would be untouchable.’

‘Mmm,’ Dumbledore concurred. ‘I should not really attempt to educate anyone who knows everything already,’ he said, ‘but suffice it to say that the book has been charmed.’ And at that he nodded to Ethel, who was sitting like innocence personified. ‘It has been charmed not only to appear as one of the copies, but also to withstand your touch, and the very air around it.’

I spun on Ethel. ‘You told me it was a recipe book,’ I accused.

‘Actually I didn’t, dear,’ she said mildly. ‘If you recall, I merely said that he could take whatever wart cures he found as necessary to the preparation of Aqua Vitae, if he chose to. The rest of the suppositions were yours alone.’

I gaped at her audacity.

‘Now, Severus, stop making a fuss,’ she said. ‘That is a great failing of yours. Do you understand those whom you need to keep close?’

‘Yes,’ I replied. ‘Black, Lucius and...’

‘You won’t choke on the name, dear,’ she scolded, as I felt my lip twist.

‘I very well might,’ I muttered. ‘Does he know?’

She raised her eyebrow at me.

‘James Potter.’ I spat the name out, glad it was gone and I didn’t have to say it again. ‘Does he know?’

‘Not yet, dear,’ she replied. ‘We shall leave that up to you.’

Chapter Thirty-Two

Chapter 32 of 48

A tasty dinner and a nasty shock for some of the Blacks.

‘You know, Lucius, it is customary in polite society for a gentleman to make mention of his wife’s name when issuing an invitation to his home,’ I said, handing his third draft back to him.

‘You know, Severus, this would be much easier if you were to correct the whole thing at one time, instead of piecemeal,’ he snapped back as Black stuck a cigarette into his mouth and snorted in derision; I wasn’t quite sure how he managed not to swallow the cigarette.

‘Anyway,’ Lucius went on, ‘I have not announced my marriage to the world at large... just yet.’

‘Were you intending to tie Narcissa up in your bedroom until the guests have left?’ I asked, as Black gave another unhelpful snort at my admittedly poor choice of words.

‘No,’ Lucius replied, giving Black a long glance that I didn’t much like the look of. ‘I shall indeed announce our union, and as Lucretia’s brother, I shall announce yours too... as and when I see fit... during the course of the evening.’

‘And am I expected to keep my own wife under similar wraps until you tell me otherwise?’ I asked somewhat waspishly. If the truth were told, I would have been only too happy to keep Lucretia away from the company of any of the men who had abused her in the past, and I had been more than a little disappointed in both Black and Lucius’s, and even Ethel’s, seeming nonchalance when I had mentioned that. Even Lucretia had appeared to be unconcerned.

‘Leave that to us,’ Black said as cryptically as one as transparent as he could possibly do. Then he drew Lucius yet another knowing look, and at last I realised that they were waiting for me to ask just what half-cocked plan they had up their sleeves. ‘Wives aren’t invited anyway,’ he added, and I wasn’t sure if that were just because he had convinced Lucius that he didn’t want to come up against the redoubtable Walburga again so soon.

I listened to them explain how they intended to pull whatever rug Cygnus Black happened to be standing on, from under his feet, and then tell me how they were going to topple the rest of the Blacks and assorted hangers-on-ers on top of him, with mounting alarm.

‘Enough,’ I said faintly, holding my hand up. ‘That is bordering on insanity.’

‘Which bit?’ Black asked through a cloud of noxious blue smoke.

‘All of it,’ I snapped.

‘He just means that he wishes he had thought of it,’ Lucius said knowingly, sitting back in his seat and looking rather pleased with himself.

It was then that Ethel turned from where she had been pottering about at her stove. She came to the table and laid a plate of tasty little fancies in front of Lucius, whom she seemed to have taken another shine to for some reason, before giving me one her “back down now, Severus, before it’s too difficult” looks.

‘How do you think you’re going to carry it off anyway?’ I snarled, refusing to acknowledge to myself that she had any sway over me.

Lucius gave me a pitying look, as Black grinned like the madman I had long suspected he was. 'We thought that we would let Tom Riddle into the secret... seeing as he is the only person, our own circle apart, who actually knows that you and I are now married men, Severus,' Lucius replied. 'In that way, he too can use the evening's alternative cabaret to his advantage.'

'Your advantage, you mean,' Black supplied, stubbing out his cigarette. 'You're the one who's going to be Minister of Magic.'

'Whatever,' Lucius said airily. 'Now get in touch with Riddle, Severus... we've done everything else.'

I stood up, angry with all of them, angry at the way they seemed to have deliberately underestimated the seriousness of Tom Riddle's rally, as though it were just another chance for Lucius to display his wealth for everyone else to envy, without a thought about what he was allowing himself to be used for, as though being Tom Riddle's Minister of Magic were going to be a feather in his already over-adorned cap, instead of the millstone around his neck that it would turn out to be. I didn't even bother to explain my misgivings, so sure was I that they would have been have lost on them. The only small comfort I felt about the whole business was that Riddle had intimidated he wanted Black at the Ministry too; perhaps Sirius could use himself as some sort of buffer between Lucius and what Riddle's more outrageous demands were likely to be.

'I'm sorry, Lucius,' I said. 'You may use your own wife in whatever way you see fit, but you're not using mine.'

'She was my sister first,' Malfoy replied, as though that made any sense, his voice taking on what he probably fancied was a hard edge.

'It's all right, Severus,' Lucretia said, from where she and Narcissa had appeared in the doorway. 'I have agreed... with your permission, of course.'

Lucius and Black were a startling counterpoint to the men who began to arrive in twos and threes for pre-dinner cocktails, all dressed in black tails, and strangling high collars, and white bow ties, and I always thought it odd that such rabidly pure-blooded men saw fit to so closely mimic the fashion of Muggle high society.

Lucius wore his customary conglomeration of silks and velvets, in pale blues and violets and greens, forsaking only the fine leather he favoured adding to the melting pot through the day, and Black took up whatever else the spectrum had to offer. Yet I have to admit that, whilst for myself I favoured traditional black wizard evening robes, at least Sirius and Lucius looked like men of magic, which was more than the rest of them did.

Riddle was last to arrive, of course, and I could see Lucius was wearying of putting on an act of welcoming the men he so loathed. I had been becoming a little concerned about just what else Lucius and Black had planned for the evening; they had seemed to have had their heads together for a suspicious part of the week before, and Black had taken the unusual step of actually leaving the manor a couple of times. We sat down to dinner, with nothing much out of the ordinary happening, and I began to relax enough to keep my attention firmly focussed on Riddle, to the extent of almost not noticing that the racks of Welsh lamb had been slightly overcooked, again, although what I recognised as Ethel's redcurrant sauce nearly made up for the fact.

The tables were set in a less formal way than the last party at Malfoy Manor, but the only change to the seating of the table Riddle was at was that Lucius sat on Riddle's left, where Abraxas had sat the last time, and Sirius sat where Lucius had sat. I could see that didn't please Cygnus, or indeed Orion, who shot his eldest son hostile looks throughout most of the meal. I noticed he had brought Regulus, as though to take up the slack where Sirius had been previously, and reminded myself to ask if he had actually been invited. I doubted that though; Lucius, Sirius and I were the only ones of our own generation there, and I suspected Orion had brought Regulus as his second of some sort, another Black to bolster their numbers. I spent the meal once again at Riddle's right hand, even less comfortable with that arrangement than I had been the last time, perhaps knowing that was because I was there of what I could only admit to myself was my own volition.

Riddle declined to make a speech after Lucius's toast to him, one which I had taken the liberty of writing for him after his own four attempts, saying that he would address his dear and faithful friends as they relaxed over Lucius's fine brandy and port. I sat back listening to the scrambling of chairs, taking the time to watch the men who had come searching for me on the night that Abraxas died in the hope of abusing me in the way in which they had abused Lucius so many times, and I found myself, whilst not quite looking forward to what Lucius had planned for that night, at least sympathising with it. I was just about to stand when Orion Black caught my eyes, and I was almost shocked at the malevolence that seemed to seep across the room to me. He looked away quickly, saying something to his younger but more favoured son, as Riddle bent to me.

'Come, my love,' Riddle purred. 'Let us have our sport now. Let Lucius repay the impertinences meted out to you and him... and, of course, your dear wife.'

Riddle had lulled them into a false sense of wellbeing; perhaps in turning down the opportunity to reply to Lucius's toast he had led them to believe that any rumours that might have been flying around their inner circles about Malfoy favouritism were unfounded. He was a virtuoso of that particular game, a grand puppet master, moving his marionettes this way and that, until they were placed just so.

We had retired to the manor's formal drawing room, the one in which Lucius had received his visitors on the day that he had returned to the manor after Abraxas's death. It was an almost decadent display of ancient wealth, with its voluminous burgundy-coloured drapes, held in place by gold ropes, making their dusty drop to the floor; and its glowing old wood; and its Afghan pixie rugs, woven in patterns of dark reds and greens and blues, that seemed to shift before the eyes into patterns of women in barely concealed sexual poses; or perhaps that was just what I saw, and each man saw his own fancy.

As the talk became desultory and the men drank their fill of Lucius's cellars, Riddle stood from where he had been sitting nursing a large snifter of 1956 Cognac in his favoured seat at the fireside. I watched him nod to Lucius, who left the room, and felt my stomach flood with unpleasant warmth. I knew the ladies were with Ethel, just as I knew she would have schooled them in how to act, but I still worried for Lucretia, about how she would handle facing the beasts in that room. I watched Orion Black and Igor Karkaroff share what I suspected was a ribald comment, their features thickened and ugly with drink, and I knew then that I should never have permitted Lucius and Black to subject Lucretia to what was about to happen.

'My friends,' Riddle began. 'My most faithful and dear friends.' He paused to make sure that even those most deeply in their cups had given him their attention, and I suspected for Lucius to close the door as he slipped back into the room. 'As most of you know the position of Minister of Magic is about to become vacant, and that is just one of the reasons why the Malfoys have so graciously entertained us yet again in their magnificent home.'

One or two of them frowned at his reference to more than one Malfoy, but the moment passed as a few others tipped their glasses in Lucius's direction in some type of belated acknowledgement of his hospitality.

'It is fitting, my friends,' Riddle went on, 'that we have once again been invited here, to this most prestigious of wizarding homes, for the launching of what I know will be the spectacular career of the only man really worthy of the position.' He looked towards where Cygnus Black had begun to rise to his feet, as his own inner circle of Orion and Karkaroff and Darius Shield let one of Lucius's elves top up their glasses. 'Gentlemen,' Riddle said, content now that the pawns were placed to his satisfaction, 'let us raise our glasses to my new Minister of Magic... our new Minister of Magic.' He smiled once at Cygnus Black, and turned at last to the man who stood just inside the doorway. 'I give you Lucius Malfoy.'

There was a silence for a moment, as though the assembled Death Eaters were waiting for Riddle to complete a sentence he couldn't possibly have finished. I had to hand it to Lucius at that point; his Malfoy arrogance, and sense of self-esteem, rose to the occasion in a way which it could only have done if it were inbred.

'Thank you, Tom,' he replied grandly, surveying the stunned faces, and ignoring the muttering that had begun to rise from where Cygnus had slumped back down into his seat, his face an unwholesome milky colour, with Orion and Karkaroff whispering urgently to him.

'I have a couple of little announcements of my own,' Lucius went on.

'Have you indeed?' Orion snarled across the room to him. 'Well, I for one, don't care to listen to them.' He turned to where Riddle was watching what might as well have been a little mummery acted out for his amusement. 'Might we have a little word with you, Tom?' Orion said meaningfully. 'I fear you may have been misled about Mr

Malfoy's allegiance to you. It was something Abraxas was most concerned about.'

'Really?' Riddle replied. 'Well, enlighten me here, Orion. We are after all, old friends, all of us, are we not? And what should be said to one, should be said to another... the fact that Abraxas and indeed you, Orion, had reservations about Lucius and did not bother to tell me, notwithstanding.'

'I'll tell you,' Cygnus said, rising to his feet, his face suffused with the rage of one who has been bettered by whom he sees as an inferior. He pointed first to Lucius, and then swung his arm around to encompass Black and me. 'You are surrounding yourself with fools and traitors, Tom. At least the Blacks have seen fit to purge the impurities from our family,' he said, giving Sirius a look that seemed to leave him unmoved. 'And I happen to know that it was only Abraxas's deep sense of family honour that stopped him from denouncing his own son... that... that useless dandy that you see fit to foist upon us as Minister of Magic. And as for that upstart, Snape, why, he's not even pure of blood...' He trailed off, seeming to realise his indiscretion, and what parallel he drew to Riddle himself, and settled for giving Lucius a long derisory look, as though satisfying himself of his own superiority. 'Minister of Magic indeed. Shall I tell you what his own father thought of him...?' He trailed off yet again, this time in what looked like shock, as the door opened once more.

I looked at my wife for a long moment: serene and composed, and incredibly beautiful, and I smiled to myself in some kind of self-reproach as I understood how I had underestimated those around me, before glancing across to where Black had gone to stand at Lucius's side. I gave the two of them a hard look, promising myself I would give them an equally hard time for keeping me in the dark.

Riddle had lifted his brandy glass. 'To the Malfoy family honour,' he said in a mocking toast, as a goodly few of the men present shifted uneasily at the sight of Lucretia. 'And to the honour many of the regular visitors to this manor have heaped upon the line.' He smiled over to where both Orion and Cygnus had sat back down; there was a vein throbbing in Cygnus's temple, and I hoped he wasn't about to have a seizure, we weren't quite finished yet. I could see that several of the other men were confused, men who obviously had no idea of what was going on, or indeed just who Lucretia actually was. It was Regulus Black who voiced his bewilderment first.

'Father,' he said urgently, grasping Orion's arm. 'We are not voting for the election of Lucius Malfoy surely. What of my uncle's own position?'

'Shut up, whelp,' Riddle snapped, his own veneer slipping to let the ungracious thug he truly was show through. 'We are discussing family honour at the moment, not something a brat such as you would know about.'

'What's going on here?' Shultz, an elderly American wizard spoke up, from where he had been muttering to Evan Rosier's father. 'Is there something that we should know about?'

'How can we be expected to endorse your choice of the new Minister, if we don't know what's going on?' Augustus Rookwood asked, adding his own voice to the confusion.

'Gentlemen, gentlemen, patience,' Riddle said. 'I was merely giving the Blacks, as the largest single contingent here, the opportunity to voice their approval of my choice first,' he said, as though it mattered a whit whether anyone agreed or disagreed with what Tom Riddle intended to do. 'And for the record, Cygnus, whilst we are talking about the Malfoys, perhaps it is time for you to know that Lucius, as Valerius's son, has always outranked Abraxas, and any matters of the family honour should really have been addressed to him... something, I fear, that has not always been the case.'

'Valerius?' Shultz echoed, as Cygnus seemed to draw back, as though someone had thrown a bucket of cold water at him. 'Abraxas's brother?' Shultz went on. 'He's been dead for years.'

'Indeed,' Riddle concurred. 'Twenty-nine years, I believe,' he said, turning to Lucius. 'Is that about right?'

Lucius just nodded, his eyes blazing his open hatred of Cygnus Black and his cronies, and I hoped he wasn't about to do anything stupid.

'And who is this pretty little thing anyway?' Rookwood asked, nodding across to where Lucretia took a step backwards, like a nervous fawn. 'She looks damn like a Malfoy to me.'

'Indeed,' Riddle agreed again. 'But let us not sidestep, gentlemen. May I have a show of hands for the Minister elect... just for effect?' he suggested disarmingly. 'It would not do for him to feel that his position was anything but unanimously welcomed. Why don't you start the ball rolling, so to speak, Cygnus?'

'Or why not you, Father?' Black said to Orion. 'Or perhaps I should go and have a little chat with Mother, about... things.'

'Is this really necessary?' Karkaroff asked, his voice blustering, but failing to hide his apprehension. 'If he's to be Minister, so be it, but surely we are not expected to prostrate ourselves before him.'

'What's the matter, Igor?' Schulz drawled easily. 'I've got nothing against the boy. Fine family, good bloodlines... in fact, even better if that old goblin Abraxas weren't his father,' he said, shoving his hand in the air. 'He's got my vote, Tom. In fact anyone has, as long as it isn't me,' he added with a guffaw that trailed off into an ominous sounding spluttering cough.

One by one at first, and then all of the rest of the Death Eaters' hands were raised, until only the Blacks, Karkaroff and Darius Shield were left. I could see Cygnus had been thinking about how to extricate himself from what had become a painful, and potentially very damaging, situation. He hadn't looked at Lucretia at all, not since he had first watched his own aspirations pass her in the doorway.

'The Ancient and Most Noble House of Black wishes it to be known that we shall always stand behind any Minister of Magic,' he said. 'That goes, of course, for my cousin Darius Shield, and my old friend, though not in blood, Igor Karkaroff,' he said. 'As I trust the house of Malfoy will also stand with the Blacks?' he invited, but any challenge he might have hoped for was sadly lacking.

'The Malfoys,' Lucius replied, nodding to Lucretia, 'myself, my sister, and whosoever else should complete our family, now or in the future, will always deal in the same way as that in which we are dealt, Cygnus.' He nodded to where Sirius had moved to the door. 'Perhaps, Sirius, you would be good enough to escort Lucretia to her rooms now...' He let his words trail as the murmurs rose around the room, and some of the tension dropped as many of the men present began to think they had been let off a hook of their own making.

It wasn't much later when the Death Eaters began to make their excuses, and roused themselves for their various homeward journeys. I was a bit nervous that Tom Riddle might seize upon the opportunity of being at the manor and siding so obviously with Lucius, to make some sort of attempt to stay for the night, a move that I dreaded might lead to a more permanent addition to our household. He didn't though, and I confess I was a little surprised when Schultz hauled himself to his feet.

'I don't want to drag you away, Tom, but I'm an old man now, and I can't keep up with the all-night drinking parties the way I used to,' he said. 'My wife is waiting up to greet you too, and she's not that much younger than me.'

Riddle nodded across to him, in a way that made me want to keep my eye on Morton Schultz; the two were obviously old friends. 'I was just waiting to bid the ladies goodnight, Morton,' Riddle said; then he turned to Lucius. 'They will join us again?' he asked, but I doubted if anyone noticed that he referred to more than one woman.

'Just for a moment, Tom,' Lucius replied, eyeing the Blacks, who were on their way out of the drawing room. 'They will bid our guests goodnight in the entrance hall.'

Lucius's elves were scurrying about with an assortment of cloaks and hats and silk scarves and white kid evening gloves when I sensed, rather than saw, two women appear on the minstrels' gallery, at the top of the grand staircase which led to the drawing room we had just come from and the rest of the manor's upper apartments.

I was standing with Lucius and Riddle at the time, and we all turned to watch Narcissa and Lucretia come down the stairs, with Sirius Black between them.

'Ah, the delightful ladies,' Riddle said loudly, in case anyone present had missed them. He moved across the hall and held out his hand to take Lucretia's as she got to the bottom step, as I moved across with the same intention, but had to content myself to take Narcissa's instead.

'Oh no, you don't,' Cygnus Black bellowed in rage, shoving me out of the way, and grasping Narcissa's arm. 'You're coming right back home with me, you little trollop. How dare you despoil yourself with this... this upstart of a pauper,' he screamed, quite bereft of his senses. 'He might fool some, but he certainly doesn't fool me.'

'Really, Cygnus,' Lucius said, crossing the hall too, content that everyone's attention was now on the little tableau, 'control yourself, dear fellow.'

'Don't order me around where my own daughter is concerned, Malfoy. Stay out of what's none of your business,' Cygnus snarled, turning again to where Narcissa was trying to drag her arm away from her enraged father. 'There's no hope for you now, you little whore. You'll never make a decent marriage now you've ruined yourself the same way as your sister...' He trailed off, roaring in shock as Lucius's fist caught him on the corner of the mouth, drawing blood and knocking Cygnus off his feet to land in a heap of outrage at my feet.

'That was for calling my wife a whore, Cygnus,' Lucius said. 'Now you may leave our home, and never return to it until you are at least able to conduct yourself as the gentlemen you most clearly are not.'

'Wife?... Wife?' Cygnus spluttered, wiping his hand across his mouth. 'She's not your wife. I haven't consented to her marrying anyone... far less you, Malfoy.'

'Oh, dear, Severus,' Lucius said, turning to me, before looking back to where Cygnus was dragging himself to his feet, 'I knew we had forgotten something in all the excitement. Well, well, I'm sure it doesn't matter much. You were the one after all, Cygnus, who tried to foist her off onto me for so long. This way, we're all happy.' He gave Cygnus his most dazzlingly vapid smile, and took Narcissa's arm. 'Come, my dear,' he said, turning away. 'You too, Severus. I would like you and your wife, and Sirius too, to join us for a nightcap.' He began to walk away, as though his elves were quite capable of clearing the rabble from the hallowed hallway of Malfoy Manor.

As I took Lucretia's arm and led her away too I caught Riddle's eye, where he stood smiling from the open front doors, a man content with his night's work.

I waited only until the library door had closed on all of us, before I spun to Lucretia.

'Do you have any idea of how hazardous cross-gender Polyjuice transformations are, Black?' I snarled.

'It was quite easy,' Black replied from Lucretia's lips. 'Anyway, we were hardly going to allow Lucretia anywhere near these men.'

This was going to be the tricky bit; I had been almost overwhelmed with relief when I had realised Lucretia was actually Black, but I had had a good hour to compose a suitable reply. 'That is not the point, Black,' I replied. 'I had my own plans for dealing with that situation,' I lied. 'And had I not realised just who you were when you came into the drawing room, I may well have gone in a direction that would have upset the whole applecart.'

'What plans?' Lucius asked, narrowing his eyes as though he didn't believe a word of my fabrication.

'I shall not overburden your already overtaxed mind, Lucius,' I replied, turning to where the bogus Sirius Black stood against the door, a perfect replica, right down to the cigarette hanging out of the corner of his mouth. 'And just who, in the name of all that is sacred, is this?' I asked, but I didn't really need to, of course. After all, there weren't that many men who knew Sirius Black so well that they could pass themselves off as being the real thing. 'And while we're at it,' I added, 'where is Lucretia?'

'I must say, Severus, you're being a little ungracious,' James Potter replied from Sirius's lips. 'After all the sneaking about we've done... not to mention the fact that I had to trust Sirius's Polyjuice.'

They had caught me, like a rat in a trap, and they knew it. I was only saved from having to back down by Lucretia opening the library door.

'You're not angry, Severus, are you?' she asked, as she crossed the room to me and put her tiny hand on my arm, and that made me remember just what it was all about: protecting the vulnerable, and not just the pretty and wealthy, from those who sought to harm them, but protecting them all. We had to look after not just the Lucretias and the Narcissas of this world, but the Lily Evans's and Remus Lupins too, and all of those who by accident, or poverty, or chance of birth, or indeed all three as in Lupin's case, did not fit into Tom Riddle's idealistic mould. We had to protect them from men like Tom Riddle and Cygnus Black, and all the other men who had been at the manor that night. And I reminded myself that they didn't need protection from Sirius Black, or Lucius Malfoy... or even James Potter.

'Angry?' I asked, as Ethel came in and drew close to Lucretia, as she probably had been all evening, and little Narcissa dropped back to take her other hand, and I found I had to swallow a lump of humility that rose in my throat. 'Angry?' I repeated. 'How could I be angry?'

Chapter Thirty-Three

Chapter 33 of 48

Severus finally accepts yet another to his circle.

"Let not the Light dazzle thee with its purity, let it show thee thy way instead, for the Darkness can only blind, and in the Dark, so shall ye stumble and fall. And when ye seek Eternal Life, know ye that it can only be done through the Light, for the Dark is naught but absence of the Light, and serves only to hide thine enemies and confuse thy friends. Heed ye that for the Ultimate Truth it is."

I laid the book aside and rubbed my eyes: "Die Letztendliche Wahrheit?", "The Ultimate Truth?". I wondered, not for the first time why there was a question mark in the book's title. I picked it up yet again, drawn once more to the pages I had read and reread so many times by then that I almost knew them off by heart. I wondered if my translation were wrong, or even if I had read it too many times in that way that makes us read what we think we see and skim past the rest, assuming we already know what is written. I closed it again in frustration and laid it face down on my desk.

'Why don't you give it a rest for today, Severus? Go and get changed for dinner,' Lucius said from the doorway. 'Look at it again tomorrow... under a different light.'

I looked up, almost startled by his presence; I had an uncomfortable feeling that he had been standing there for longer than just a few moments, and that I had been so deeply in thought that I had not even noticed him. I sighed and doused the candles, leaving the room lit by just the flickering glow of the wall sconce and the dying embers

of the fire. I was about to stand when I noticed the book was once again open at the pages I had been studying.

Lucius had noticed too; he straightened up, keeping his eyes on the book, except for just a brief glance at me as I took my wand and relit the candles... and the book closed, and turned itself over to lie in the same way as it had done.

'Under a different light,' I repeated Lucius's words in a whisper, dousing the candles yet again. 'Lucius, get Black and Ethel,' I said, but he had already turned to go for them. 'I think, Merlin help us all, that you might have shown me the way. Who would have guessed that you would ever prove yourself to be...?' I trailed off; he had already gone, and there was no real point in talking to myself.

By the time Lucius arrived back with Black and Ethel, and the unwelcome addition of James Potter, the initial excitement had already turned to disappointment; the text was just the same as I had been reading beforehand.

It seemed that Potter had arrived just a couple of minutes earlier, and I was about to snap the book shut again in frustration at what I thought was another intrusion into my thoughts, and another blind alley, when Ethel slipped into my mind. "*Perhaps it is fitting, dear, that he has arrived at this particular time;*" she said reprovingly.

I gave her an unforgiving look and turned to Potter, but he wasn't looking at me, he was staring at Ethel.

'You look remarkably like a picture of one of my father's old aunts,' he said. 'It was funny,' he went on. 'He has a black and white picture of her, and I always seemed to know what colours everything in the picture was.'

I only realised my mouth was hanging open when I felt it snap shut. I had never noticed that before, never noticed that I had known Ethel's eyes were blue in the faded old picture I had brought from the solicitor's office, never noticed that I couldn't know the colours of her clothes, or that the roses were yellow. I understood something else too, with a pang of what I refused to recognise as jealousy, something Dumbledore had hinted at; Ethel wasn't only my aunt, she was Sirius's too, and Dumbledore's, and even James Potter's. I wondered what part of the murky depths of Grimmauld Place her picture had been consigned to, just as I knew with blinding certainty that it would be there somewhere.

"*They are all of the line, Severus.*" Ethel had slipped into my mind again. "*All except Lucius,*" she said, and even her thought held a quiet regret; it was one that frightened me, and made me fear for him in a way I didn't understand.

"*I can't sacrifice him,*" I said, as some kind of awareness welled up inside me.

"*He is equal to his task, Severus;*" she said, her words pouring into me, as though they were trying to gloss over facts I was not yet ready to deal with. "*Already he has joined his line with mine with his marriage. Remember this too, dear,*" she said. "*Not all the choices are yours to make, some have already been made for you.*"

I wished we were alone, that Black and Lucius and Potter weren't standing there, frozen in the way she could make time stand still for her own ends. "*Shall not sacrifice lives,*" I repeated. "*You can't make me.*"

"*You may not have to, Severus;*" she argued, and I noticed that she had become firm, as though trying to turn me aside to what she wanted me to do. "*Now, let us move on; you alone can show the way.*" And with that she was gone from my mind, wrenching my doubts from me in her wake, to leave an odd feeling of calm acceptance.

I found I was back to Potter's remarks about Ethel's picture, and decided to appear to know as much as I would have liked to. 'Oh, she's everyone's aunt, Potter,' I said offhandedly. 'What are you doing here anyway?'

'I didn't come to see you anyway,' he snapped back, for some reason making me feel foolish.

'Did you call us through for a spat, Severus, or was there a reason?' Black asked as he made himself comfortable and poured three rather large shots of my whisky, which he handed round to Potter and Lucius, keeping kept the third for himself. I noticed he hadn't even asked me if I wanted my glass topped up, giving me a challenging look instead.

I felt Ethel nudge at my mind, as though to tell me to get a move on. "*Speak openly, Severus, or we shall be here forever.*"

Potter had sat beside Sirius, nursing his whisky; he seemed content to observe, and equally content that he would be permitted to do so. I knew I would only look childish if I asked him to leave, and I was mindful of the veiled orders I had been given in the catacombs. I told them about how the book had reopened itself in front of Lucius and me when I had doused the candles, and how it had closed itself again when I relit them, and finished with the scald of disappointment that the text seemed the same as it had been, in whatever light it was viewed, and it was just when I had finished, that something occurred to me.

'Of course,' I murmured, half to myself, as the rest leant forward from my settees, all except Ethel, who sat at my side in a slightly higher version of her own odd little chair, 'legend has it that this text was written by wizards.'

'So?' Lucius asked. 'You're not trying to read it by Muggle light.'

'No,' I concurred, 'but I wasn't trying to read it by wand light either, was I?'

The other three men had stood up, as sure as I had become that wand light was the very key it proved itself to be. Where there had been but the single paragraph about the Light and the Darkness and Eternal Life, and the Ultimate Truth, there now unfolded a lengthy text written in what I suspected was not Coptic, but the earlier Demotic script. That said, it looked like a long list of instructions, and I felt my pulse rate increase in the belief that I may indeed have found the recipe for Aqua Vitae, which just went to prove how wrong one person can be.

'Can you translate that?' Potter asked.

'Yes, but it will take some time,' I murmured, explaining that the Demotic script was more obscure than the Coptic, at the same time quite forgetting just whom I was addressing.

'Don't you know what any of it says?' Lucius asked.

'No,' I replied. 'But if you do, please share it with the rest of us.'

'We can be sure of one thing anyway,' Potter remarked. 'Tom Riddle doesn't have a copy of that,' he said, nodding to the book which had closed itself when I relit the candles.

'How long will it take you, Severus?' Black asked.

'That rather depends on how many more stupid questions I have to answer whilst I am doing it,' I replied.

'Be nice, Severus,' Ethel chimed in. 'Now, dear, you're not going to be able to translate it tonight, so why don't we join the ladies and have dinner. I'm quite sure they have had long enough to compare notes, and if we wait much longer none of you will have any secrets left worth knowing.'

It was only when I opened the drawing room door and saw the startling redhead between the blonde heads of Narcissa and Lucretia that I realised I still didn't know why Potter had called.

'Well, well, Severus, you have been busy,' Lily said, as she stood from where she sat in the middle armchair of three at the fireside. 'It seems to be silly season,' she said. 'Are you not going to congratulate me too?'

Lucretia turned to me too, and I noticed with something like alarmed guilt that my wife of only a few weeks, whilst being certainly the most beautiful of the women, had slipped rather easily down to third slot in my affections. 'On what?' I asked Lily, pushing the uneasy feelings away.

'On my own forthcoming marriage to James, of course.'

I stifled the obvious retort, and made some attempt at felicitations, wondering a little unkindly if she were pregnant once more, and if that was why the wedding was to be two weeks thence. I conveniently forgot that both Lucius and I had married in what might have been considered as undue haste. It did seem though, as Lucius hadn't lost interest in Narcissa yet, that I was to be the only one at that point in time to repent at my leisure, whatever that might have been.

It seemed that Lily and James were, rather surprisingly to my mind, to have a traditional Muggle marriage ceremony, in a church, and that they had called to ask Sirius if he would be their best man. It was a concept I couldn't quite grasp, as one would assume that the groom would be the best man or he wouldn't be the groom, but I didn't bother to ask what it meant. I found that very fact of a Muggle wedding made me reevaluate my thoughts on James Potter's opinion of all things Muggle though, and grudgingly conceded to myself that I might have misjudged him in that respect, and then shifted the blame for my misconceptions on to Sirius Black's more deserving shoulders.

James and Lily ended up staying for dinner, and I spent most of the meal watching and listening, trying mainly to read the two people about whom I had so many reservations: Potter, of course, and Narcissa. She troubled me, and I knew that I had not paid her enough attention, probably because she was right under my nose at the manor. I could find little about her to really cause me concern though, and, if anything, she just seemed like a young girl who had had too close a shave with Darkness, and had found she had had to lie her way to what she so desperately sought. I even pretended to myself that Andromeda's good opinion of her hadn't swayed me in any way.

Potter was somewhat guarded at first, but the fruits of Lucius's cellar loosened his tongue more thoroughly than it had his father's, and it was not long until I was able to see him for what he was: the quintessential Gryffindor, complete with a flaming sword, shining armour, and ruddy white charger, dreaming of deeds victorious and battles glorious, Merlin help us all.

'When do you start at the Ministry?' he asked Lucius as he attacked his pudding, and it was only then that I really noticed how quiet Lucius had been on the matter, one which, under normal circumstances, he would have bored everyone to death with by then. I suppose that was a measure of his own misgivings about the post.

'I'm not sure,' he replied. 'There will be some sort of formal investiture.'

'I'm thinking of applying for a post myself,' Potter said, laying his spoon down. 'My father's post, in fact. Would I apply to you to have Barty Crouch removed?' he asked.

It was Sirius who replied, before Lucius got the chance to frame whatever answer he was making up. 'It wouldn't be a bad idea, Lucius,' he said. 'The more safe men we have there the better.'

'There are some rather ugly rumours flying about too, and I'd like the chance to see what they're all about. I have a bad feeling about them, and the people involved,' James added, and I didn't miss the quick glance he gave to where Narcissa was watching him. 'My dad says that there were some very secret plans about some sort of operation involving not only those of mixed blood, but anyone not of Riddle's bent.'

'What kind of rumours?' I asked, not much liking the sound of that at all.

'It was all very secret,' Potter repeated. 'But Arthur Weasley told Dad that he caught sight of a document he wasn't supposed to see. It referred to something called the "Midlands Cull".'

'Cull?' I echoed. 'As in removing a section of people for the supposed good of the remainder?'

'Yeah,' Potter agreed, and I could see that, like his father, he wasn't really drunk at all. 'The supposed good.'

'What did the document say?'

'Arthur wasn't able to see,' Potter replied. 'Someone came in and moved it before he got the chance.'

'Who?' I asked.

'I'm not sure,' Potter lied, in a way that led me to believe he meant Cygnus Black, but hadn't wanted to say so in front of Narcissa. 'But Arthur playing the bumbling fool he has always played is a very handy man to have around. He's one of those men no one really notices.'

'I wouldn't be so sure of that, James,' Narcissa put in, surprising me as much as she seemed to surprise Potter. 'My father notices everything.'

'Don't worry about being frank in front of Narcissa, James dear,' Ethel said. 'She has proven herself more than a match for her father.'

Potter had the grace to give Narcissa an apologetic smile. 'Yes, quite,' he said, and then turned to Lucius. 'Watch out for your father-in-law, Malfoy. He has sworn to bring you down.'

'Has he indeed?' Lucius replied, swirling his brandy in his glass before tossing it over his throat, and I thought he looked less than comfortable about Cygnus Black's enmity.

'And just how do you know all this, Potter?' I asked. 'How do you know so much about Cygnus Black?'

'I was here that night, Snape. Don't you remember?' he replied, as though speaking to an idiot who had forgotten he had impersonated Sirius. 'And don't forget, Barty Crouch thinks he is my friend, and he is a self-important little loudmouth, and as such, a mine of useful information.'

I stifled the urge to hate Potter with even more ferocity than I had always hated him, and his sanctimonious attitude, and his "Fuck you lot, I'm all right, Jack" insolence, and for having Lily Evans when I had her first, and all the other things I was about to add to the list, before Ethel rapped smartly on my mind in a wordless reprimand that left me feeling rather silly.

I turned my mind to what Potter had said for a moment, mulling over new possibilities in my mind. I had been concerned about Lucius being thrust into a position of power, mainly for the fact that Ministry doctrines would, of course, be laid eventually at the Minister's door, and that Tom Riddle would always seek to distance himself from the less than tasteful. Potter's assertion about some mysterious plan in the Midlands only served to strengthen the uneasy feeling I had that Lucius would eventually become not only Riddle's puppet, but his scapegoat too, and I could see too that Cygnus Black and his cronies would help that along wherever they could. Perhaps it would be no bad thing to have another powerful secret ally. I could see one huge stumbling block to Riddle's acceptance of Potter into his fold though.

'Tell me, Potter,' I said, 'just how you intend to inveigle your way into Riddle's favour? You must know that it is he who staffs the Ministry now, or thinks he does.'

'Why don't you spit it out, Snape?' he replied, glancing to Lily. 'You mean, how do I pass myself off as sympathetic to his more ridiculous ideals, when I take a Muggle

woman as a wife?'

There was no point in beating around the proverbial bush. 'I mean, how do you pass yourself off as sympathetic to his more ridiculous ideals, when you take a Muggle woman as a wife?' I concurred.

He sat back in his seat, cocky and assured as he always. 'I have already made some inroads actually,' he said, 'using the very Barty Crouch I expect to oust from his position... and it seems that Riddle will be pleased to meet me, the fact that I am marrying Lily notwithstanding. In fact,' he said, his own self-importance brimming over, 'if what Barty says is anything to go by, Riddle says that he feels that I could be just the man he is looking for for his long term plans.'

My vision actually starred as I felt the implication of what Potter had said slam home. *I have to speak to him alone;* I said to Ethel's mind. *"He will have to know about Aqua Vitae."*

"She is not with child, Severus." Ethel sent her thought back. *"You must speak to him soon, but it need not be tonight."*

They didn't stay much longer, and it was only when we were standing in the entrance hall of the manor as they took their leave, the ladies in a glittering cluster of shared confidences, Black and Lucius standing talking to Ethel as I stood at the bottom of the grand staircase, that my chance arrived.

'Watch out for the greater enemy, Snape,' Potter said as he appeared at my side, and I could see that he wanted to speak to me alone too. 'Riddle's measure is one thing, he is but one though.'

'What do you mean?' I asked. 'Riddle is the enemy, and to lose sight of that would be madness.'

'Perhaps,' he agreed. 'But I'm sure you have noticed that it was when Riddle was not present that you had a noose tied rather tightly around your neck.'

He was right, although I would never admit that, but it did remind me of a night when I had come to Malfoy Manor and had felt the hostility of everyone there, with the exception of Tom Riddle.

'That just demonstrates how clever Riddle is,' I replied, perhaps only understanding that for the first time.

'That doesn't make the Blacks and their close circle any less dangerous,' he countered, looking across to where Lucius had begun to cross to us, 'particularly to Malfoy.'

I knew it was time, perhaps not to back down, but to move sideways to allow another to stand beside us, and it didn't sting as much as I had expected it would that that other was my nemesis from my boyhood. I understood something else too, that no one of us was what we seemed to be, and I hoped that as we had managed to fool one another for so long, that we might just have a whisper of a chance of fooling Tom Riddle too.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Chapter 34 of 48

Severus finds some kind of truth.

It was almost a week before I got the opportunity to speak to Potter again. Lucius wasn't at the manor that morning; both he and Black had gone to London. Lucius had received an owl from the outgoing Minister, inviting him to go to the Ministry in order to familiarise himself with his staff and his offices. Black took that to mean that he had been invited too, stating that it would give him the opportunity to suss out, whatever that might have meant, what was going on. They had just left when Potter's owl arrived to let me know he had got my message, and that he was on his way.

I wasn't really looking forward to it. Black had been unable to see Potter since he had left the manor the week before with Lily, and so he had no idea of what I was going to talk about, no idea that the texts I was trying so hard to make sense of were anything but me searching for a means to defeat Riddle permanently.

'Sit down, Potter,' I said, and then grudgingly remembered that my manners ought really to extend to those whom I detested as well as the few I tolerated. 'Would you stay for lunch?... A drink?'

'Hospitality... from you? How bad is it, Snape?' he asked dryly in way of reply, eyeing the bottle of Glenfiddich that sat on my desk.

He toyed with his whisky glass as I told him of Riddle's obsession with finding the key to Eternal Life through Aqua Vitae, his frown deepening until he interrupted me at last. I had expected hostility, perhaps disbelief, or more likely some sort of accusation. I had forgotten the one thing I should have been prepared for: his fear.

His lifted his glass to his lips, took a short swallow of the whisky, and laid it on my desk. He had paled visibly. 'Are you trying to tell me that if Lily and I have a baby boy, that Riddle could see him as a vessel to nurture some potion...?' He trailed off for a moment, before spitting out the rest. 'Some hellish concoction of his blood... That a son of mine would have a fucking monster growing inside him?' He finished on a high strangled shout that I knew he hated the sound of.

'That's about the size of it,' I admitted quietly. 'It's the reason Andromeda Black was taken out of circulation.'

'Why is she showing herself now?' he demanded.

'She is carrying a girl,' I said dully. 'The child should be born soon. And I... well, a girl is not what Riddle is looking for.'

'And what?' he asked. 'You said "and"... what else were you going to say?'

'I did a deal with Riddle,' I said, trying to shy mentally away from the day I had delivered that awful curse on Ethel. 'I made him swear he would not harm her or her child.'

'Well, you can just make him fucking swear he won't touch Lily, or our child then, can't you?' he flared, rising from his seat.

'Potter, he only ever did the deal because he knew Andromeda's child was a girl,' I snapped back. 'Do you think for a moment he would have passed up the chance of a boy... for any reason?'

'I don't know what the fuck to think,' he said, carding his hands through his hair. 'How am I supposed to tell Lily this? Fuck sake, we get married next week.'

'Perhaps you could take some precautions against her falling pregnant,' I suggested carefully. 'I can give you a potion... or I'm sure Lily could brew one herself.'

'Perhaps you can keep your bright ideas to yourself,' he snarled back. 'I think you've done quite enough.'

'I didn't do this, Potter,' I replied, refusing to let my own temper rise. 'It's just fortunate I was around at the time Riddle began his planning, and that he sees me as pivotal in those plans. Better we are prepared for what might happen, than to have something happen out of the blue.'

He slumped back in his seat. 'How are you going to defeat him, Severus?' he asked, shocking me by what I saw as not only his vulnerability, but also as some sort of belief in me. I wondered from what it stemmed.

I looked around the room, at the books and scrolls I had been poring over in an attempt to make sense of the passages "Die Letztendliche Wahrheit?" had revealed to me. 'I don't know,' I said. 'But I do know this... we have to work together, Lucius, Black, me... and even you.'

He surprised me again by seeming to accept that. He was silent for a bit, and I contented myself to letting him have the time to pull his thoughts together. When he did speak he had gone in a quite unexpected direction though, one that both gratified me and took me aback.

'Has Sirius taken the Dark Mark?' he asked.

'No, not yet,' I replied. 'Riddle seems still to have some reservations about him.'

He nodded slowly. 'I think it may be an idea if we both do.' I was about to object, but he raised his hand to stifle my comments. 'Hear me out, Snape,' he went on. 'I've listened to you, so hear me out.'

I sat back in my seat, in truth welcoming whatever his input might prove to be. I might have loathed James Potter, but I knew he wasn't a fool, just as I knew that he seemed to have donned his father's stolen mantle, and found his own shoulders worthy of the weight.

'May I ask you something?' he began, and went on without waiting for me to concur. 'May I ask you why, if your object is defeating Riddle, that you are searching for the answer to his mad desires?' he said, and something about his question struck a deep chord of self-doubt within me. 'Or is there something else, Snape? Do you want it for yourself?'

I drew back at that. 'Are you accusing me of something, Potter?' I snapped.

'No,' he said, his eyes searching my face. 'I'm wondering if you're losing sight of what really matters.'

'What really matters is defeating Riddle... without him ever knowing who his true enemy is,' I hissed. 'It is our only real chance.'

'My point exactly,' he retorted. 'And does helping him become immortal further our aims in that direction?' His look was challenging now, and I welcomed that too; he was making me drag my uncertainty out from where it lurked in the corners of my mind.

'Do you really think for one moment that I would brew him the real thing?' I asked, trying to feel my way back into some sort of control. 'What kind of idiot do you take me for?'

'Why bother with all this...?' He trailed off, making a sweeping gesture at the reams of parchment littered all over. 'Why not just cobble up some crap for him to swallow? Make it as poisonous as possible.'

'So now you're taking Riddle for an idiot too?' I accused. 'This has got to look good... it's got to be believably obscure.'

'Does Aqua Vitae exist, Severus?' he asked me.

'I doubt it... and I doubt that anything I could ever brew could make it exist.' I looked to where the book lay on my desk, feeling once again drawn to it, as though it held, perhaps not the answer I sought, but some sort of solution. 'But something does. Somewhere in the text that showed itself to us is a clue I have to find.'

'You'll find it,' he said quietly, rising to his feet, as though his own questions at least were answered.

'And if I lose the way?' I asked, in a moment of weakness that shocked me.

He paused at the door, and that instant reminded me of the morning at the Three Broomsticks after Black and I had spent the night with the werewolf. It seemed to me, and I fancy to him, to be the moment in which we set our boyhood differences aside.

'I don't think you can lose the way, Severus,' he said, turning away to where he had prepared his escape route. 'I think you are the way.'

I had all but stopped going to Lucretia's rooms at night; I somehow felt she tired of being naught but a vessel for my fantasies. It was cruel of me, I know that; she had taken me in good faith, declared herself able to deal with my inability to love her, but she had every right to expect that I would at least prove to be a physical husband to her, even if my heart lay elsewhere.

That night she came to me, dressed as she had been the first night she had come to my room, in her green diaphanous silk. She was lovely, and inviting, and yet I knew she had not come to give me only her body. She sat on the little chair beside my bed, the one she had sat on the first time she had come to me, and I confess I felt some of the ice in my veins thaw as it always did when I allowed her charms to play me.

Her grey eyes were clouded with fear though, and for all she had gone through I realised then that I had never seen her thus.

'What's wrong, Lucretia?'

'Two things,' she said, her chin lifting in some sort of defiance I didn't understand.

'And am I to be left in the dark by both of them?' I asked. I could see she was troubled though, and resolved to let her take her time.

'The first one is about us, Severus,' she said at length.

'I'm not much of a husband to you, am I?' I asked, managing to veil the accusation in my voice that it was those around me who had pushed me to such a pass.

'I know you, Severus Snape,' she said. 'I know you are bitter, and yet try not to be. I know too that I am not the cause, but only the indirect result. I can live with all of these things, Severus.'

I looked away from her; she was too close to the truths I had not hidden. 'And what is it that you cannot live with?' I asked, not at all liking the way my voice had turned to a whisper.

'Look at me, Severus.' She waited for me to turn to her before she went on. 'I cannot bear your guilt.'

She had hit that particular nail so squarely on the head that I had nothing to say, nothing to add to the wretched truth.

'You cannot afford this,' she said. 'You cannot tell your heart not to love Andromeda Black, any more than you can tell it not to love Lily Evans. I know you, Severus Snape,' she repeated, 'and I am content with my lot in life. The only thing that hurts me is your misplaced feeling of self-reproach. It does not serve you well.'

She had stood up, and I found that she had taken the role I always fancied was mine alone, that of protector. She stood before me and pulled my head to rest against her breast, stroking my hair like a mother soothing a frightened child. And I needed her touch; I needed to be vulnerable too, even if only in my wife's arms.

'You said there were two things you came to talk me about,' I murmured later, resisting the urge to drop off into sleep and forget all about it, as I lay back sated and at some sort of peace with myself.

'Yes...' she said hesitantly, as though she knew the other would break whatever mood we had shared. 'Yes, there was.'

I hoisted myself up on one elbow, brushing away the hair that had fallen over my face. 'And am I yet permitted to know?' I asked, raising my eyebrow.

She gave me a long troubled look. 'Lucius,' she whispered. 'I fear for him. I fear that what he will become is not who he is.'

I spent the next few weeks barely noticing they had passed, my head bent over the book, and yards of parchment littering the floor and my desk and anywhere else I could lay them. Potter and Lily's wedding came and went, unmarked by me save for whatever gift Lucretia sent. Lucius was installed as Minister of Magic, and spent less and less time at the manor, at the same time becoming more and more remote, as though he had drawn some sort of armour about him to inure himself from what went on around him. Had I looked properly I would have seen him begin to age in front of my eyes, and maybe even thought back to what Lucretia had said, but I didn't; perhaps it was just as well Black, and to a lesser extent Potter, were there to give him some sort of support.

I grew distant too; looking back, I can see that. I had never been keen on socialising, I suppose feeling myself above such time-wasting interaction, but I found that being alone was no longer a dubious pleasure, but a necessity to me. I spent long hours just thinking, and every time I thought I had found a direction, it tore itself away from me, and I returned to the book. I had translated all of the hidden text, and it made little sense, just so much archaic rubbish about truth, and faith, and belief, and none of it seemed to point me in any direction.

I had just made up my mind that both Black and Potter had been right about my pretending to Riddle that I had found the recipe for Aqua Vitae, when I picked the book up again. My vision swam for a second, or perhaps the words actually blurred themselves before my eyes, because the text had changed. Where once it had been long and windy, and seemingly aimless, it was then a few short, fairly modern paragraphs, which appeared not to be related to one another. I didn't really notice that at the time though; the opening words stunned me. It was a direct address to me, and I was quite convinced it had only been written as I watched.

"All truth is easy to comprehend, Severus, even this ultimate one; it was finding that truth that was the hard part."

I tried to cast my confused mind back to what I had been thinking about before I picked the book up, but my eyes were dragged back to the next paragraphs.

"Beware though, for there are more wrong answers than right ones, each one willing to present itself to you. Only the truth lies hiding, waiting for you alone to discover it."

Believe not in immortality; it cannot be proven; rather pretend to prove it, for the Dark One cannot but believe in it, and in so doing, he will believe in you. Know that you can overcome his belief by your own faith, for belief is naught compared to faith. Choose the hard route as though it were easy, and fearlessly uphold your convictions; that is true faith."

Remember this, too, when the way seems barred; there are many ways for evil to succeed, all of them need that you do nothing to stop them."

I gathered my scattered wits and at last remembered I had been thinking about Black and Potter, and their suggestion that I just make up my own recipe for Aqua Vitae, and I let my eyes drop to the book again to see if that fitted in with the new text.

It didn't really, not unless I twisted it somewhat. What it did fit in with was the new paragraph that had appeared below the others.

"It may be ill-considered to trust too much; yet you will fail if you do not trust enough. Remember the triumph of friendship is not the smile, or even the outstretched hand, but the faith that others place in you. For in the end you must rely not on the words of your enemies, but the silence of your friends. Keep your enemy close, Severus, for him to believe in you, and in your heart keep your friends closer still."

I blinked quickly as the words seemed to appear on the page as rapidly as the next question that presented itself to me, something like the way Ethel would send a message to my mind before my enquiry was even fully formed.

"The Wolf, the Dog, the Stag, the Weasel, the Serpent, and she who walks between the worlds"

'Lupin and Weasley?' I said the words aloud, as though asking for some sort of confirmation.

'What about them?' Black said from the door.

I spun round, furious at the interruption. 'Can you not knock on a door, Black?' I hissed.

'It was open,' he objected. 'What's got you all aquiver?'

I stifled my annoyance and handed him the book, watching as he scanned the text. He looked back at me, rather more blankly than usual. 'Why are you showing me this?' he asked. 'And what were you talking about Remus and Arthur for?'

I snatched the book back, and although the new paragraphs were no longer there, just the text that had shown itself to us some weeks back under wand light, I found that I could remember every single word.

'Now isn't that convenient,' Black said, as I finished quoting what I had read. He shoved a cigarette into his mouth, and lit it before I got the chance to tell him not to. 'We don't have worry about Riddle seeing it,' he muttered, and I noticed it hadn't occurred to him to disbelieve me.

'Yes,' I agreed, my quill scratching over a fresh sheet of parchment as I finished writing the text from memory in a shorthand nobody, myself included most likely, would be able to make sense of. 'That could have proven to be a little tricky. Anyway,' I said, 'what did you want? Or did you just come in to foul up the air in here?'

'No, I came to tell you Riddle's here. He just arrived.'

I sighed, casting my mind beyond the room to feel the malignance of his presence. I had been so engrossed I hadn't even felt him arrive.

I took the step of showing Riddle how I had uncovered the first hidden text in the book using wand light, and this seemed to inflame his almost religious conviction that he had been chosen by Mordestone to choose me to find his path to Eternal Life. I thought it a miracle in itself how any madman could twist events and happenings into a meaning of his own.

Riddle took to calling at the manor almost every day after that, on the flimsiest of excuses, and I almost became used to his presence, much in the way any horror lessens with familiarity. I knew why he came though; I knew he was waiting for me to tell him I had unlocked the secrets he so longed for. I knew something else too; I was running out of time.

He was sitting watching me one day when I took the perhaps foolhardy step of asking him not to call again, that he was ruining my concentration, just sitting watching all the time, with his personal guard of four Death Eaters hovering over me, and the other five who lurked in hallway like some sort of back-up, in case I was insane enough to make any attempt to kill the first four. At first I thought he was actually going to comply, that perhaps he had understood what I was trying to put across to him, that I needed to be alone to work.

He came across to my desk and bent towards me. 'Get on with it, Severus,' he hissed, the cords in his neck straining with the effort of suppressing his fury. 'I want results, and I want them before the week is out.'

I nodded, at least I thought I did, inasmuch as my dread left any room for thought.

That was the night it all began to close in on me; it was the night James Potter called to tell us that Lily was expecting his child.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Chapter 35 of 48

The pawns begin to move into place.

Author's notes.

Please heed the individual warning in this chapter of suggested male/male sexual abuse.

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Please heed the individual warning in this chapter of suggested male/male sexual abuse.

I only noticed that Riddle had ceased his physical attempts to have me do his bidding, when he resumed them. I had let my guard down, I know that now, to the extent that not only were Black and Lucius away from the manor, but the ladies were all in Brighton. They had gone to see Andromeda's new baby girl, and no doubt enthuse over the fact that the child had blue hair, as though that little tuft, of what to me looked like the tail feathers of some exotic bird spelled onto her head, were some kind of magnet. She had brought the child to the manor only the week before, seemingly content then that Riddle had no further interest in the baby, and appeared to be keeping to his word. Of course, I knew that was only because I had convinced him of what he really knew himself: a female child was not what he sought. However emancipated the wizarding world might have thought itself to be, it still underestimated the power of women, something, with the exception of Ethel, that I did too, although I didn't find that out for quite some time.

Narcissa was by then noticeably pregnant, and I could see that Lucius's interest in her seemed to be flagging at last. He disappointed me a little, becoming every bit as flagrant in his womanising as he ever had been, and I didn't notice what other things that hid, so wrapped up was I in working out a way of stalling Riddle's conviction about a half-blooded baby, using secrets I pretended to have unlocked from the hidden text. I didn't see what was happening to Lucius, and of all the things that happened over the next months, that one remains one of my deepest regrets. He deserved more from me, from all of us.

Potter had become a regular visitor to the manor, to the extent that he was almost an inhabitant. I began to wonder if Potter were the mystery man that Sirius had alluded to that morning in the Three Broomsticks, when he had confessed that he had hopes of another love in his life. More often than not, James brought Lily, and the women all seemed to get on in the way that ladies of high station do. Their days appeared to involve a lot of visiting the sick and the elderly, and those in St Mungo's who didn't have visitors of their own, and I misjudged them, and just what they were actually doing, so badly that I even allowed them their victory over me when the time eventually came.

The day they were in Brighton, Lucius was at the Ministry, and Black and Potter were at Hogwarts, ostensibly spying for Riddle, more likely absenting themselves from what had admittedly been my short temper at the constant interruptions I had to endure. I had just raised my head from the book, the script still swimming in front of my eyes, when I felt him, not inside the manor, not just then, but on the point of being admitted. I quite forgot that I was alone but for Ethel, who couldn't possibly show herself now that Riddle believed me to have killed her, and Lucius's frightened elves. But he knew, and he had been biding his time, probably in the knowledge that his chance would come... and come it had.

'Will you have lunch?' I offered absently, still thinking about the text that I had managed to twist into something I hoped might appeal to him, still in my comfort zone of what I saw as the safety of the manor.

'Only in a manner of speaking,' he said, pulling up a chair and sitting uncomfortably close to me, in a way that made me understand at last that I had cut myself off. I had done it again; only that time I didn't even have Ethel. 'Relax, my Severus,' he said, touching my cheek, as I felt something cold writhe inside me when I realised that I couldn't even find Ethel's mind. I knew what that meant; she was in the catacombs talking to Godric, the only time she was ever closed to me. She would not even know that Riddle was in the house.

'So tense, my Severus,' Riddle purred. 'And yet we are alone, so there is no need for caution.'

'Lucius will be home shortly, Tom,' I said, grasping at anything I could find. 'And I have work to do for you.'

He shook his head. 'No, Severus,' he replied. 'Lucius has a busy day... by his limited standards, at least. I have seen to it. And Black is not here either, is he? No, of course he isn't,' he said, and ran his tongue across his top lip in a way that made me shudder in loathing. 'Both he and Potter are doing a little job for me at Hogwarts. Even the ladies are elsewhere.'

I didn't have time to wonder at his knowledge of the comings and goings of the entire household; he had grabbed my upper arms, the way one might grab a recalcitrant child to hold its attention. 'We are alone, Severus. I shall not be denied.'

'You have it all planned, don't you?' I whispered. I knew then that even once Ethel found out Riddle was there, that she could not send for Black and Lucius the way she had done the last time, that they could not appear back at the manor for no good reason. I had broken my own cardinal rule, and I had no one to blame but myself. I had nowhere to turn either, and I took, Merlin help me, the path of least resistance. He would not kill me; I knew that, not when he needed me as much as he believed he did. I would hang onto that.

"I'm here, dear. The elves have informed us that he is here," Ethel said, slipping into my mind. "But I cannot leave the catacombs, Severus dear," she said, pouring her message into my mind. "We cannot allow the link between him and Salazar to become any stronger than it is. Even in the split second of her outpouring I could feel her hesitation, and braced myself for what was to come. "Do not allow him to use Mordestone, Severus... the stone is his link to Salazar, and if he should fully understand that... dear... Severus dear... you must succumb to him."

"I can't," I said, even as I doubled over in agony from his first curse, yet I knew that what he dealt out, he thought he gave in love, and I knew too that it was when the Dark Lord dealt out in anger that the real pain would begin. My last truly conscious thought, before I surrendered to the agony of his caress, was of begging Ethel not to send for Black or Lucius, that to do so would only arouse the suspicion that never lurked far from the surface of Riddle's mind, and of fumbling in my pocket for the white stone.

I endured the onslaught, lost in the miasma of pain, yet somehow shrouded and detached in a way I thought had to do either with the stone or Ethel, or maybe both of them. I had to remain conscious; I had no way of knowing if he could plunder my mind if I allowed myself to slip away, in the way he found it so easy to plunder my body.

I don't know how long it was until he finally drew back, leaving me shivering in a mixture of self-loathing, and gut-wrenching fear that, in his madness, he would not even notice if he killed me. He had pulled back before, as though to admire his handiwork, and for an awful moment I thought he was going to begin his assault again, but he had become thoughtful.

'You will let me know when Potter's wife is with child, Severus?' he asked. 'It would not do for me to have to find out from anyone else... the way I had to find out about Andromeda Black.' He spun on me, his eyes alight with accusation.

'Of course I shall,' I murmured, wiping my mouth with the heel of my hand, unsurprised to find it covered in blood.

He smiled at that, beginning to dress himself, using negligent spells to aid him in the task, until he had donned the façade of sanity along with his clothes. 'And your own wife is not to your taste, my love?' he asked, presumably taking the fact that Narcissa was carrying a child, and Lucretia was not, as some sort of indication that relations between us had soured to the extent that we did not share a marital bed. 'Of course, my Severus, how could she be?' he added, and then stiffened as the door of my room was pushed open.

'Where on earth is everyone? Severus...' Sirius's voice trailed off as I watched him close his eyes for a moment longer than a blink, only to be followed into the room by the last man on earth I wanted to find me in the condition I was in.

Riddle was already seated at the fire, nursing a glass of whisky, as though he had been there all afternoon. 'Ahh, gentlemen,' he said, addressing James more than Sirius, as if oblivious to the fact that I was trying to drag myself to my feet under the unseeing stares of his escort of Death Eaters. 'A successful afternoon's work, I hope?' He glanced to where I had pulled myself across to the wall, in some vain attempt at preserving a modesty I didn't have. 'Severus and I were just having a chat about some things.' He turned to James again. 'Your wife? She is well I take it?' he enquired, as though he weren't asking if Lily were yet carrying the child he so desperately sought.

'She's well, Tom, thank you,' Potter returned shortly, and then he surprised me, and humbled me too. He took off his cloak, and handed it down to me, hardly glancing at me. 'You must be cold, Severus,' he said, his voice totally passionless. 'And the ladies will be back soon. It would not be fitting for them to find you like this.' He shot Riddle a look, and it was one I knew stifled the hate and the outrage he was feeling. 'Would you like our report?' he asked, his voice still betraying nothing.

'Perhaps,' Riddle agreed. 'Perhaps I shall stay for dinner... then again,' he said, glancing to his four Death Eaters with something like regret, 'perhaps not.'

He snapped his fingers, and his four faithful woke up as I felt myself being clothed. I opened the eyes I didn't realise I'd closed in some sort of belated humiliation, in time to see Black drop his wand arm, as both he and Potter stood in front of me as though to shield me from view. I could feel the fury in both Sirius and Potter, that Riddle had no compunction in showing off to his followers just what he could reduce me to, like some cheap trophy, and that in his madness he would suppose me honoured and envied above his common herd.

Black sat with his head in his hands at the kitchen table. We had adjourned there after Riddle left, taking his entourage with him, the four who were in the room with us, and the other five that Potter and Black had said were standing in the hallway just outside the door to my room. I knew before I asked that, whilst the four in the room had been insensible, the others would have been able to hear everything in the room, and my guts recoiled in mortification at the thought of the likes of Barty Crouch and that hellcat Bellatrix laughing at what they would recognise as my comeuppance. Ethel still hadn't come upstairs, but I had spoken to her mind to let her know that Riddle had gone, and that Sirius and Potter were back.

'Do I take it that this is a common occurrence?' Potter asked.

'It has happened before,' I snapped back, resisting the almost overwhelming urge to Obliviate the memory from him.

'This fucking day is just getting worse,' Sirius snarled, dragging his head up, and I began to realise that something apart from what had happened with Riddle was troubling him.

Black recounted that Dumbledore had told him that some rather unpleasant rumours were circulating about Lucius. At first I paid scant attention, assuming him to be filled with some belated righteous indignation about his cousin being two-timed, and it was only when Potter began to throw in his two knuts worth that I really began to listen, with slowly mounting alarm.

Two whores had been murdered in the past month in Knockturn Alley, both from the same brothel as the girls who had been at Malfoy Manor the night Abraxas was killed. A third girl had survived, and she had claimed that her client was a powerful Ministry man, although she refused to be drawn any further, probably because he had been under some sort of charm that had made his actual identification impossible.

'My father says that his contacts told him that the three times it has happened, Lucius has been absent from the Ministry,' Potter said. 'It doesn't look good for him.'

I wondered if he were just taking a swipe at Lucius, and if so what he hoped to gain from that; it certainly wouldn't be my good graces. Then I thought about how distant Lucius had become, and how I had failed to really notice that before. I set that line of thinking aside quickly; Lucius was many things, not all of which were good, but I felt quite sure he was not an abuser of women.

'And your father... and you, for that matter, think that Lucius is a murderer,' I said, my voice heated with accusation. 'And Dumbledore too,' I said, shooting that remark to Black.

'No, Severus,' Potter said calmly. 'My father... and I, for that matter, think Lucius is being framed.'

'Dumbledore does too,' Black grunted. 'That aside... this is the sort of mud that sticks, Severus. And the fact that Lucius is who he is, doesn't help matters. He is despised,' Black went on with something that sounded like regret, 'by every side. The innocent loathe him because he heads a corrupt Ministry, and the Death Eaters, the Blacks and their close circle in particular, hate him anyway.'

I felt sickened by the injustice of that; at the same time I didn't really see what we could do about it. We didn't have a chance to discuss it further anyway; both Lucius and Ethel arrived in the kitchen at the same time.

'He's been here,' I said, before either Black or Potter saw fit to give their version of events.

Lucius sat down heavily, and I took a searching look at him for the first time in too long. He looked strained and worried, and distinctly nervous. 'Am I to understand that you have once again been the subject of his abuse, Severus?' he asked.

'What does it matter?' I replied, letting my eyes slide to where Ethel had gone over to her stove, in that way she had of pretending to cook, when she was actually thinking or listening. 'I do what I have to... we all do.'

'And am I also to understand that certain rumours which are circulating the Ministry, have reached Malfoy Manor too?' he asked.

'What's this?' Ethel turned her enquiring gaze to where Lucius sat.

Lucius gave her his account of the ugly suppositions which had filtered through the Ministry, fanned in some places, and quashed in others. He sounded emotionless as he spoke, not even that; he sounded like a man no longer able to support the luxury of emotion. I felt a bitter guilt well up in me; I had not taken the time to ask him if the position he had been placed in were a price he was able to bear, let alone willing to pay.

'What are you going to do about it, Malfoy?' Potter asked. 'You can't just ignore that kind of thing. Can't you make a statement refuting the allegations? You're the fucking Minister of Magic.'

'I shall curb my excesses,' Lucius said in hard flat voice, one that made me realise for certain that he was not guilty of the charges laid at his door. He stood up and left the room.

'I wonder just who he is protecting?' I murmured after him.

'And why?' Black added.

Ethel just looked thoughtfully after him. I thought she looked tired too, and wondered at just what work she and the other shades had had to do to keep Slytherin from breaking through to Riddle. That was something else I had to worry about; I felt Riddle was formidable enough without the undoubted power of Salazar Slytherin to bolster him.

The next week things took a turn for the worse. The "Midlands Cull" that Arthur had seen mention of in a secret document, became a horrible reality. Every day both the "Prophet" and the Muggle newspapers released details of what the "Prophet" described as the neutralising of those the "Ministry deemed unfit to be called the name wizard", and the Muggles put down to an unidentified rampaging psychopath. In the space of ten days twelve people were reported dead in the Muggle press; the actual number was twenty-six, the rest not being known to the Muggle authorities.

Black and Potter came to me one day towards the end of the massacre; I knew without asking them what they had decided to do. Maybe I should have stopped them; perhaps they might even have listened, but I doubt it. They took the Dark Mark that night, both of them, and within a week Potter headed one of Riddle's death squads, and Black headed another, whilst within the Ministry Lucius fought the silent thankless war he had fought since he had assumed the mantle. We had moved our pawns into place, Merlin help us.

Lily had moved to stay with James's parents, and had not been out of the house for fear of her pregnancy being recognised by some shrewd witch hostile to our cause, and I tried to play Riddle as well as I could. He was suspicious about Lily's apparent disappearance, of course; after all, he was hardly going to rely solely on the information that came from the inhabitants of Malfoy Manor, and I knew it was up to me to tease him in another direction.

I had moved him forward a little, cobbling up a story I thought he swallowed, even going as far as to begin brewing a potion which I told him would take fifteen years to mature, and that I would not need a host body until then. In my naivety I thought he believed that, but that's not really an adequate excuse; the real truth is that in my vanity I thought myself smarter than he was. Such a basic error: the underestimating of one's adversary, the overestimation of oneself.

Things quietened down a little, and I fancy that was only because fingers were beginning to point to Riddle as Lucius's ultimate master, and he did not care to bear the brunt of any hostility, not when he had gone to such pains to put Lucius in the Ministry to do that for him.

I went into the kitchen one evening to find Lucius sitting alone at the table, with just Ethel standing at her stove. The silence made me think I had interrupted them, something I was vaguely regretful about.

Potter had arrived, as had become his habit, and when Sirius came in a few minutes later, he was grey-faced with what I mistook for fatigue. It was only when he began to speak that I understood what was wrong. He gave Lucius an almost furtive look, before looking to me in some sort of appeal, as though I could say the words he couldn't find for himself. I looked behind him to where Ethel had moved from her stove, as though summoned by trouble, in that way that she always seemed to rise to the occasion.

'Now, sit down, dear,' she said to Black, taking his arm, and leading him the rest of the way to the table like a child, and I wondered with a twinge of envy if she were speaking to him on some other level too, like the way she often spoke to me.

'I don't know to say this, Lucius,' he began, and faltered, taking the time to stick a cigarette that he forgot to light, at the corner of his mouth. 'I don't know how to ask you to forgive me.'

'Really, Black, your good opinion has never really mattered that much to me,' Lucius replied. 'However, if it makes you feel better, I forgive you for ever having doubted me.' He turned to me. 'You too, Severus. Don't think I haven't felt you drawing away from me. I am becoming somewhat immune to hate now, though,' he said, in a way that made me understand just how badly the waves of hostility, that were sent his way from so many quarters, were affecting him, and made me understand that that was what he had been talking to Ethel about.

Black broke into my thoughts though. 'I didn't doubt you,' he said. 'That was why I went with Lupin to stake out the whorehouse this last few days... now that other things have quietened down. It's amazing just how much a wolf and a dog can smell when they try,' he added bitterly.

I frowned over at Black, just beginning to understand the depth of his inner turmoil, but Lucius had raised his hand, as though to stave Black off.

'Black, I know,' he said quietly. 'I just didn't want you to.'

Sirius stood up, toppling his chair. He crossed to where Lucius stood at the door, and grabbed a fistful of his velvet robes. 'Of all the fucking insane stupid...' He trailed off. 'How could you do that? How could you let that accusation be levelled at you?'

'What exactly is going on?' Potter asked. 'What did you find out?'

'I found out just who has been murdering whores,' Black said, spitting the words out at Lucius, as though he were accusing him freshly.

'And?' Potter put in, still clearly in the dark.

'Black, no,' Lucius snapped. 'It doesn't matter.'

'It does to me,' Sirius snarled back. 'And believe me, Lucius, I shall kill my father one day for what he has done... not only to those girls, but for what he has tried to do to you.'

'Orion?' James breathed in shock. 'Are you sure, Sirius?'

'Don't you fucking think I can smell my own bastard of a father?' Black bellowed like a bull in agony.

'Don't do anything stupid, Black,' Lucius hissed.

I watched Black turn to the door, to where one of Lucius's elves stood with a visitor, a man I had never cared for in one way, but had cared for one night, in quite another. Remus Lupin ignored us all, except for a nod to Black, and a muttered word to the second visitor who had shambled up to his side.

'Arthur, is this wise?' Lucius asked, clearly panicked.

We all turned to Lucius. That he would even acknowledge that he knew who Arthur Weasley was was one thing, but to greet him in the fashion he had just done was almost unfathomable.

'No one knows we are here,' Weasley replied, holding up his hand in a placating way that spoke of shared confidences between him and Lucius, as another knot of humility hit me in the pit of stomach, and I realised that perhaps I was the only one who hadn't bothered to look out for Malfoy. I'd dropped him into the deep side of the river, and hadn't even bothered to ask him if he could swim. 'But I'm afraid we bring bad tidings.' Weasley looked to James, and I knew what it was, just as he did too.

'He knows? He knows Lily is pregnant?' Potter whispered. 'How did he find out?' he breathed, glancing around all of us, and finding no one worthy of blame. 'I must move her... If he knows, he will also know where she is.' He turned to me, desperation showing in every new line on his face. 'Were did you hide Andromeda, Severus? We have to take Lily there.'

I was already shaking my head. 'Flamel's house in Brighton... but the cover is no longer there. Andromeda is openly staying there for the time being.'

Potter looked away for a moment. 'Very well,' he said at last, holding my eyes in frantic challenge. 'Can you cast a Fidelius Charm, Severus?'

I nodded slowly. Yes, Merlin forgive us our folly, I could cast a Fidelius Charm.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Chapter 36 of 48

Severus discovers he's not the only one trying to undermine Tom Riddle.

I wrote to Riddle immediately to ask him to come to see me. I wasn't even sure if that would be quickly enough, but I had to keep my cover in some way, and there was nothing to be gained by keeping James and Lily's secret if everyone knew about it. Riddle didn't call until late the next day, and I wondered if he were trying to score some point over me by keeping me waiting for so long.

'You have news for me?' he asked, glancing to my desk as though he didn't know why he was there.

'Yes, I have news, Tom,' I said. 'Lily Potter is expecting a child.'

'Indeed!' he exclaimed, and even knowing that he knew I still could not detect any insincerity in his surprise, something that should have warned me to be very careful if I ever thought I could tell what Tom Riddle was thinking about. 'A boy?' he asked, and I suspected that at least was an answer he didn't know.

'I have no idea,' I replied. 'I suppose it is a little early to tell.'

'Well, we shall hope for the best then, Severus,' he said.

'What would you have me do?' I asked, trying to force him into the open about his intentions.

'Do?' He looked surprised. 'You have informed me over the past few weeks that we have no real use of our host child for fifteen years, Severus. Would you have me saddled with a babe in arms?'

'Of course not,' I murmured.

'Unless...' he said, robbing me of any false sense of relief I might have had, '... unless you have reason to think that James Potter is unworthy of my trust.' He gave me a level challenging look. 'Or unless you have been lying to me.'

'Not at all,' I replied, ignoring the barb he had pointed in my own direction. 'I was only surprised when Potter saw fit to tarnish himself with Muggle blood in the way he did.'

'Quite,' Riddle responded. 'And yet so convenient for our plans.'

'If it's a boy,' I said.

'If it's a boy,' he concurred.

I should have got Dumbledore to help me with the Fidelius Charm; I know that now, but for what it's worth I doubt that would have made any real difference to the outcome of events.

It was a complex spell, involving not only the Potters, but their Secret Keeper too, and I had to spell the other people they wanted to have access to them peripherally to the main spell. It took almost a whole morning of standing in the rain in Godric's Hollow, until Lily was satisfied that everyone she trusted had been included. I thought the list far too long, and yet I could pick no single name from those whom she had chosen, as a direct threat. Her parents were Muggles, and she always visited them, instead of the other way around, but them apart, it seemed to me that everyone she knew was included in the Charm, although to be fair, none of them could get past the front door without her or James permitting entry... or the Secret Keeper of course.

When I had finished the first part, I then had to bind everyone to the Secret Keeper, and my unease grew when Sirius shook his head.

'Not me, Severus,' he said, sticking his ubiquitous cigarette in his mouth. 'It's too dangerous. My work could make me unavailable for any amount of reasons; I couldn't risk that.'

'Lupin then?' I asked, but the werewolf shook his head too.

'What if I'm needed when it's... inconvenient?' he asked, glancing to the rain-sodden sky.

'I assumed it would be you,' Potter said, a puzzled frown on his face. 'Isn't that the point of all this?'

To say I was taken aback was an understatement. 'I... I cannot do that, Potter,' I said. 'I cannot cast the spell and be a part of it. It's specifically third party,' I added, resisting the urge to add the couple of dozen other parties that Lily had included.

'But... but when I asked you, you didn't say that,' Potter objected. 'Why didn't you say that? Who can we trust enough?'

'What about Dumbledore?' Sirius asked.

Potter made a face. 'Not that interfering old busybody.'

'I can do it,' a small whining voice said from behind Potter. 'I'd like to be of some kind of service, James.'

It was Peter Pettigrew, a man I couldn't stand, but Potter had wanted him included in the peripheral spell as they had been boyhood friends. He had been hanging about all morning, much the way he had hung about Sirius, James and Lupin at Hogwarts, and I'd noticed Sirius barely resist turning up his nose at Pettigrew's ingratiating manner.

'No one would suspect him, I suppose,' Lupin remarked, and that much was true, or so I thought then.

As I finished casting the charm I added a little precaution of my own. It wasn't so much that I didn't trust Peter Pettigrew, more that I detested him, so I Obliviated his knowledge of who had cast the spell, quite probably out of nothing more than spite.

Riddle still feigned no interest in the Potters' child, and I truly believed that he was biding his time in the knowledge that when we needed the boy, if indeed Lily's baby was a boy, that he could find him then. He began to spend more and more time in public, courting the doubters and coercing the weak and frightened, yet polishing his sullied image, and seeming to distance himself from the Ministry's more outrageous actions at the same time. He was remarkable orator, and I have few doubts that many of his rallies were little short of mass hypnosis, as men began to turn against friends and neighbours, pointing their fingers at those who had even slightly diluted blood, in attempts to win his favour and another step up his complex hierarchy. Cygnus and Orion Black were with him frequently by then, as were Darius Shield, and occasionally Igor Karkaroff: Abraxas's friends and Lucius's enemies.

I began to worry that the time would soon pass when I held any feeble sway I might have had over Riddle. I had resisted appearing in public with him, and he had seemed to accept that, but then I wondered if I had allowed him to become too distant, as though in his madness he thought there were two Tom Riddles: the Dark Lord, and Severus Snape's Dark Lord.

I took the step of going to Hogwarts to consult with Dumbledore, but he seemed to be of the opinion, like I was too, that to make any attempt to cut Riddle off from his closet followers would only result in his guard tightening around him, and that did not suit us at all. I knew it was up to me to let him become confident enough of me to call without his guards, or even to let his caution slacken enough to a couple of Death Eaters so that Sirius, Lucius and I could take an opportunity to rid ourselves of Riddle at least. I knew that concerned Dumbledore, that we would only remove a snake's head, and leave the rest of its body writhing around, wreaking whatever damage it saw fit. I knew he worried that someone else, like one of the Blacks, would think his shoulders broad enough to assume Riddle's mantle. We had to get rid of them all, before they got rid of us, and I had an uncomfortable notion that it was going to be a race.

Black and Potter were still at the Ministry, ostensibly heading up two of the death squads, and as the culls began to spread throughout the country they were hard pressed to keep up with the covert evacuations they were actually doing.

It was only when Arthur Weasley called at the manor under heavy disguise one evening that I really understood the depth of the way in which Lucius was double-dealing Riddle too. Weasley had come to see Lucius, but he wasn't home yet, and I stifled my annoyance when he shuffled into my room in that way he had.

'Got a moment, Severus?' he asked, nodding his head eagerly, as though I would be delighted by his presence.

'Just a moment,' I replied much more curtly than I should have.

'I don't want to leave this message with an elf,' he began, 'but it's too important not to leave at all.'

'Yes, yes,' I said. 'Just tell me what it is.'

He drew back at that and seemed to square his shoulders. 'You know, Snape, I'm not a message boy,' he said. 'That said, I do have an important message for Lucius.'

I resisted the urge to strangle it out of him, and bit back the obvious retort about his lowly status. 'Would you please deliver the message... Mr Weasley?'

'Let Lucius know that the documents he left for me were changed.'

'Left for you?' I asked, regretting my initial hostility. 'What do you mean?'

'You don't really know what he does do you?' Weasley accused, leaving me feeling rather small. 'You have no idea what everyone else does.'

'Speak plainly, Weasley,' I replied, and I know that he read that I was backing down.

'Every night Lucius leaves certain sensitive material amongst the general chaos I have to clear from his desk,' Weasley replied. 'We have never discussed this, and there is no formal agreement between us, not even a spoken arrangement.'

'And?' I invited, noticing with some relief that he had sat down, and that I didn't have to backtrack to the extent of asking him to do so.

'Since he has become Minister of Magic, Lucius Malfoy has probably saved around a hundred souls from certain slaughter, by just leaving little tidbits of information which we both very well know I will read and act upon.'

'I see,' I replied. 'And how does this not come to light?'

'Much in the way James Potter and Sirius Black's death squads are a sham,' Weasley replied, nodding as I unscrewed the cap of the Glenfiddich bottle and splashed him a hefty slug. 'Burnt out empty houses, funerals with empty coffins, crocodile tears.'

'So what... what is the problem?' I asked, pushing back the all too familiar lump of humility. 'What has gone wrong?'

'I think someone suspects,' he said. 'I had gone through most of the stuff on his desk this evening, and I remembered that I hadn't let Molly know I was going to be late. I went down to send her an owl, and when I came back Cygnus Black was leaving Lucius's office.'

'And?' I repeated, not at all liking where this seemed to be going.

'There's nothing so unusual in that,' Arthur admitted. 'But what is unusual is that there had been another name added to the list of names that Lucius had left me.'

I felt something cold run through me, a feeling of danger that was becoming horribly frequent. 'Can you remember the name?' I asked, my voice barely a whisper.

'Oh, yes,' Weasley replied, 'I can remember the name.'

'And?' I asked for the third and last time.

'Henry Potter,' he said quietly.

'I don't understand,' I whispered. '... I mean, why add someone of his own to the list..? What could he hope to gain..? Or prove?'

'If Henry Potter goes into hiding, I'm sure Cygnus has something up his sleeve to implicate Lucius in some type of treachery,' Wesley replied. 'I know he saw me, and I suspect he will have known I was in Lucius's office earlier. I'm sure he has something devious to present to Riddle, something which would bring Lucius down and elevate himself at the same time.'

'You're right,' I admitted, much less grudgingly than I would have done a few minutes before. 'I wonder...' I said, as much to myself as to Weasley, '...I wonder if Henry would join us too.'

'As a Death Eater?' Weasley asked. 'Or should I say, as your version of a Death Eater? Would Riddle accept him? After all, was it not Riddle who had him dismissed from the Ministry?'

I shrugged. 'In truth I don't know from whom that order came. It could just as easily have stemmed from the Blacks; after all, they had aspirations at the Ministry.' I mulled it over again, satisfying myself that if Henry Potter joined us, he would not only save himself from the Blacks' manipulations, but pull Cygnus's teeth too. Whatever we did was going to have to be quick though; I knew that much.

Lucius was late that night; late as we were by the time Arthur left, he even missed dinner, and when he came in he went straight to the library on the first floor, just off the minstrels' gallery. I had been sitting in the drawing room with Sirius and Narcissa and Lucretia, listening to the ladies tell us about their day of visiting, when it occurred to me that I hadn't paid enough attention to what I thought of as their good work.

'Just who exactly are you visiting?' I asked, as some belated suspicion crossed my mind, possibly as a result of Arthur showing me how badly I had underestimated Lucius's part in undermining Riddle's schemes.

'Well...' Lucretia replied, in a way that made me understand she was about to launch into some prepared little speech.

'Do not trouble yourself with the fantasy, my dear,' I said.

Lucretia gave Narcissa a long look, and then one to where Ethel was pottering about in her picture, pretending she didn't know what was going on. 'Really, Severus,' Lucretia said at length, 'if you're going to be tiresome, I shall refrain from discussing our work with you.'

'What work?' I asked, as Sirius sat up straight from where he had been lounging half asleep at the end of the couch I sat on.

'Now, Severus,' Ethel said, 'don't be meddling in other people's affairs. We're doing just fine here.'

'Doing what?' I asked, turning to give my wife as hurt a look as I could summon up at short notice. 'And who are we?'

'We can't just leave everybody, you know,' Narcissa put in somewhat reproachfully. 'And you've got enough to do. Just you keep your eye on Riddle, and that nose of yours out of our work.'

'What are they on about?' Black asked, and I was at least pleased that he seemed to be as in the dark as I was.

'We're just moving a few people to safety,' Lucretia murmured.

'Who?' I asked. 'And where, for that matter?'

'Just the innocents, Severus,' Narcissa replied, flattening her green gown across the swell of her child, as though including him too. 'Just the sick and the old, and the youngest children.'

'But where are you taking them?'

'Here, of course, dear,' Ethel replied, poking her head out of the picture it seemed everyone but me had been in.

I looked into the picture properly and gasped out loud. There were old-fashioned deckchairs sitting on the lawn, with elderly witches and a few old wizards nodding away to one another; and in the background I could see beds on a veranda, much the way the old clinics would let the less poorly patients take the fresh air; and there were women and children playing on the grass, with magical balls and bright blue stars flying around in the black and white picture; and I couldn't think of a single thing to say.

I left them not much later and went to where I knew I would find Lucius. I wasn't surprised to find he was, perhaps not drunk, but well on the way to being so. I felt a stab of guilt that I hadn't just left the ladies when I'd heard him arrive, that I had allowed him to sit up there alone with whatever tortured thoughts consumed him.

'I'm sorry,' I said, hardly realising I had spoken aloud.

He looked up slowly, and I saw it again. He was growing old in front of my eyes, and I hadn't taken the time to notice properly. 'Yes, we're all sorry,' he said, his brow faintly creased in puzzlement.

'Arthur came round earlier this evening,' I said. 'I think you might have a problem.'

'My problems don't really weigh that heavily on me, Severus,' he said, swirling his brandy around in the crystal balloon. 'It's the hate that drags me down.'

I sat down beside him, perhaps to offer him some comfort, perhaps to glean some for myself. 'Why didn't you tell me what you were doing, Lucius?' I asked.

'Haven't we all got enough to do without watching one another?' he asked. 'I had thought the point of working with men you trust was that you didn't have to keep tabs on them.'

'We all need support,' I argued, thinking of time when he had gone there to Malfoy Manor to help me on the night Abraxas died.

'I can't stand the hate,' he repeated, going off on his own tangent. 'What... what do you think this is doing to Narcissa?' he asked bitterly. 'What do you think my child will think of me?'

'Come with me,' I said, not even understanding my words until I realised I had my hand around the white stone, but unlike the day I had taken him to lay his parents to rest, it was the stone's idea that I take him to disturb them.

Sirius was in the hall when we went down the back corridor leading to the stairs to the catacombs. He shot me an enquiring look, but I just shook my head.

It was different to the last time the ghosts of Malfoy Manor came towards us, this time it was as though we had summoned them.

'Lucius,' the ghost of Atticus Malfoy murmured as it flitted towards us.

'Grandfather,' Lucius replied, and I stepped back into the shadows; I was not needed there. 'Grandfather, the last time I asked you if I could speak to my parents, you refused me permission.'

'I did, and with good reason, boy.'

'I need a reason to go on, Grandfather,' Lucius went on. 'I need a reason to turn my other cheek to the hate.'

'You have Narcissa, Lucius,' Atticus replied. 'A worthy and loving wife... and soon to bear you a son, if I am not mistaken.'

Lucius nodded, and I began to wonder if the tales of his womanising were just another fabric of lies woven about him by those who hated him. 'And what will my son think of me?' he asked.

'He will see you as your wife sees you,' Atticus replied, 'as your sister sees you, and indeed the men who call you "friend" see you too.'

I held my breath as two more ghosts floated up behind Lucius, and laid a hand on each of his shoulders. 'Your son will honour his parents the way you honoured us,' the ghost of Valerius Malfoy said to his son. 'Now leave your guilt here, Lucius. As your grandfather said to you once before, it does not belong to you, and does not serve you well.'

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Chapter 37 of 48

Another party at the manor ends badly.

I set aside some time every day after that, some quality time when we would all sit and talk about just what had happened in our day, usually after dinner, when we were all at home, but before anyone was drunk.

Often Potter came back to the manor with Black, bringing Lily with him, and quite soon she began to bring Andromeda. At first I struggled with that, with the idea of Lily and Andromeda both being under the roof of my home, whilst I was quite unable to untie myself from my past affections for either of them, but I suppose I just got used to it, a bit like a reformed alcoholic has to spend some time in his life watching others enjoy a drink.

The women were busy anyway; their work needed planning and timing since they had moved away from just the elderly and infirm, and great care had to be taken to liaise with Sirius and Potter to make sure that things were done neither too early nor too late. Andromeda had been assisting in the evacuations, which didn't surprise me at all, and Minerva McGonagall and Molly Weasley too, which for some reason which mystifies me still, surprised me greatly. Lily couldn't join them though, except from the safety of her home or the manor; it was too dangerous.

I didn't really have a lot of time to dwell on what else was happening, trying as we all were to keep one step ahead of Riddle's radical campaign of what amounted to little short of the ethnic cleansing of the wizarding world.

I had suggested to Riddle that Henry Potter had made overtures to me about joining us, and he seemed to take a while to voice any opinion either for or against. That didn't worry me, and perhaps it should have; his reactions were rarely neutral, he was either over-enthusiastic or vociferously against. He did let something slip though, something that made me understand that he was coming to terms with the fact that his own brand of politics was not going to be enough to win his day, and that that would only be achieved by outright war.

'Perhaps Potter would be useful in winning over some those fools at the Wizengamot,' he said at last, smiling over his brandy glass at me.

'Which fools in particular?' It was Lucius who asked him.

'Titus Longbottom of course, and Aurelius Marchmeadow. Even Barty Crouch seems not to understand what his son is able to comprehend,' Riddle replied. 'Dumbledore, I suspect, is a lost cause,' he added, snorting his derision. 'The old fool cloisters himself at Hogwarts, thinking himself to be the last bastion of hope for the survival of his Muggle-loving followers. But he will fall too,' he said. He had stood up, shedding the façade of sanity, as he did with such ease when he felt himself safe. 'His castle of dreams will fall into dust, dragging the last of our shameful dilution with it.'

Black and James Potter had just slipped into the room, and I could see Black move his hand to his wand pocket, but Riddle spun in greeting, waking his guard as he did so with a wave of his arm, and whatever opportunity might have presented itself was snatched away. It would have been suicide anyway, a useless carnage, which would only have left the Death Eaters alive and leaderless, and possibly even more dangerous than they were right then, if any one of us managed to penetrate the shield of power around Riddle. I doubted that of course; long ago Dumbledore, and indeed Ethel, had suggested that a simple killing curse would not rid us of Riddle. It would harm him undoubtedly, if we managed to strike him, but as for killing him, they doubted that. Only part of Riddle lived in the body he inhabited then; the rest lived in Mordestone, and the black stone of death was not subject to the physical rules of men.

Lucius became a bit more like his former self as the birth of his child loomed nearer, spending more time at home. Loath though he was to pin his colours any more firmly to Riddle's mast, Lucius agreed that he might be able to ensure himself of one less enemy, for a while at least, and went as far as to host another great party for Riddle, which I thought at the time might have quashed any suspicions Riddle might have had about us. Narcissa was heavily pregnant by then, but still managed to carry off her duties as hostess in a way becoming one to the manor born.

Lucius even invited the Blacks, including his father-in-law, throwing the ball into their court to do with whatever they wished. They could either stoop to return the volley, or

let it pass and miss whatever networking opportunities a night at Malfoy Manor would undeniably present. In the end they came, en masse, and Lucius upstaged them yet again by placing them right in front of the top table in their usual place of honour, and then ignoring them completely. All in all, I thought he handled a tricky situation quite well, at the time at any rate.

I sat with Riddle, in his preferred place at the fire in the library once most of the guests had left, and felt myself freeze as he drew Mordestone from his pocket. For a moment I panicked, but I knew that Ethel would be in the catacombs anyway, as she always was when Riddle was there, keeping check that Salazar was not breaking through.

'You know, she loves it here, Severus,' he said, as I composed my face into a neutral mask.

'Who does?' I asked.

'Why, Mordestone, of course.' He raised the stone to his cheek, letting his eyes flutter closed for a moment as he did so. 'She has served me well, Severus... as I serve her too,' he added with his dangerous smile, the one that always led up to something as unpleasant as it was unexpected.

I said nothing, but there was a light knock on the door at the same time as there was an urgent tap on my mind. I knew it wasn't Ethel; she would still be in the catacombs, keeping her vigil along with the rest of the ghosts, and as Rabastan Lestrangle came into the room, Sirius Black slipped into my mind. *"Get back down here, Severus,"* he said, the panic clear in his message. *"Lucius is under arrest."*

'It is done, my Lord,' Rabastan said, genuflecting as he crossed the room to where Riddle sat, as I tried to keep up with Black's garbled message.

'What is done?' I asked, desperate for an excuse to leave the library without arousing suspicion.

'Nothing for you to trouble yourself with, my Severus,' Riddle replied, waking the ever present escort of Death Eaters who had stood at the door watching us sightlessly. 'Just a snake in the otherwise green grass,' he said. 'Do not worry about it. I do not blame you. He can be very plausible.'

'Who can?' I asked, my own panic mounting by the moment as I clutched my hand around the white stone in my pocket.

'Lucius,' Riddle replied. 'Don't blame yourself, Severus.'

I stood up, making for the door. 'You're wrong,' I said. 'Whatever you think of him is wrong.'

'I am not his accuser,' Riddle said, and there was something ominously like satisfaction lacing his words. 'The Wizengamot themselves held an extraordinary meeting this evening,' he said, shaking his head in mock sorrow. 'I am very much afraid they would have known that our faithful were all here, and hoped to surprise us with this.'

I felt the frown cross my face. 'How do you know this?' I asked, but what I was really wondering was where Albus Dumbledore had been when whatever had happened had happened.

Riddle tutted. 'Really, Severus, my eyes are not only on the comings and goings of Malfoy Manor, you know,' he said somewhat reproachfully. 'And it is not fitting that all these terrible atrocities that have been taking place go unpunished.' He raised his eyebrow in something like challenge. 'Now, it would hardly do for the blame to be laid at anything but the appropriate door; wouldn't you agree?'

'What exactly is happening, Tom?' I asked, desperate to drag him out in some way.

'Lucius is just being taken in for questioning, Severus,' he said. 'If, as you say, he is faithful to me, I shall find a way of securing his release... glossing over his more despicable orders.'

'They came from you,' I blurted out, not even bothering to veil the accusation in my voice.

'You would do well to remember to whom you speak, Severus,' he said, and I didn't miss the smirk of satisfaction that crossed Lestrangle's face that I was being dealt some sort of rebuke. Riddle noticed Lestrangle too though, and he raised his hand slightly, leaving Rabastan writhing on the floor in agony. 'And you, Lestrangle, should remember your own place in the grander scheme of things.' He held out his hand to me. 'Now, Severus, my love, I understand you are upset. Let us go back downstairs to see what we can do.'

'Now, gentlemen,' Riddle said disarmingly as he reached the bottom of the grand staircase, ignoring Narcissa weeping in Lucretia's arms, instead smiling over to where Cygnus and Orion Black had Lucius bound in magical chains. 'Surely the bonds are unnecessary,' he suggested. 'Mr Malfoy is nothing, if not a gentleman. I am sure we can trust him to come quietly with us, so that we can sort out this unfortunate affair and have him back in the bosom of his... extended family, as soon as possible.' He gave a sweeping glance to Black and Potter to where they stood with Lucretia and Narcissa, with Lucius's elves howling their own terrified lament from the door to the recently emptied ballroom, and I could see he trusted none of us.

He had dropped all pretence of the order for Lucius's arrest not having been issued by himself, and that left me wondering if he had indeed penetrated the Wizengamot, or if he were acting on his own power of arrest alone. He crossed the floor to Lucius, snapping his fingers as the chains snapped with them.

'I can trust you, Lucius, can't I?' he asked. 'Only, I would fear for you if that proves not to be the case.'

'Have I given you cause to believe anything else?' Lucius asked, shrugging himself away from Orion and Cygnus. 'Have I not obeyed even the most distasteful of your orders?'

'My orders?' Riddle asked, his eyebrow rising. 'Correct me if I am wrong, Lucius, but I was led to believe that *you* were the Minister of Magic... the ultimate power.'

That night Narcissa went into tortuously protracted early labour. By the time she delivered Lucius a son, almost a whole day later, her husband was in Azkaban, awaiting what was to pass for his trial, and I prayed to whoever might have been listening that Lucius would live to see him.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

'There was no such order from the Wizengamot, not even a meeting,' Dumbledore said, confirming what I had already suspected. 'That said, Severus, Lucius has few friends, and I could not find anyone willing to rescind the charges laid at his door.' He shook his head. 'The death squad orders were, after all, issued by Lucius... he is the man with the mandate.'

I raked my hands through my hair as Black stuck yet another cigarette in his mouth, but Dumbledore hadn't finished.

'There was another meeting though, a quickly called one,' he said, nodding to Sirius and Potter. 'There wasn't time to call you two when Arthur heard from his Ministry sources that Lucius was under arrest.'

'The Order of the Phoenix?' Black asked.

'Yes, the Order, Sirius,' Dumbledore replied. 'Many of them want to move now. They feel, and I understand their thoughts, that the time for waiting is over, the time to take the fight to Riddle has arrived.'

'What about Lucius?' I asked. 'We can't just forget about him as though he is already a casualty... just another statistic.'

Dumbledore's look made me understand that he felt that was exactly what Lucius had become. 'Lucius has few friends, Severus,' he said, repeating his earlier sentiment.

'Perhaps,' Potter said, surprising me a little, 'but he has Severus and Sirius... and truth be known, over the last while, me too.'

'Are the Dementors still guarding Azkaban?' I asked.

'Yes, the Dementors and a few, shall we say, lower orders of human beings,' Dumbledore murmured, and I knew what he meant. I knew the kind of thugs and hooligans who were the warders there; they were men who were one short step away from being on the other side of those bars. 'But I forbid you to go to Azkaban, Severus, without Riddle's consent. It would be foolish to court any more suspicion that you have already done.'

'You're not in a position to forbid me to do anything, Dumbledore,' I snapped back at him, 'any more than Riddle is a position to grant me consent.' I turned to Black, catching the half smile of approval he shared with Potter. 'I want to carry out a quick experiment, Black,' I said, crossing the space between us, and plucking a couple of hairs from his head before he got the chance to realise what I was doing.

'That was sore,' he gasped, wincing as though mortally wounded, but I wasn't listening to him; someone else had my attention.

"It's quite possible," Ethel said into my mind, breaking her silence for the first time as she leant out of her picture. *The real trick will be making sure that Sirius doesn't follow you, dear.* "Now don't be such a baby, Sirius dear," she said fondly, in a way that did nothing to hide the anxiety she shared with the rest of us. 'Godric would be very disappointed if his brave Gryffindors had become such...'

'Wimps?' Potter finished for her.

'Not the word I would have chosen, James dear, but you've got the idea.'

I knew the logistics of the Animagus change, but I'm sure Black over-complicated issues in the hope I would just relent and let him go to see Lucius himself. 'I do not need to get the curls on the coat exactly as you want,' I muttered, 'I just need to slip past the Dementors.' My stomach was already roiling from the Polyjuice; I was allergic to the damn stuff and was not looking forward to the aftermath my guts were already threatening me with.

'Have you got the potion?' Sirius asked me for the tenth time.

'Of course I have,' I snapped. 'The reason I am going to Azkaban is to give it to Lucius in the first place.' I couldn't wait any longer. I had no way of knowing if Lucius had been permitted to keep his own clothes, and if he had not he would not have the Veritaserum buffer secreted about him, and if he didn't, he would already be suffering the shocking withdrawal symptoms I had experienced on the few occasions I had tried to wean myself off it. That apart, Lucius telling anyone who asked what he wanted them to know was poor enough defence for him, for him to spill every secret he had under a truth serum would mean death for all of us: his wife, my wife, his baby son; I doubted anyone would be spared Riddle's wrath.

I was just about to leave when Narcissa and Lucretia came into the room. Narcissa was exhausted, pale and wan, red-eyed from weeping, and despite the beloved babe with the shock of white-blond hair she carried, none of the joys of motherhood shone on her pretty face, and it struck me again just how young and vulnerable she was. She crossed to me and handed me a tiny locket.

'It has a lock of the baby's hair inside it. I've charmed it so that when you leave this house the only people who will be able to see it are you and Lucius,' she said, whispering so the words would not catch on the lump in her throat. 'Make sure you give it to him, Severus... just in case.'

I kissed her tiny hand and took the locket, avoiding Lucretia's troubled look.

I couldn't Apparate to Azkaban, not without a Ministry permit, and I didn't want to risk Arthur getting caught issuing one, so I raised an Invisibility Shield about me, one that would at least fool the wretch of a boatman who was ferrying warders on and off shifts. Once I got to the other side it didn't matter; I had slipped into Black's Animagus form. It was a while before the guard at the front gate changed to just Dementors, but when it did I was able to slip past them with an ease that still surprises me. All I had to do then was find Lucius, and I thought I would have to do that by scent alone.

There is no over-estimating the horrors of Azkaban, no exaggeration of the maddened howling and wailing from behind those bars, or the stench of despair. I was glad of the dog form; at least the sense of human suffering was lessened. I couldn't sense Lucius at all though, not mentally, or even by scent, which above the stink of piss and refuse and ordure was hardly surprising. I felt panic well up inside me as I wandered the dripping rock-walled corridors and down into the bowels of the very rock that Azkaban had been carved into four centuries before. I knew that the higher risk prisoners were kept underground, and until then I had no idea of what the depths of despondency were, what hopelessness meant; it was something so meaningless that it didn't even have a name.

I padded down stone steps, ducking into ever present shadows whenever I heard something other than the tortured moans of desperation. It was a place where even fear cowers from some greater evil. I had reached the fifth level below ground, the Roman numeral for five had been carved into the rock lintel, when I felt him. It wasn't his scent, or a conscious thought, and I almost fancy it was the white stone letting me know somehow that he was there, or what was left of him at any rate. I had just rounded a bend, when a door grated open on iron hinges, and then slammed shut again, the echoes bouncing off the uncaring rock.

'He's to get nothing else tonight,' a rough gravely voice said.

'If he's lucky,' another voice replied with a harsh ugly laugh.

'Just be careful,' the first voice replied. 'Riddle wants him presentable for his trial, no marks on his face, and he's got to be able to stand unaided.'

'I'm sure the mighty Dark Lord can fix him up,' the second voice said.

'And I'm sure that neither one of us wants to be the one to give him any extra work,' the first voice said, as the two men drew nearer. 'He's in a bad enough way anyway. Let's not court trouble we don't need.'

They passed out of hearing, and I slipped further down the passage to the door they had slammed shut. I was going to have to be very careful; there was a powerful ward on the door, and it could get noisy if I had to slice through it. That apart, I didn't want anyone to know that I, or anyone, had gone there. I waited for what seemed like hours, and was just beginning to fret that I wouldn't get to see him that night, when two Dementors glided down the corridor, obviously heading for the only occupied cell in that part of the prison.

I hardly exaggerate when I say that, even knowing he was Lucius, I didn't recognise him. He was naked, bound, blindfolded and gagged... and filthy, but even secured as he was, he managed to shiver, whether in fear or cold or shock, or all three, I didn't know. My heart felt like lead in the knowledge that I would have to leave him the same way as I found him. At the same time my mind shied away from the suggestion Potter had made that he gave me some of his own hair, and that I took Polyjuice to Lucius and let him escape past the Dementors in James's Animagus form. It weighed heavily on me even then, and to this day I have never learned to bear the burden of guilt that I didn't just succumb to that most basic human decency, and let him escape. We could all have gone into hiding... forever, and let our world become what Tom Riddle wanted it to be, and I had been the one to make that choice, to take that choice away from Lucius, and I shall never forgive myself for that, whatever the price tag might have been. I had sworn once that I would not sacrifice Lucius, and I knew I was doing just that, and had I had the capacity to think my thoughts through at that time, I would have wondered if life had become as cheap to me as it was to Riddle.

I waited in the cell, not daring to move, until the Dementors had been gone for about five minutes; then I slipped into the form of Sirius Black. I kicked a curious rat away to scuttle under the door, and knelt to one of the few men who had ever called me friend, to administer the scant comfort I had brought with me, and to let him see at least a lock of his son's hair, and to hear from his own lips what he wanted the boy to be called.

The public gallery was packed. I sat with Narcissa on one side of me and Arthur Weasley on the other. Weasley ignored me of course; it would not have done for him to acknowledge me in any way. There were a few cases before the one the world's wizarding press awaited with bated breath, and loaded quills and cameras, and I remembered another time they had waited for Lucius Malfoy, when Abraxas had died, and we had left Spinner's End to go to his triumphal return to Malfoy Manor, but I pushed the thought away as the doorway at the back of Courtroom Ten was opened, and four Death Eaters brought Lucius in. He was pale and tired looking, but despite that he held his head high, as I knew he would always do, not even deigning to notice the excited babble and the popping flashbulbs. Humiliation was below Lucius Malfoy; it was a thing of lesser men.

Orion Black stood, in the absence of Barty Crouch Senior and Titus Longbottom, who had both refused to join the bench for the trial, yet seemed quite content to sit on the fence. I felt Sirius slump, even though Weasley sat between us, and I knew the shame he felt that his father was the one to mete out whatever rough justice was about to be dispensed. I had no comfort to offer him; my own culpability in whatever Lucius's fate was to be was something I could not turn from.

Orion read out a lengthy speech; one aimed at a middle ground of those with whom he hoped to curry favour, and the few reasonable doubters who still attended any public event of any sort when Riddle was present. Riddle himself took no active part in the proceedings, content to let his puppets dance to his tune instead.

'You may be under the illusion that your tributes to what you saw as your undisputed power, and the arrogance of assuming yourself above the law was done in secret, Mr Malfoy, leaving others to take the blame for your despicable acts,' Orion stated, as he struck a pose for the popping flashbulbs, 'but the truth will out, as it has done, and that which dominated your imagination, will now dictate your future. Let this be a lesson,' he said, turning to address the court, 'that it behoves us to be very careful what we worship, for what we worship we are likely to become.'

He didn't even make sense, unless his intention had been to take a swipe at himself and the rest of Riddle's sycophants, and it showed me just how brainwashed even supposedly powerful men like the Blacks had become, and just how potent the threat of Riddle's wrath really was. That said, Orion achieved what he set out to do; he deflected the public blame for any of the recent atrocities from Riddle to Lucius, and that was all he really wanted.

For a moment he conferred hurriedly with the bench of judges, and I realised that not a single one of them was a member of the Wizengamot that had been present at my trial, the true Wizengamot. It was made up of the hierarchy of Riddle's Death Eaters, and the friends of Abraxas Malfoy. At last Orion seemed to feel that he had spun out his moment of glory for long enough, and he unrolled a scroll and began to read, and it was then that I noticed he had placed his black velvet cap on his head of black hair.

'Lucius Malfoy,' he declared, in a strident ringing voice, 'you will be taken from this place to Azkaban Prison, thence at noon tomorrow to Hangman's Common. Once there, you will be hanged by the neck until you are dead. May Merlin have mercy upon your soul.' But unlike my own trial, no young woman stood from the back of the court in an eleventh hour bid to free Lucius.

As Narcissa's scream was stifled to Lucretia's breast, Arthur stiffened and let a tiny moan escape from his lips, and Black slumped forward to put his head in his hands. I looked across the court to where Dumbledore had been relegated to the public benches, and I felt a rage rise up inside me that he didn't even have the courage to catch my eye. A couple of rows behind him sat Henry Potter with James at his side, and I saw the younger man take his father's hand and whisper something to him... and all I could think of was that last humiliation: a public execution. I felt the fury rise another notch higher within me as Lucius was led from the courtroom between Walden Macnair and Rodolphus LeStrange, and found I was on my feet, with Arthur Weasley tugging furtively at my robe.

'This is wrong,' I yelled above the babble of voices, some of which had already begun to catcall at Lucius's back as he disappeared behind a door between the two Death Eaters.

I saw Orion Black bend to share a word with his brother, and Cygnus's smile of satisfaction, and I knew no one was interested in justice; all they had gone there for was another public relations exercise in cleaning up the Dark Lord's image for his final assault.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Chapter 39 of 48

The crowds at Hangman's Common don't get quite what they expect.

Ethel took Narcissa and her baby and Lucretia into her picture with her, and I left her to it, sitting in the dark, waiting. Black didn't come back to the manor until almost dawn, and I knew where he had been; I could smell Azkaban from him. I didn't ask him anything, and he didn't volunteer any information. All we seemed able to do was to wait, as Lucius's life ticked away. I hadn't imagined how slowly the seconds could pass, and yet how quickly the hours could snatch themselves away as we sat in some kind of silent vigil.

At shortly after nine o'clock Riddle arrived at the manor, and guard of six Death Eaters or not, I felt murder rising in my blood, and had to clench my hand around the stone in my pocket so as not to sign the rest of our death warrants.

'I have come to spare your hurt, my Severus,' he said, and for a moment I truly believed him, before he dashed all hope. 'I would prefer if you stayed here this morning and did not witness this. I understand how upset you are,' he said. 'In fact, he quite fooled me too.'

'I'm going,' I replied. I didn't say anything else; I had nothing left to say to his madness.

He hadn't finished though. 'I shall be moving in here tomorrow, Severus,' he said. 'Not tonight, as I had originally intended. I shall let you get to terms with Lucius's absence. I do understand, you see,' he said, as though the next day I would no longer notice Lucius wasn't there.

I let the cold knot of sick fury settle on my chest, and determined then to content myself to let him be hoist by his own petard, and for that I had to remain calm. He might have won that battle, and whilst the cost was more than I could bear, I resolved then that he had just lost the war. All I needed was time... and courage.

We had all had to surrender our wands anywhere within range of where the ancient gallows stood against a backdrop of lowering grey clouds. It was placed on a rise so as to make it visible to the masses, and they had turned out in ugly force. I drew my cloak tightly against me, shivering against everything but the external cold; I couldn't even feel that. The last drum roll had sounded, and Lucius Malfoy was led to the gallows, his clothes and his hair streaked and splattered by the mud and refuse that had been hurled at him on the last walk from the Ministry Apparition point. His eyes scanned the crowd, seeking mine, flitting to Narcissa, and back to me.

"Don't do anything, Severus," he said, his thought slipping into my mind. *I have come to terms with it; I shall deal with it in my own way.*

I was almost surprised at how lucid he was, how calm. *I took it all from you... I should have freed you..* I stumbled out the inadequacies.

"No, Severus, you know that for the madness it would have been," he replied, as Walden Macnair slipped the white Italian hemp noose roughly around his neck. *You gave me everything I have now,*" he went on, as though what Macnair was doing was happening in another world to another man. *My wife, my son, my sister... my pride... I would have had none of them had you not been at my side.*" And with that he drew his thoughts away from mine, and I felt him close his mind to me, and knew I would never hear from him again, not directly, not in this life.

I watched Macnair milk every second of fame from his grisly task, and then watched Lucius instead. No matter how despised he had become, he had walked a tightrope for us, and had never faltered in his path. The world was losing a hero it would never know it had, and I grieved for that; he didn't deserve to die at the Dark Lord's behest. I wanted to turn away, not to listen to the crowd baying to Macnair to hurry up and let them watch the bastard dance, but Lucius was worthy of more than that act of cowardice.

As the drummer boys picked up their beat again Riddle stood, resplendent in his robes, from where he had sat a good distance from the gallows, at the edge of the cordoned area that separated the riffraff from his elite of Orion and Cygnus and a few of the other older Death Eaters, and I noticed only absently that the old American Morton Schultz was not amongst them.

'Get on with it, Macnair. Let us hang this traitor and be done,' Riddle said as he turned to the crowd. 'Let this be an example to anyone who seeks to thwart the ends of our struggle for purity,' he said, his words whipping the crowd to even more eager expectation.

Riddle began to cross to the scaffold, as though perhaps he were about to ask the man he had condemned for his own crimes if he had any final words, or maybe he intended to bestow some hellish blessing. He was about half way to Lucius when I felt something nudge against my leg. I looked down, puzzled, and felt my heart turn over at the pitiful looking black mutt that had appeared at my side. I looked to where Lucius's brave little wife nodded once to it, laying her hand on its head in some sort of futile gesture of comfort, and the cur slunk away into the crowd in front of us as I pulled Narcissa to me.

Macnair stepped back, tugging the rope once to settle the knot firmly below Lucius's left ear. He spat on the ground at Malfoy's feet, and I swore that he too would die. The crowd was becoming restless; yells of "get a move on", and "let him dance", and whatever other abuse they cried, until a hooded man stepped forward as Riddle gave Macnair a nod, and the Death Eater went to kick away the tall stool on which Lucius stood, and I heard a snatch of conversation slip into my mind.

"Sleep easily, Animagus... my friend, in the knowledge that I understand what you are about to do as the mercy it truly is..." Lucius's last thought trailed off.

'AVADA KEDAVARA.' The words ripped through the air from the hooded man, along with a bolt of green light. It hit Malfoy square on the chest, as I felt Narcissa slump at my side in what I knew was partly relief, and the crowd bellowed their outrage at having been denied the spectacle they had longed for: Lucius Malfoy dangling on the end of a rope, as his life was choked out of him, and his bodily fluids ran down his legs.

Riddle spun in fury. 'Guards,' he screamed. 'That man.' He pointed to where the crowd had parted in surprise. 'The hooded man... It was Sirius Black... arrest him and bring him to me,' he shrieked, his careful façade of sanity cracking as the crowds backed away in fear.

But I knew they were wasting their time; there was no hooded and armed wizard for them to find, just a sorry black dog trotting away to hide somewhere safe until I could call for him.

I went back there, once I had taken Narcissa and Lucretia back to Ethel's care, later that evening just as dusk was falling, just to say my own goodbye to him, a farewell to the Lucius Malfoy I had known and grown to love as a brother. There was an almost eerie silence surrounding the dell, broken only by the souging of the wind in the trees that lined the clearing, and the creak of the scaffold rope where it swung backwards and forward. I don't know how long I stood there, my throat constricted, and my breath heavy in my chest. I shouldn't have gone alone; I realised that. I should have taken Black with me to help, and it was only when I walked towards Lucius's body that I became aware of the fact that five other men were approaching from the far-side Apparition point.

'You shouldn't be here, Severus,' James Potter said quietly, and for once there was nothing about him that set my teeth on edge. 'You don't know who's watching.'

'There is no one else here,' I said. I looked to where Sirius and the others had begun to climb the small rise to where Lucius hung, hardly surprised that the other men were Arthur Weasley, Henry Potter and Remus Lupin.

James just nodded. 'We only came to take him for some kind of decent burial.' He turned away, and began to make his way towards where Black and Lupin were already climbing the scaffold.

Sirius used no magic for his task, sawing at the hemp rope with a knife he drew from his boot, as Lupin tried to give him a bit of slack to work on, and I understood they wanted to leave no magical trace. I watched as Henry and James Potter caught Lucius's body as the rope eventually gave way. I let them do it their way; perhaps in that way Black could deal with his own part in Lucius's death. Whatever mercy his Killing Curse had been, it would still weigh as heavily on him as my part in his demise lay on me.

Sirius and Lupin had clambered back down, and James and Sirius stood Lucius up, and then Apparated away in tandem with Malfoy's body between them; it was the last

time I ever saw Lucius. Lupin and Henry disappeared next, but Arthur had hung back, and he began to walk slowly down from the rise to where I stood.

'Some heroes are not recognised in their lifetime, Severus,' he said wisely as he reached me.

'And some are never recognised at all,' I said flatly.

'He will be,' Arthur replied. 'I swear that to you. When this is over, everyone will know the part all of you have played.'

I almost laughed. I suppose I had already come to terms with the fact that Lucius was just the first, and that it was likely that none of us would survive, whether we were successful or not. 'And just who will tell the world, Arthur?' I asked. 'Who will be left to tell the world what happened? Who will be here to care anyway?'

'Me,' he said simply, and I looked at him properly, perhaps for the first time: a balding red-haired man, ordinary, one of those I had always regarded as somewhat beneath me, the precious ones of our world, one of those whom we had sworn ourselves to protect. 'Me, Severus,' he said, laying his freckled hand on my arm. 'I shall bear witness.'

Chapter Forty

Chapter 40 of 48

Severus has to begin to deal with the fallout.

I didn't go back to the manor that night. It would be so easy to site any amount of noble reasons for that; it was Lucius's home, and I didn't feel like staying there when he would never again have that luxury; it was only fair to give Narcissa the time to be alone and come to whatever terms she could with her loss; it would be a kindness to allow Lucretia some time with Ethel and Narcissa, and for the women to grieve the way women did, in that healthy outpouring that men find almost impossible to allow themselves to succumb to. There was only one truth though, one reason for staying away, and I couldn't hide from it: its name was cowardice. I was frightened to look those in the eye from whom I had, perhaps not taken so much, but allowed so much to be taken. Narcissa and her baby, Lucretia... even Black. I didn't fool myself that his action had been anything less than that of love, and I found myself believing as I had once before, despite his denials, that it was for Lucius that Black had held a candle close to his heart.

I Apparated to the warehouse at the top of Cottotrader Row. Nothing had changed there; the dusty old warehouse with the broken windows was still the same, the cracked pavement slabs were still cracked, the off-license where I bought my whisky was still open, even the barking mongrel dogs almost seemed to welcome me back to where I belonged, a dingy little street on the way to nowhere.

There was no Death Eater guarding my own street that night, of course, I thought wryly, as the house at the bottom of Spinner's End swam into only my view. I let the old iron gate swing shut and clipped the few steps up the weedy slabbed pathway to the shabby front door. I don't suppose I was surprised that, despite Henry Potter having told me that the house was totally empty, it was actually still the same, but I did wonder if what Ethel had taken to Malfoy Manor was a replica, or an illusion, or if the whole lot had moved itself back to Spinner's End when I opened the front door. They were surface thoughts though, just anything to hide from the real issues.

I closed the front door behind me, and stood against it. Everything was still the same, but Lucius was still dead.

I don't know how long it took me realise that I wasn't alone, or what it was that invaded my consciousness first, whether the voice came before the smell of cigarette smoke, or vice versa, but a bit like the chicken and the egg, it didn't really matter.

'I thought you'd come here,' he said.

Black was sitting on one of my settees, my favourite one, of course. I didn't say anything, just cracked open the Glenfiddich and poured a couple of stiff ones, handing one to him, and downing the other in a painful gulp that did little to warm me inside or out.

'I just can't go back there tonight,' he said, when it became apparent even to him that I wasn't going to speak. 'I can't face Narcissa... or Lucretia.'

He had more guts than I had, I'll give him that; at least he had the courage of that admission.

I don't know what we talked about that night, or perhaps I do, and do not care to recall the painful memories we both dredged up, not only of Lucius, but of the sorry world we were a part of. The next thing I really recall is waking stiff and sore and guilty as the dawn crept through the windows, dusting Black's dog form where he slept on the floor, and rousing him eventually too.

It was a wordless agreement that we both squared our shoulders and faced those whom we had left bereft to deal with their own emotions the night before.

I cannot explain my feelings, or speak for Black's, as we walked from the Apparition point behind the greenhouses, Lucius's greenhouses, but we did it, and pushed open the kitchen door to where the three women waited for us: Narcissa, pale and drawn, but brave, with her blond-headed babe at her breast; Ethel worried and upset and fussing around us in a way that made the guilt rise fresh and hot, as I had not thought about her hurt, or her fondness for Lucius, and had left her alone to cope with the younger women; and Lucretia, the brother she had only just found, so cruelly plundered from her life.

They converged on us, on Black and me, the way only women can, the way they touch and weep and mourn, like some kind of laying of hands on tortured souls. And we were tortured, but there was something else too; I knew that we had found something else in Lucius's death, and that was the final resolve to finish what we had begun, at whatever the cost was to be. Whatever the price tag was, I would not permit the down payment of Lucius Malfoy's life to be squandered.

I left them after a while, and opened the door on my study and went to sit at my desk. All the books and scrolls seemed to watch me, as though they too were on to greater effort, giving me the push I so desperately needed to start the thinking process again. I didn't wonder then how the parts of Spinner's End that Ethel had brought to the manor could be there, and yet also where Black and I had just left them up north; it seemed too mundane a thing to be concerned about, one of those things that just was.

"Die Letztendliche Wahrheit?" sat open on my desk, something that didn't surprise me.

To go through pain, Severus, you must keep going, for only then will it pass behind you, to be plucked later and found that what your heart wept for was not only grief, but the stealing of what you valued most.

Remember, Severus, to hold onto the past too tightly leaves you no room to also embrace the future. Your task is to be afraid, but to go on anyway.

Remember too, as you cannot heal your heartache, he can steal neither your memories nor yourself.

I laid it down again as the text blurred to leave just what I had come to regard as the meaningless ancient scripts that hid the private messages the book held for me. I knew, and I understood. It was telling me to get a move on.

It was late in the day when the Potters arrived, Henry and James. They had Arthur and Lupin with them, and I could tell that they too were waiting for some sort of direction from me, and I worried again that I had nowhere to point. As it happened, I was wrong, and it was only when Black came into the room with yet more men and women, ones who were, I supposed, members of his mysterious Order of the Phoenix, that I understood that I was not expected to lead the way, but to follow on instead.

'Cygnus Black has just been made Minister of Magic,' Arthur said as an opener, as though he wanted that bit out of the way as quickly as possible. He sat down on one of my settees, leaving the rest of them to make whatever job they saw fit of making themselves comfortable, just as I noticed with a rush of painful affection for Ethel that I had suddenly acquired not only more seats, but more space too.

'We know this house is in mourning, Severus,' Henry Potter said, 'and we... Arthur and I, and James and Lupin... well, we want you to know that we also feel your loss.' He turned to where the other men and women stood around awkwardly, the men and women he had not mentioned. 'They all know the sacrifices Lucius made... the dangers he embraced in working with Arthur to allow so many to be moved to safety.' He stopped for a moment and nodded to Kingsley Shacklebolt, a young black wizard, only a year or two older than I was, as though singling him out.

'Kingsley's own grandmother even now lives in Ethel's picture. He has seen that for himself.' Henry paused again, and I wondered if he was waiting for me to speak, but that seemed not to be the case. 'We have to take the fight to them, Severus,' he said at last. 'And we have to know that you can deal with Riddle if we do.'

At last I understood what they were asking, that I took Riddle, and they would take the rest.

'I think so,' I replied, not at all sure that I was speaking the truth.

It was quite late in the evening when I found myself alone at last. I had tried to take in as much as I could of the plans the Order of the Phoenix had been making, and kept finding myself surprised at the depth of their scheming, how it all dovetailed neatly with the evacuations the ladies had been doing, and James Potter and Sirius's fake death squads, and the way Lucius and Arthur had all but undermined the Ministry on their own. All that was over now, of course; Cygnus Black was Minister of Magic, and not only was Lucius unable ever to return to the Ministry, or anywhere else, I thought bitterly, but neither could Arthur Weasley return. I knew, too, that Sirius's position was more dangerous than that it had ever been, his closeness to Malfoy Manor and its inhabitants, and the way he had distanced himself from his own family saw to that, even without the spectacular way in which he had thwarted Riddle by sparing Lucius's final humiliation by delivering his own death curse. And then I wondered why I should be surprised that honourable men and women had not been sitting back waiting for their loved ones to be harvested by Tom Riddle's Death Eaters.

I was deep in my troubled thoughts when I realised Ethel was sitting in her little chair watching me.

'We're all going to die, aren't we?' I asked.

'I don't know, dear. That much is hidden from me.'

'Is it worth going on? Will the results justify the casualties?'

'Will you honour those already fallen, and those still to fall, if you do not?' she asked. 'Will you honour Lucius?'

That stung me, probably the way she had intended it to. I thought for a moment, wondering if I should even ask the next question, and yet that wasn't quite true; I knew I was hoping she would pluck it from my mind, in that way of hers.

'I have not spoken to him yet, Severus dear, but I shall tell you what I told Sirius just a short time ago.' She waited until I had raised my head again. 'Lucius knew of his eventual fate.' She paused for a moment, and I read in her, perhaps not the self-doubts I felt myself, but that she too was struggling with what she saw as some kind of personal shortcoming. 'I underestimated him, Severus,' she said. 'Not latterly, but when I met him first... I took him for a weak and selfish man, one who would succumb to whatever pressure was greatest upon him. That will always weigh heavily on me.'

I had grasped her bony little hand in mine. 'He loved you,' I said. I couldn't think of anything else to say.

'I know, dear, as I loved him, and all of you,' she said, rallying in a way that made me wonder if her admission had been her voicing her own doubts, or what she had read as mine. 'Now let us honour him.' She looked to where the door to my living room was closed, and I'm sure she had dropped some kind shield over it, because it was only when she turned back to me that I felt Tom Riddle's presence.

'He is moving in here?' I asked.

'I suspect it is his intention, dear,' she said. The old lined face broke into the smile that charmed me in a way no other smile ever had or ever will. 'That said, Severus dear, we, on the other hand, are moving out.'

'Out? Out where?' I asked.

'We cannot afford to have him living here,' she said, 'not when Salazar is so close. If I have to leave the catacombs to defend any one of you, it would leave just Godric and the shades to keep Salazar from breaking through.'

'Has Godric not got the power to do that?' I asked.

'Of course, dear,' she chided. 'It is, however, a risk he does not see fit to take. There are other things in this manor besides the spirit of Salazar Slytherin.'

'What other things?' I asked, not at sure I wanted to know.

'This house...' she said, trailing off in in some kind of unease that I had never detected before in her. 'As you know, it was originally built on a pagan burial site, dear. Many would believe that that alone renders the house cursed for all eternity.'

'What's buried here, Ethel?' Black asked, not surprising me at all by appearing in doorway.

'The reason Salazar is so strong here is that not only is his spirit here, Sirius dear,' she said, 'but his earthly remains too lie below our feet.'

'Where do we go now?' I asked, as though I hadn't the mental capacity to work it out, as Black drew his hand across his face in what looked like superstitious dread.

'Spinner's End, of course,' she replied. 'Now, dear, you must tell him that we are leaving here.'

'And Black? He cannot be seen to be at Spinner's End.'

'Oh, don't worry about Sirius, Severus dear,' she replied, smiling over to where Black still stood rooted to the spot. 'He won't be seen.'

Chapter Forty-One

Chapter 41 of 48

Tom Riddle returns to Malfoy Manor.

As Ethel closed the door, I drew a deep breath and squared my shoulders. I could feel him walking across the hallway, and I crossed to the door, determined not to tremble before him. Up until then I had thought him invincible; of course, consequently, he had been.

'Tom,' I said flatly as I threw open the door, not even glancing at the five Death Eaters he had brought with him.

If he were taken aback by my lack of greeting, he didn't show it. If he noticed the silk-trimmed black mourning robe I wore, he either didn't see fit to comment, or just didn't care. That was fine, because neither did I, not about him.

'Where is Sirius Black?' he asked, making himself comfortable.

'I do not know,' I replied. 'I doubt he will be foolish enough to come anywhere near me now.'

'And James Potter?' he asked.

'I do not know where he is either,' I replied, 'nor do I care, as long as we keep tabs on the child, if it's a boy. Quite frankly, I have enough to cope with here with two bereaved women, to wonder where anyone else is.'

'Yes, yes,' he said, 'I understand how upset the ladies will have been at Lucius's treachery. I believe Cygnus is willing to take his daughter and his grandson back under his good grace though. In a way it's a pity that the boy is pure of blood; had he not been he might have proved useful to us.'

'Narcissa and Draco Malfoy will not be going anywhere near Cygnus Black.' I refused to let myself even gasp inwardly. I had things to say, and it would not do to allow him to dictate his way of things, or become any more at home than he already was. I had to make some attempt at asserting myself, especially now he would think me to have no allies save for the women. 'I am closing up this house, Tom,' I said, before my courage failed me. 'You will have to find somewhere else to stay.'

'But surely your dear wife will want to stay on here, Severus,' he said, and I could see that was not what he had expected, and he was momentarily, perhaps not lost, but certainly wrong-footed. 'It is her family home, after all.'

'My wife will make her home where I make mine,' I said, keeping to the same cool tone, and finding it easier than I had thought it would be as the cold hate bolstered my resolve. 'Narcissa and Draco will be coming with us.'

'Not to that dingy little hovel up north, Severus?' he said, his brow creasing as he tried to work out my standpoint and what it meant to him. 'Surely not there.'

'It is *my* family home,' I said. 'I don't care for it here anyway, Tom,' I said, at last letting the caution I had decided upon slip into my voice. 'I have found it difficult to work here, as though there is something or someone I am on my guard against...'

'That will just have been Lucius,' he declared, cutting me off. 'But do not let that worry you, my Severus. I shall take part of the blame for foisting the fool upon you.'

I had prepared myself for that conclusion on his part. 'Not Lucius,' I said, shaking my head. 'I almost feel as though...' I trailed off, looking down at my arm to where the Dark Mark had awakened with his presence. 'It's as though I feel some sort of detachment here... as though something seeks to undermine my concentration, and place some sort of barrier between me and...' I shook my head again, as though at a loss, hoping he would make of it that being at the manor detached me from him or Mordestone; I didn't care which, as long as I had said enough to make him susceptible to what I had yet to say. 'Do you recall the twin sarcophagi in the cellars?' I asked. 'The ones that stood in front of the room where Black and Lupin were held?'

'Where are they now?' he asked, his eyes narrowing as though he were trying to work out the angles.

'I had them removed to the Crypt,' I said. 'It hasn't helped much though. I can't think properly here, Tom. I can't work,' I repeated. 'I had threads... and thoughts...'

'But you have moved forward, my love,' he said. 'The book...'

I looked across to where 'Die Letztendliche Wahrheit?' lay on my desk, and clasped my hand around the stone in my pocket.

'It speaks to me,' I said, dropping my voice to a superstitious whisper, as I began to tread the path I had decided upon, just hoping the stone and the book would agree to follow. 'It does not like it here.'

'Come, come now, Severus. It came from here, if you recall, right beside the very sarcophagi you mentioned,' he said, a smile crossing his face, as though I were a child frightened of the dark, which, of course, I was. 'Perhaps I have misjudged the effect that Lucius's treachery has had on you. I should have thought about what a blow that would be to you.'

'Yet for all the years it lay here, it showed itself only to me,' I said, pulling him back to the book.

He seemed to think about that, maybe about Abraxas's denial of any knowledge of its existence. 'Perhaps you are right,' he said eventually. 'Perhaps we should leave this place. First Abraxas, then Lucius... you are sure about Lucretia, my love?' he asked, going in a direction I had not expected. 'Perhaps you should set her aside too, and we shall go alone to Spinner's End.'

'No, Tom,' I said quickly. 'I am going to Spinner's End with the ladies... that much has been made clear to me.' I glanced again to the book, this time feeling his eyes follow my line of vision to where it lay open.

I could feel his reluctance as he crossed the room, the difficulty he had in feigning disinterest as the pages flicked one over another to come to rest. I found myself at his side as he picked up the book and scanned the message that unfolded before his eyes. He wouldn't trust it; I knew that, that he would assume it to be some sort of trick. I

also knew I wasn't imagining the tightening feeling in the atmosphere of the room, and I knew it stemmed from the shield that Black and Potter were tightening around us, and though I didn't know it then, not only had they done so, but Lupin and Arthur Weasley had joined, and even Dumbledore and Minerva had come from Hogwarts to help, so dangerous was it to allow Salazar Slytherin and Mordestone to feel one another.

At last Riddle did what I expected of him and drew Mordestone from his pocket, as I felt the shield tighten even more, so that I almost felt my breath constricted, as the white stone throbbed in anger. As he laid Mordestone on the book the sconces dipped, and yet the writing on the page became clearer:

If you should hold out your hand to clasp his, do so in trust, for even if you should let his go, he will never let go of yours.

'You see, Severus?' he said, turning to me. 'You have to trust me, my love; even your book says so.' He made to pick Mordestone from the page, and drew back as though burnt, as the page seemed to change, until the background was black and the new words danced in fiery red.

Severus Snape has no doubts. The message was for Tom Marvolo Riddle. If you cannot give trust, seek none in return. That will ever be the way of things.

'What trick is this?' Riddle said, two spots of anger appearing high on his pale cheeks in what I had long ago come to recognise as a warning sign, and I wondered if I had gone too far too quickly.

I needed him to put Mordestone away though; it would not take long for him to feel the ever-tightening atmosphere, as the shield between the Stone of Death and the catacombs where Ethel and the shades were keeping tabs on Salazar Slytherin became even more constricting in a way that made me think I was running out of time.

I said nothing, just shaking my head in what I hoped he would take for confusion, as Black slipped into my mind. *Get a move on, Severus,* he said, and I could hear his gasp of strain even in his thought.

'Mordestone cannot lie to us,' I ventured at last. 'She cannot lie, Tom, not to us.'

He moved to pick up the stone again and drew back once more as new words appeared before him:

I would have your Mark, Tom Marvolo Riddle, so that I know you are he, and you know me.

'What does it mean?' he asked, doubt lacing his voice, directed not at me though, but at the book, and I could see he was torn between his adoration of Mordestone, and his mistrust of the unknown powers of 'Die Letztendliche Wahrheit?'

A quill had appeared on the centre of the book, resting on the creamy-coloured silken thread that bound the old pages together, and I could see the fat blob of ink, the colour of tainted blood, at its tip. Riddle picked it up and scrawled his name across the page, smiling as though he were joining a game to keep me amused, and not as deeply intrigued as he actually seemed to be: Tom Marvolo Riddle, and the letters danced in front of our eyes to change to "I am Lord Voldemort", and back again to what he had written.

'How did you know that?' he demanded, spinning to me, and for the first time I read something in him I had never seen before, something like shock, or awe.

'Know what?' I asked, totally confused.

'Nothing, my love, nothing,' he said, lifting Mordestone from the book and slipping it into his pocket. His face was suddenly suffused with some kind of self-believing fanaticism as he leant to me. 'Whatever your desires are, my Severus, they are yours to have.' He nodded to where the nondescript little book lay closed on my desk. 'We are complete.'

It was only then that I understood that the book had rearranged his signature into the grandiose name he had picked for himself, a name he had told no one, except perhaps his beloved Mordestone. I rather suspected it would be in the public domain very soon though.

Black and Potter had let the shield down very slowly, almost seamlessly, and by the time Riddle had sat back down at the fire the atmosphere seemed quite normal, as normal as it could ever be with the Dark Lord in the room.

He didn't say much after that, but he surprised me by announcing that he would stay with Cygnus Black, and I smiled to myself at how put out not only Cygnus would be by that arrangement, but Bellatrix too. 'I am more than happy to take Narcissa and the boy, Severus, if you would like to change your mind,' he offered. 'I would think no less of you if you felt them a burden, especially the child, being Lucius's son. I would understand your reluctance to bring up a traitor's son.'

"If anyone knew about betrayal, it was Lucius. Black's bitterness spilled into my mind. "Every person he trusted stole a part of him."

I couldn't break my concentration to reply to Black, and I suspected he hadn't intended it to be for my hearing anyway. 'I promised Lucius long ago that I would care for them, if anything happened to him,' I said to Riddle instead, adding quickly, lest he get the idea that Lucius had confided anything he might view as treachery, 'as he promised me he would care for Lucretia, if anything happened to me.'

"Get rid of the scum now, Severus, before I do something," Black snarled, slipping into my mind again in a way that made me understand I had to speak to him, and soon, so that his festering outrage, no small part of which would be directed at himself, made him careless.

'Ever the honourable one, my Severus,' Riddle said, and I could see he was already shedding whatever awe he had held. 'Oh, by the way, Severus, if James Potter or Sirius Black gets in touch with you, I should like to know.' He had flung the door open to his guard of Death Eaters, all of whom I only noticed then had not been put to sleep as was his normal custom. 'In fact, I should like Lily Potter delivered to me at Cygnus Black's house, and she can live under my protection until her son is born... or perhaps at Orion Black's... that way the Blacks can return the compliment the Potters paid them when Sirius Black stayed there as a boy.'

'I have neither the time nor the inclination to look for Lily Potter, Tom,' I said. 'Get someone else to do that.'

He smiled his cold smile, the one that told me that whatever wonders had unfolded before his eyes, were merely to confirm his own omnipotence, and I doubted if I had moved forward at all.

Chapter Forty-Two

Sirius has a night out.

I had gone down to the catacombs to see Ethel, and to get some idea of whether we should leave for Spinner's End that night, or wait until the next day, when I became aware of someone else. At first I had thought it was the ghost of a young girl wearing what looked like a white nightgown; it streamed behind her as she ran up and down the gloomy passages, and in and out of chambers, one arm clutching what seemed to be a doll to her breast. She was weeping, a tragic lost keening sound, like a panicked child who cannot find her mother, or a soul bereft with no hope of succour, and it was only when she came running towards me that I felt a jolt of pain and remorse as I realised it was Narcissa.

'I can't find him,' she sobbed. 'I know he must be down here, but I can't find him.' She held her baby in one arm, and pounded her other fist on my chest. 'I must find him, Severus; help me.'

I took the child from her, and pulled her close to me with my other arm, quite at a loss as to how to comfort her. She was looking for Lucius, of course; I would be a poor substitute. She tried to pull away from me, gripped by some new hysteria, as her breath hitched in short sharp gasps that quite frightened me.

'I must find Lucius,' she said. 'I cannot leave here without him.' She turned to me again, her eyes feverish and unfocussed, yet laced with challenge and accusation. 'We cannot leave here without him. He will think we have gone away and left him behind.'

'He will know where we are,' I said uselessly. 'He will know I have taken you and Draco to safety.'

It was with no small measure of relief that I saw Ethel hurrying along the dim passage from where she had likely been in the same chamber as when I had eavesdropped on her the last time I'd found her in the cellars.

"It is better this should happen now, Severus," Ethel whispered to my mind. *"Better now than when we leave this place."* 'Hush, child,' she said to Narcissa. 'Hush, sweet child, and you and I shall try to see if we can make contact with Lucius.'

I gave Ethel a doubtful look. I thought it was a somewhat dangerous line to take, but I supposed her thousand years' worth of experience dwarfed my twenty-five, so I began to turn away.

'Not so fast, Severus dear,' Ethel said. 'Give Narcissa back her baby.'

'I was taking him to Lucretia,' I replied.

'Well, dear, Lucretia can see him later; for now, Narcissa and I are going to take him to see his father,' Ethel said firmly.

'Yes,' Narcissa said. 'Give me back my baby, Severus, so I can take him to Lucius.'

"Is this wise?" I asked Ethel's mind.

"Just let me deal with this, Severus dear," she replied, at the same time crooning words of comfort to the distressed young woman she embraced. *"She will remember nothing of this if I do not find Lucius."*

"If you do see him, tell him..." I said, faltering, as my throat constricted as though I had spoken aloud, *"...tell him I shall always care for them as though they were my own."*

"Even if I don't, he went to Merlin knowing that."

"Tell him anyway," I said as I handed Draco to Narcissa, and turned and left them to it, feeling oddly excluded.

It was a good couple of hours later when Ethel came into my living room, where Black, Potter and I were discussing the banner headline in the Evening Prophet, the one that read: 'James Potter and Sirius Black desert their Ministry posts.' Riddle wasn't letting the grass grow under his feet.

'We shall wait until morning, and go to Spinner's End then,' Ethel announced. *"I was not able to find him, Severus,"* she said, answering the question I hadn't asked.

'Is Narcissa all right?' It was Potter who asked, as my mind had a horribly troubling image of a ghostly Lucius unable to find his way home; it felt something like a waking nightmare. I shook my head trying to clear the uncomfortable thought.

"Don't dwell on this, Severus," Ethel said, and I could feel her pouring her false calm on my mind, and I wondered what it was that had panicked me. *"Is this house, dear,"* she said. *"The sooner we leave this house, the better."* She was absently replying to Potter at the same time, assuring him that Narcissa was calm and asleep, and that she would be in far better frame of mind the next day.

I didn't even notice that Black was unusually quiet; perhaps if I had I might have stopped him, then again, perhaps I would have joined him.

Neither Narcissa nor Lucretia joined us for dinner, Lucretia having had a tray sent to where she had insisted on staying with her sister-in-law in case she awoke alone and frightened, despite Ethel's assurance that she would be calm.

We had only just finished our evening meal, Potter had left for his parents' house where he'd left Lily, and it was just Ethel, Black and me, when Sirius stood up, his usual cigarette stuck in the corner of his mouth.

'I'll see you in the morning,' he said, and I didn't like the way he didn't meet my eye.

'Where are you going?' I asked.

'I'll be back before breakfast,' he said in way of a reply.

'Where are you going,' I repeated, and I noticed Ethel gave him a long troubled look that mirrored my own apprehension.

'I'm going to meet Lupin,' he said, and I didn't want to wonder why he was either lying, or being more than economical with whatever the truth was.

'Be careful, Sirius dear,' Ethel said.

"Where's he going?" I send the thought to Ethel, knowing even before she gave me a long reproving look, that I had framed it like a demand.

"He is going to meet Lupin, Severus, but he's closed the rest of his mind down quite tightly; either that or he hasn't quite made up his mind yet."

That wasn't much help at all, but I suspected that however good an Occlumens Black was, and he was good, he wouldn't have managed to keep Ethel from knowing anything important, which just went to show how wrong I could be.

I didn't sleep well, my thoughts racing uneasily, flitting between wondering what Black was up to, wondering if I could prevent Riddle from trying to stay at Spinner's End, and wondering when Lucius would join his father and grandfather in the catacombs of the manor. I knew Ethel was right though; the house felt wrong, and looking back I can see that that most of the horrors had happened while we were there. I took the accursed Mark at the manor; I, and of course Lucius, had been victims of Riddle's abuse there; Abraxas had died that awful night when I had almost been hanged for a crime I hadn't committed; and, of course, that thought brought thoughts of Lucius's own downfall hard on its heels, and I found myself reliving the nightmare of his final days, and berating myself for being so wrapped up in myself that I had failed to see what had happened to him.

And yet, we had found Lucretia at the manor, and Lucius had finally succumbed to Narcissa there too. The bad outweighed the good though, and I found myself longing for morning and our return to Spinner's End.

I had been along to Narcissa's rooms, and found her awake and as calm as Ethel had promised, as Lucretia helped her to bathe Draco. I was the first person down to breakfast, apart from Ethel, of course. The Daily Prophet had already arrived by the time I sat at the kitchen table.

'Did Black come back last night?' I asked her absently as I unfolded the paper and froze as the headline jumped out at me:

"Orion Black Murdered".

It is with great regret and deep shock that the Daily Prophet has to announce to its readership the untimely and brutal murder of Orion Black.

Orion Black, 47, the younger brother of our esteemed Minister of Magic, Cygnus Black, was found brutally murdered in a lane in Knockturn Alley. We have been led to believe that Mr Black was probably murdered elsewhere, and his body was then taken there in an attempt to sully the family name.

Orion Black is survived by his beloved wife, Walburga, nee Black, and his sons, Regulus and Sirius.

Regulus Black, who has appointed himself as spokesman for the family, has asked that the family is given privacy to grieve the heinous act that has robbed them of a husband and father.

When asked by our reporter why he, and not his elder brother Sirius, was spokesman, Regulus Black replied, 'Sirius has not been a member of this family for quite some time.'

Whilst it is not this paper's place to speculate on the fact that Sirius Black has had several brushes with authority over the last few weeks, it was interesting that he could not be found to offer his own comments on his relationship with his family, or his whereabouts at the time of Orion Black's death.

I looked up slowly, realising only then that Black was reading the report over my shoulder.

'When I get hanged, as is likely, I intend to be hanged for much more than one Black,' he said, sticking a cigarette in his mouth, and looking expectantly at Ethel, as though the only important item on his agenda for that day was breakfast.

Chapter Forty-Three

Chapter 43 of 48

Return to Spinner's End.

The move to Spinner's End didn't take long, not with Ethel's talents, and I confess I didn't even wonder then why she had made such a fuss about having to use the ladies to help her to uproot everything she had planted there, from her roses to Godric, to take them to Malfoy Manor in the first place. I was just on the point of beginning to chivvy her along, when she told me to look out of the window of my living room, and I don't suppose I was surprised to see not the gardens of Malfoy Manor, but the rain-washed little northern street, halfway along the road to nowhere.

'And the ladies?' I enquired. 'And young Draco, for that matter?'

'Should I have left them in Wiltshire, Severus?' she asked. 'That aside, dear, I have left the manor uninhabitable. It is no longer the place it was.'

'And the ghosts?' I asked.

'Oh, the shades of the manor will see only the reality,' Ethel replied in her usual cryptic way, nodding to the doorway as Lucretia came into the room, with a wan but otherwise calm-looking Narcissa. 'They will be quite at home.'

'I see we've moved already, Ethel,' Lucretia said, as though houses, contents, and inhabitants moving four hundred miles without as much as a jolt were something quite ordinary. 'That's good. I confess I've been anxious for Severus to distance himself from the manor.'

'Lucius will find us here, Ethel, won't he?' Narcissa asked with less anxiety than I would have expected, and Ethel's confident nod and the way she led the younger woman to the table made me wonder if she had already spoken with Lucius, something that gave me a quite unexpected pang of envy.

Black was still sitting at the table, and I saw him shoot a worried look at Narcissa, which I suspected had to do with whatever explanation he had still to foist upon us about his father's death. Of course, I was wrong about that, which just went to show how badly I still tended to underestimate most people.

Narcissa had sat at the table beside her cousin, and it was only when she lifted the Daily Prophet that I realised that she didn't have Draco with her.

"I borrowed a few elves; there is no work for them in the manor now," Ethel remarked blandly before I could even voice my question, in that way she had of imparting little tidbits in my mind to save wear and tear on my larynx.

I was watching Narcissa though, and the look she gave Sirius. It was one that made me suspect that she had been party to whatever plans he had laid for the night before, and I warned myself to keep an eye on her. It was one thing for Black to be out and about and plunging whatever dagger he saw fit into whichever breast he deemed most deserving, but quite another for Narcissa to take the mantle of what I recognised as revenge onto her shoulders. Perhaps it sounds overcautious to have worried about a bereaved slip of a girl, who had just become a mother, running out to commit murder, but I remembered the single-mindedness of her pursuit of Lucius, and how she had mentioned that she may 'come back for dessert' on the matter of her father's downfall.

'Is Cygnus next?' she asked, confirming the worst, and I noticed she didn't ask if her 'father' were next, as though she had long ceased to have such feelings about him. Of course, given what Andromeda had told me of the abuse she had suffered at Cygnus's hands, I could hardly fault her on that count.

'There's no specific order,' Black replied, sticking the ubiquitous cigarette at the corner of his mouth.

I was about to make some comment or other along the lines of taking care to make sure that the only Blacks relieved of life were those of our choice when an owl tapped at the window. Her message wasn't for me though; it was for Black from Alastor Moody, to let him know that a dozen men and women faithful to us had surrounded a small Death Eater gathering in the old Riddle house in Little Hangleton, and asking for me to owl Riddle to come to Spinner's End on some pretext so that they at least didn't have to deal with him. They would stay in hiding until they had a message from Sirius that Riddle had arrived in Spinner's End, before launching an attack.

I complied with Moody's request, albeit a bit uneasily, and sent off the owl to Riddle after breakfast. Then I spent some time with Black, trying to find a way of allaying Riddle's suspicions about him and James Potter, and formulating a reason for my asking Riddle to Spinner's End in the first place. The plan was hasty, and I thought ill-prepared, but like so much of our planning we were marching to Riddle's beat and not our own. Much of its success would depend on Riddle's vanity, and his remarkable ability to see what he wanted to see.

I went through to my work room and began preparing a new batch of Veritaserum buffer. There were quite a few of us taking it by then, and I'd always found the preparation of a potion to be conducive to thinking, especially the ones I prepared so often that the making of them was almost automatic. Once I had everything in the cauldron, and the potion was stable and simmering, I went back into the main kitchen. Ethel was just looking up from whatever she was doing at her stove, the way she did when she was following someone's progress along Spinner's End.

'The Dark One is approaching, Severus dear,' she said. 'Try to stall him, and let us see if we can use this visit to our advantage instead of his.' She gave Black a look; it was one that spoke of shared confidences that rather left me feeling out in the cold. There was no time to think what they were up to though; I could feel Riddle walking up the path.

At first I thought he was going to ignore the fact that Orion Black was dead, or maybe wait until I mentioned it, but he approached it from an oblique angle. 'I have decided to consider Henry Potter's request to join our number, Severus,' he said, and that made me realise that he was still doubtful of his ultimate control in the Ministry, and Orion's death had left a void larger than he cared for.

'Indeed?' I murmured, content to wait to hear what else he had to say, not least of all how he would reconcile that with James Potter's implied desertion.

'I would like him a little closer, and what with Orion Black's untimely death, I would like someone else I can trust at the Ministry,' he went on, and I could feel him gauging me, perhaps to see if I had known about Orion. 'Just to keep an eye on whatever Blacks remain.'

I made neither show of surprise nor any kind of regret. 'I had thought that that was what you had placed Lucius in the Ministry for,' I said, not much caring whether he became angry or not, as I began to realise that he really meant that Henry's unborn grandchild was whom he actually wanted to keep tabs on. 'That aside,' I went on, 'I thought you were staying with Cygnus Black.'

'Have you asked me to visit to attempt to score points off me, Severus?' he asked so lightly that I was not left in any doubt of his fury. He gave me a cool look as those two tell-tale spots of colour, the ones I had come to recognise as warning, rose on his pale cheeks, and they cautioned me to take even more heed of Riddle's mood than his words. 'I understand how badly this has upset your life, my love,' he said, and it was as though he were puzzled at my attitude, as though he could not comprehend that Lucius's death was anything to me but an inconvenience which left me lumbered with his sister, his widow and his child. 'I should have listened to you when you told me you needed to be alone to work. I admit to the error of foisting the fool upon you,' he said magnanimously. And that reminded me of what Ethel had warned me of a long time before, that Riddle had almost total recall.

'Are you sure that Sirius Black and James Potter have deserted their posts?' I asked, turning him aside from belittling Lucius before I lost my temper.

'Black?' he asked, lacing his voice with incredulity. 'You were present, Severus, when he killed Lucius.'

'Lucius had a rope around his neck at the time, if you care to recall, Tom,' I reasoned, and began to go down the road I had mapped out in some sort of effort at a damage limitation exercise I had planned for Sirius, and to a lesser extent James Potter. 'Lucius and Black were lovers, Tom,' I said offhandedly, my mouth twisting in what I hoped he would take as distaste; the lie would not matter to Black, and nothing mattered to Lucius anymore. 'Black merely sought to spare his final anguish.'

He seized on that, as I had expected him to. 'And just when did you see Sirius Black, Severus?' he asked, smiling the dangerous smile, and holding up his hand to stifle whatever my reply might have been. 'You may answer that after you tell me why you have not informed me that you have seen him.'

'This is the reason I asked you come, Tom,' I said, daring reproach. I unrolled the scroll I had had Black write earlier, and Riddle read it aloud.

"Severus,

I need you to explain to Narcissa and Lucretia why I did what I did. It was to spare them, and Lucius too. I suspect Riddle will see what I have done as a slight; I cannot help that, nor do I care much. I am not sure that I trust him any more than he trusts me. I intend to drop out of sight for now, and continue working to freeing our world from its impurities by my own methods.

SB

'And murdering his impeccably bred father was in furtherance of his aims?' Riddle asked. 'Really, Severus, how naive do you think I am? I'm not disappointed in Black, not really; I am, however, disappointed in you for believing this rubbish,' he said, repeating a line he had used to me before, just substituting Black for Lucius. He thrust the scroll back at me. It was no more than I could have hoped for; I had sown a seed, and one such as he would see what he wished, and his own self-belief would make him accept the lies as he accepted all the sycophantic offerings that fed his ego, and twist anything he didn't care for to his own meaning.

'Black killed Orion?' I asked, as though it didn't concern me whether he believed Sirius's assertions as to his ultimate loyalty or not.

'It is Cygnus's belief...' he said, trailing off as one of the elves Ethel had brought from Malfoy Manor tapped on the door and came in with another scroll of parchment, this one still tied as though just delivered.

It happened in just the same way as the time Riddle had intercepted Lucius's message from Brighton, that awful day when I had cursed Ethel, and I felt a horrible chill of déjà vu as Riddle took the scroll addressed to me, and unrolled it, and the frightened elf backed away.

"Severus,

It is vital that you find a way to get a message to Riddle by whatever means you have. I have just heard that Dumbledore's men are about to launch an attack of some sort on the Death Eater encampment at Tom's old home in Little Hangleton. Do this immediately, Severus; I doubt there is time to waste.

There's no point in me or James writing to Riddle. He seems to have made a stand about our loyalty, and I don't really care about him. I do care about what he thinks he stands for though, so James and I are going to try to see if we can get any more information.

Sirius."

He said nothing for a long few moments, just rolling the scroll up, and tapping it against his hand, and I resisted slumping relief that it wasn't some indiscretion from James Potter, or anyone else. I detected Ethel's hand in the writing of the message, and understood just what she and Black had been cooking up between them, or perhaps I was still underestimating Sirius. Whichever it was, Black would not have sent the elf through unless he had word that the swoop the Order had made in Little Hangleton was, not necessarily successful, but at least over. I reluctantly agreed that the opportunity and the timing of Riddle's visit were too good to miss.

I crossed to my work bench and stirred the batch of Veritaserum buffer that I had been in the process of making, drawing my thoughts together, and it was only then that Riddle unwittingly handed me yet another spoke to my wheel.

'You seem particularly concerned about whatever that is, Severus,' he said, as though he either had no interest or belief in the contents of Black's last scroll, or had forgotten about it already. 'What is it?'

'Nothing yet, Tom,' I said carefully, my gaze flicking to where "Die Letztendliche Wahrheit?" lay open on my desk, and I smiled to myself in the knowledge that the little book had been closed but a few seconds before, and I felt something rise up inside me, something like victory in wrong-footing him in so many ways at one time, and I suppressed the feeling even before Ethel's warning knock on my mind.

He had risen from his seat, and I could feel him beside me as he too glanced to where the little book lay open, his eyes alight with his inner madness. 'You have found the way?' he asked, peering into the cauldron as though it were indeed Aqua Vitae. He took Mordestone from his pocket, and for a moment I wondered if the stone of death would refute his belief, but it just glowed and throbbed in his hand, an ugly red for a moment, and then became the flat black shiny stone it was. Riddle took that as a sign of course, and I understood that however sceptical and indeed disbelieving he was, he had such certainty in his own supremacy that he would read any sign as being indication of his greatness. It was the weapon I would use against him; it was the only one I had.

'I... I'm not sure, Tom,' I said, wondering when, if ever, he would address the matter of the Death Eaters at Little Hangleton, or if he just didn't care. Then he knocked any foolish notions of whatever petty successes I might have harboured, with his own brand of triumph, without even saying a word, as his very silence on the matter gave rise to another more unpleasant thought, one which I then suspected was a likelihood: we had a traitor in our midst, and he had already known.

'I knew he would be the one, Severus,' he said, drawing a hand down my cheek in a way that made me shudder, pulling my unease in another direction in a way he did so easily.

'Who?' I asked. 'What one?'

'James Potter's son, of course,' he replied. 'Do not pretend to me that you don't believe so too.'

'We do not even know if the child will be a boy, Tom,' I said.

He nodded to where the little book lay on my desk, and drew Mordestone from his pocket again. 'We may not know, my Severus,' he said, 'but the book and Mordestone do.'

I had found my hand in my pocket, the way it always was when he drew Mordestone, and the white stone throbbed, whether in anger at Mordestone, or in agreement with Riddle's assertion, I couldn't tell. In that moment I was uncomfortably sure of one thing though: Lily Potter's child would be a boy.

Chapter Forty-Four

Chapter 44 of 48

A child is born.

By the time I got back into the kitchen Lupin was there, and I could tell it wasn't good.

'We lost five of our number,' Black said, his voice flat with anger, turning away from where Lupin slouched at the door with a cigarette dangling from his mouth. 'Gideon and Fabian Prewett, Caradoc Dearborn, Dorcas Meadows, and Aiden Fenwick.'

'Benjy's brother?' I asked, wondering if it were wise to drag up Benjy Fenwick's name at all, and who would tell Molly Weasley that her brothers were both dead, and if there would be any one of us not touched by death at Riddle's hand.

Black just shook his head though. 'His cousin.'

'And them?' I asked.

'We only took out three of them,' Black snarled. 'Dolohov and two fucking lightweights.'

'Riddle knew,' I said, voicing the unnecessary as I sat at the table, and Ethel pushed a mug of something hot in front of me. 'I think you should call a meeting, Black, but only of those of whom you are completely sure.'

'Just you and me then?' he asked, sticking a cigarette into the corner of his mouth.

'Surely Lupin?' I asked, nodding to where the werewolf still stood at the door, and I got the idea he was waiting for his next challenge, and that surprised me when it shouldn't have. 'Dumbledore and McGonagall, of course. What about Moody?'

'How the fuck do I know who to trust?' he snapped. 'I should have been there.' And I could see how much it stung him that he had sent others to do his dying for him.

In the end we sat making a list of everyone in the Order, adding those who were not actually members, but who were in the Order's confidence one way or another. On one hand it was far too many people, and on the other it wasn't nearly enough, not if it came down to a fight.

Lupin had left to break the news to Molly, and I didn't envy him his task. It was late in the afternoon when Dumbledore arrived, and by that time Black and I, and indeed Ethel, had decided on only one thing. Aside from those mentioned specifically in 'Die Letztendliche Wahrheit?', and Dumbledore, Minerva, and Henry Potter, we would confide in nobody completely. It would mean two sets of meetings, the Order meetings where all of those in the Order would be present, and meetings in Spinner's End where Lupin and Dumbledore could keep us up to date. Whatever happened, if we were to maintain our cover, the Potters, Sirius and I could not be seen to be a part of any planning the Order was doing, not until we knew the enemy in our midst. Perhaps it was then that I began to understand just how important men like Arthur Weasley and Remus Lupin were, and that made me realise just how important the little book was to me.

None of that stopped me worrying of course. Our security had been breached, and as we didn't know by whom, I had no way of knowing if Ethel's picture wasn't even then harbouring a traitor's relative, or how much damage we had already done, or if the traitor had even accompanied those Order members who had called at Malfoy Manor after Lucius died, and I panicked when I couldn't even remember who all of them were.

'Remember the book, dear,' Ethel chided gently, nodding to where 'Die Letztendliche Wahrheit?' had appeared in front of me at the table, when I knew quite well I had left it in my workroom. 'Remember the book.'

I looked down at it, unsurprised to see its message, one it had left for me once before: *It may be ill-considered to trust too much; yet you will fail if you do not trust enough. Remember the triumph of friendship is not the smile, or even the outstretched hand, but the faith that others place in you. For in the end you must rely not on the words of your enemies, but the silence of your friends.*

I nodded, somehow a little bit more at ease. 'My task is to be afraid, but to go on anyway,' I said, adding a little more of what had been its message of that day.

'It may be vain of me, Severus dear,' Ethel said, 'but I do not think this traitor is someone I have met.'

'Go on,' I urged.

'Nothing else, dear,' she said. 'I doubt I have met him... or her. Perhaps at least that will narrow your field somewhat. It teaches us one valuable lesson though, Severus, and that is to be wary of anyone whose depths we do not know, however insignificant a part they play in the grander scheme of things.'

I looked across to Black, relieved and frightened to see that he was afraid too, but unlike me his fear was for others, and his concern was more specific.

'It's a boy, Severus,' he said quietly, and I didn't need to ask what he meant. 'James says to tell you that he leaves it up to you when to tell Riddle. The child is expected fairly soon now, but James thinks it better if you tell Riddle before the birth.' I looked away, not wanting the pressure of that trust. 'Damn it, Severus; get a grip of yourself,' he snarled, and I mistook his meaning, as I mistook so much about him and all the others.

'Potter is, or will be the boy's father, Black. It is not for me to juggle with his safety.'

Sirius had stood up, and he reached across the table to the little book, and thrust it under my nose. 'Don't you understand what it's trying to tell you?' he asked, and I must have frowned my confusion. 'It's all about trust, too much of it or not enough, but everything's about trust.'

'I trust you, Black,' I replied, my own temper beginning to rise in bewilderment and hurt indignation that I even had to say that. 'I trust Lupin and Dumbledore, and... and Arthur and Henry... I even trust James fucking Potter.'

'I know,' he said, raking his hands through his hair in what looked like exasperation. 'And they all trust you too. You've missed my meaning though.'

'Well, make yourself clear,' I snapped.

'Try trusting yourself, Severus,' he said, nodding to the book. 'I think... I know that's what it's trying to tell you.' And with that the little book snapped shut, leaving me feeling slightly discomfited, and more than a little foolish.

'It is... it will be a boy,' I said, watching Riddle carefully where he sat at my fire, rolling his cheroot from one side of his mouth to another in a way that had begun to annoy me intensely, and I knew it was just hate of everything about him.

He looked up and nodded slowly, a faint smile of satisfaction on his lips as he threw the remains of the cheroot into the fire. 'I should like Lily Potter under my care now, Severus,' he said. 'It is only fitting that as the mother of such a child she should be cared for in an appropriate manner. In fact,' he said as though just making up the mind he had probably made up long before, 'I would like you to re-open Malfoy Manor.'

'That won't be possible,' I replied. Ethel had warned me some time before that Riddle, perhaps unwittingly, would be drawn to the manor, a move I knew she thought dangerous because of the ties the house held to Salazar Slytherin. 'I have charmed the house. It is uninhabitable.'

'You didn't tell me that,' he said, the ever-present anger and suspicion flaring dangerously to the surface. 'I would like to know these things, Severus.'

'Why?' I asked. 'The house belonged to Lucius Malfoy, Tom, not you.'

If he was taken aback at my flash of anger, he concealed it well, and I wondered if he had already visited the manor. I doubted that though. Ethel had assured me that the shades of the manor had taken watch and would inform Phineas Black if Salazar Slytherin became active. That made me wonder if Lucius, too, lingered in his old family home and was even then reaching out to protect his wife, his son, and his sister.

Riddle had crossed the room, and he drew his hand across my cheek as I warned myself not to appear any more hostile than I done so far, stifling the recoiling feeling in my guts. I had decided the path I had to tread, and it would not do to alienate him, not when I had to creep under his defences. I would do that for my own reasons and on my own terms though, not on his; that much I had promised myself.

'I had considered enlisting Sirius Black to keep his eye on James and Lily Potter,' I said, trying to lead him. 'After all, by bringing Black and Potter back into your fold... our fold... we can keep tabs on the child without courting the danger of them fleeing if they sense danger.'

'Out of the question,' he replied, drawing back from me as though he were the subject of unwanted attention instead of me.

'You trust Cygnus Black alone in the Ministry?' I asked, probing what I hoped was a weak point. 'Yet with both James Potter and his father there, and Sirius Black reporting directly to you, you could have them all watching one another.'

I could see the very deviousness of the idea appealed to him, and he was only wondering how to back down.

'Tom,' I said, glancing to my arm and then to where 'Die Letztendliche Wahrheit?' lay closed on my desk, 'if this is truly the child, I have to know that we can find him when we need him, and not have to chase him to a foreign land.'

'And I have to know that Lily Potter is under my... protection,' he said.

'Exactly,' I agreed. 'And what better way than having not only her husband, but her father-in-law at the Ministry?'

'Let them carry on their good works on our behalf, and leave us to ours?' he said, and I knew he was teasing me along to thinking I had a victory over him. 'However, Severus,' he went on, 'I do not intend to trust Sirius Black, not in any way,' he said. 'In fact, I would prefer if he were dealt with... No, no...' he said in a hurry as I drew back, 'I promised you once I would not ask you to kill again, my love. I shall not go back on my promise, not one made to you.'

I felt it safer to leave it there than try to argue a case for a man who, as far as Riddle was concerned, should mean little to me. Ethel had assured me she could keep Black hidden, and if the price of keeping Lily Potter free of Riddle's clutches was that Sirius had to remain in hiding, it was one worth paying. It would leave Potter somewhat exposed at the Ministry, and he would not be able to continue in his previous capacity, but it was the safest option we had.

'I shall think about this, Severus,' he said, drawing close to me again, yet glancing across the room to where the Veritaserum buffer bubbled contentedly. 'Now, entertain me, my love,' he said, sending my guts roiling in the way he could so easily do, until I realised just what he meant. 'Tell me how we go about the business... Do I ingest any of the potion?' he asked, and I could almost feel the anticipation rising inside him. 'How will it be infused into the boy...our boy, my Severus?'

"*Carefully, dear,*" Ethel's thought whispered lightly. "*Say nothing you may regret or forget.*"

I said nothing at all for a moment, trying to marshal my thoughts from where something else seemed to try to intrude on them, and I shut it down, assuming that Riddle was trying to access my mind. It wouldn't be denied though, and it was only when I found my eyes drawn across to where the potion muttered away to itself that I noticed that 'Die Letztendliche Wahrheit?' was lying open once again.

'I have made some tentative notes, Tom,' I said cautiously, yet buoyed along by the encouraging little throb the white stone gave from where I had it clutched in my hand in my pocket. 'I thought it safest to make them in the book... to see if it would agree...' I confess I do not know to this day if the words were my own, or those of the book and the white stone, and if I was just their worldly pawn. Perhaps I always had been.

Riddle rose from my side, glancing once at me, his eyes alight with a seething mixture of madness and self-belief.

'*Day one:* he read aloud, *which shall be the forty-third day of the life of the chosen child: Equal parts of Aqua Vitae and water drawn from the non-tidal stretch of a tidal river, to be ingested within five minutes of being mixed, but not before the initial effervescence has died down and the mixture has turned inky-blue. Some physical discomfort is natural, quickening of the heart and visual distortion, but this will clear within a few minutes.*'

Riddle lifted his eyes from the book, and I just hoped he didn't realise I was trying as hard as he was to memorise the words.

"*Some things can't be forgotten, Severus,*" Ethel's thought whispered.

'It doesn't say how much,' Riddle said. 'Equal parts could be a gallon of each.'

'I am still working on the refinements, Tom,' I replied. 'I still have time.'

'*Day two: which shall be the forty-fourth day of the life of the chosen child: Five parts of Aqua Vitae to four parts of water drawn from the non-tidal stretch of a tidal river, to be ingested as day one.*

'*Day three: which shall be the forty-fifth day of the life of the chosen child: Five parts of Aqua Vitae to three parts of water drawn from the non-tidal stretch of a tidal river, to be ingested as day one.*

'*Day four: which shall be the forty-sixth day of the life of the chosen child: It is of vital importance that none of the potion is ingested on day four*He paused again. 'Why do I stop at day four?' he asked.

'The potion is difficult to tolerate, Tom,' I replied, feeling a bit more confident. 'It is best to take breaks so as not to become dependent on it.' I omitted to add that even by day four he would find it well-nigh impossible to refrain from taking the Veritaserum buffer, not that he was going to take it.

He began reading again, and I thought it odd that he didn't see fit to question me further.

'*Day five: which shall be the forty-seventh day of the life of the chosen child: Begin again as day one, two and three, until once again abstaining from the potion on day eight.*'

He didn't sigh, or become bored, or even have to stifle any impatience as he read on until:*Day twelve: which shall be the fifty-third day of the life of the chosen child. The chosen child will be weaned. The potioneer will prepare a fresh batch of Aqua Vitae, which must be prepared solely for the chosen child, and must be fed to him by the recipient from a stag-horn spoon of a stag slain solely for the purpose, and must be within nine hours of the preparation of the potion. At this point the recipient must cease taking the potion completely for one year.*

The list of instructions went on and on, and at last I felt him fretting, anxious to get to the end to where he believed his prize was firmly within his grasp.

'*The fifteenth birthday of the chosen child...*' and it was there that the writing stopped.

He looked up at me as though he were a child who had just had a favourite toy snatched from his grasp.

'I... I can't rush this, Tom,' I stammered. Of course, I hadn't known any more than he had that the instructions would just judder to such a halt. 'I have to have time to think, and assess things, and...'

'My Severus,' he said, drawing close to me in a way I didn't like one bit. 'My love... I had no idea you had done so much.' He looked back to the book, to where it had snapped shut. 'Not that I doubted you, of course, my own true love. But that you have done this for your Tom...' His voice actually throbbed with some mad emotion. 'I have but one request, my true love,' he said, 'aside from completing your work here, of course.'

'And what would that be?' I asked, desperate now to end the meeting. I had been in his presence for far too long, and I needed to take stock.

'That you find another worthy child, my love, and that you help me to brew more of the potion, and that you join me too,' he said, as though bestowing some unimaginable gift upon me, 'forever.'

I knew the time had come for me to seem to indulge him, just as I knew that Ethel watched over me, and that Lucretia and Narcissa would make an entrance at a time Ethel deemed convenient to me and not to Tom Riddle. As he drew his hand across my cheek I hoped it would be very soon.

Chapter Forty-Five

Chapter 45 of 48

Riddle leave the building, but he doesn't go alone.

It was almost a week later that Lily gave birth to a baby boy. She called him Harry, a nod to James's father, one which Henry seemed inordinately misty-eyed about in a way I found hard to associate with him, until he informed us that that had been the name of the first child his wife had borne him, the one who had died.

'James and Lily would like you to be the boy's godfather, Sirius,' Henry said, downing yet another generous measure of my Glenfiddich, and at last getting to what I assumed was the point of his visit.

That seemed to make Black about as emotional as Henry, and I found it was all becoming rather too cloying for my taste, and I worried that they would lose sight of the importance of keeping the child safe from Riddle. Henry was smarter than that though, and I forewent my usual self-recrimination about underestimating others when he went off in a direction I had not expected.

'You keep your eye on Riddle, Severus,' he said, 'and we shall watch out for little Harry.' He watched us over the rim of his glass before going on to what I then suspected was the more important reason for his call. 'I had a rather odd visit this morning; one that left me unsure of its meaning.'

'From whom?' I asked.

'Morton Schultz,' he replied, quite taking me aback as I remembered the night at Malfoy Manor when it became evident that Tom Riddle was staying with the old American, and that the two were long-time friends. 'I may well be wrong,' Potter went on, 'but I suspect that he seeks to find a way out of pinning his colours any more firmly to Riddle's mast.'

'But Riddle stayed with Schultz a few months ago,' I objected, rising to my feet in my disappointment at his folly, whilst also recalling the odd facts that Schultz had neither attended Lucius's trial nor his execution. 'I caution you, Potter...'

'Don't take me for the fool you know I am not, Severus,' he said firmly, his hand raised to stall me. 'He called ostensibly on Riddle's instruction, to invite me to re-join the Ministry, and, of course, to pass on the congratulations which Riddle asked him to intimate that he would prefer to bestow in person.'

I sat back, willing to listen to the rest of what Potter had to say. He was right; he wasn't a fool, and he knew that I knew as much.

'What else, Henry?' Black asked from where he'd been uncharacteristically quiet.

'It's not much, I know,' Henry Potter admitted, 'but he seemed nervous when he began to mention Riddle's interest in little Harry. Now, I know Morton Schultz, I have known him for very many years, although we have never been friends as such. He is not a nervous man. He is, if anything, very aware of what he considers to be his own worth. He is almost rabidly pure-blooded, disdainful of those with any mixed blood, and completely intolerant of Muggles,' he said, pausing either to draw breath or for effect, 'but... and this is very big but, Morton Schultz is not, and never has been to my knowledge, a bad man.'

I found myself nodding. I understood what he was saying, that not everyone was either light or dark; there were those of us, and I included myself, who were streaked with grey.

'Are you saying you want to take him into your trust?' Black said, clearly troubled at that prospect.

'Oh, no,' Potter replied. 'He made no attempt to gain my trust, nor did he ask me anything I was not willing to tell him regarding little Harry. It was what he didn't say that made me conscious of another layer, so to speak. He was asked to pass on a message that Riddle would be pleased to meet the whole Potter family, including the baby, to welcome his old friend Henry back to the Ministry,' Potter said with a sour twist to his lips. 'And apparently Riddle further suggested that Morton's house would be an ideal place for an informal get-together.' He paused for a moment before adding thoughtfully, 'Then Schultz started stumbling out excuses about his wife having a touch of the cold, and how it may not be wise to subject the baby to the danger that it might be something more serious, and perhaps we should wait a while. He said everything but the one thing he meant.'

'Which was: "Don't come, and don't let the baby near him"?' Black finished for him. 'I think we know that anyway.'

'Morton didn't know that we knew,' Potter replied.

'Where is the boy just now?' I asked. 'Is Lily still at her parents' home?'

'James and I collected them this afternoon. They're safe at Godric's Hollow.'

I nodded, feeling something uneasy creep through me as I tried to remember a conversation I'd had, something someone had said, something important, but I couldn't recall what it was and dismissed it.

'Did you tell Schultz that?' Black asked.

'No. They were in Surrey when he asked me, and he didn't ask me when they were returning,' Potter said, as though casting his mind back. 'Now I think about that, I'm sure it slipped his mind to ask when they were coming back; that way he won't have to lie to Riddle.'

Henry and James Potter took up their positions at the Ministry the next week, and although Riddle asked me to let Sirius know that he would be willing to consider permitting his return to his former post, Black and I, and of course Ethel, decided to let Riddle know that Black had opted to wage his own war, and that he was disappointed in James Potter for toeing what he considered was the more conventional line of tugging his forelock to the Dark Lord. I just hoped that Sirius hadn't seen his voluntary exile as an opportunity to cleanse the Blacks from the world, instead of those Riddle felt didn't deserve to live.

Dumbledore and Lupin had called to see us that morning, and they had gone over the Order's plan of luring the Death Eaters en masse to Hogwarts. I didn't like it; I thought it was hasty, and ill-conceived, and downright dangerous, but they seemed to have the bit between their teeth. In reality I had no good reason to spin things out any longer, and I know now that it was fear of failure that kept me stringing Riddle along, all the time risking eroding any trust he had in me.

I laid the stirring rod on the sink and turned at last to where Riddle sat at the fireplace watching me.

'You are nervous, my love?' he asked. 'I thought the potion was stable.' He crossed to me and peered into the cauldron, inhaling the acrid yellow fumes of the Veritaserum buffer to no noticeable ill effect.

'It's not the potion, Tom,' I replied, hardly needing to feign the trepidation I had decided upon. 'I have come by the way of some information...'

'From whom?' he demanded. 'What information?'

'The boy...'

He grabbed my robes by the fistful at my neck, almost choking me. 'What about the boy?' he said through teeth gritted so tightly it was a miracle he didn't break any. I could hardly breathe as his face bore down on mine, suffused with a rage so mindless that I thought he was truly about to strangle me. The way he had shoved me against my workbench my hands were trapped behind my body, the wrists just at the edge of the bench, and such was his physical strength that I couldn't budge him, let alone reach for where the white stone throbbed in my pocket. I felt him try to plunder my mind as I willed myself to find enough air to remain conscious, and then he let go, stepping back quickly as I slid to the floor, gasping for breath.

'The boy?' he asked. 'Where is the boy, Severus?'

'Dumbledore has him.'

I didn't even see him reach for his wand, perhaps he didn't need it, but the next thing I knew was pain that felt as though it shattered every bone in my body like glass; it was red, and then it was black, and by the time I dragged myself back to consciousness Tom Riddle wasn't the only thing to have left Spinner's End; he'd taken what he believed was the Aqua Vitae potion with him, and "Die Letztendliche Wahrheit?" too.

'Do not worry about the book, dear,' Ethel said yet again, as Lucretia cast a complicated diagnostic charm over my body, one that seemed to hover almost visibly around me like some sort of benign shroud. 'It would not have gone with him, had that not been its intention in the first place.'

The simple truth was that I felt lost without the book. It had become some sort of mentor to me, and I worried that Riddle would be able to tell that much of text was so much archaic drivel, and that he would interpret the book's real messages, its messages to me, as the treachery they were.

'The book will not show the Dark One anything but the original text,' Ethel said calmly, in that way she had of understanding what I hadn't even voiced.

'How can you be sure?' I asked. 'When I was with him you urged me to caution before the book took over.'

She gave me a reproachful look and nodded to the table, and whilst I don't suppose I was particularly surprised, I was certainly very comforted to see the little book lying there. 'You just said it went with him,' I accused in what was really a rush of relief.

'No, she didn't,' Black said unhelpfully. 'She said it wouldn't have gone with him if it didn't intend too.' He nodded to the book too. 'Apparently it didn't.'

'He'll think I've tricked him in some way,' I snarled. 'How does that help me win his confidence?' I glared first at Ethel and then at Black; I felt they were making light of a very dangerous situation, one I was likely to feel the brunt of.

'Oh, but he has a book, Severus dear,' Ethel replied. 'It's just a copy though, and as you and I well know, a copy of the book is just so much rubbish. Now, stop fretting when things happen that you have not actually orchestrated yourself, Severus. It's a failing of yours, dear, to expect to do everything yourself.'

'He just doesn't want to share the glory when it gets handed out,' Black remarked, sticking his cigarette into the corner of his mouth.

'Hush, Sirius dear,' Ethel said. 'For now, let us content ourselves with the fact that the Dark One believes he has the Aqua Vitae potion and the book. If nothing else it buys us a little time, and time, dears, is of the essence, I suspect.'

'Will he be able to identify it? The potion, I mean,' Black asked, slouching down on one of my settees.

'I doubt that,' I murmured, 'and it would take quite some time for even an expert to identify the ingredients, never mind its intended use.'

'You do have more, Severus, don't you?' Narcissa asked from where she'd been handing Lucretia various odd little charms to assist her diagnosis, ones upon whose use I didn't intend to speculate. 'Only I wouldn't want to be without it for long.'

'He's got gallons of the stuff,' Black grunted, heaving himself up for a moment to throw open the cupboard doors above one of my sinks to where several stoppered bottles of the potion were indeed stored. 'He only keeps making it so that he's always got the same potion on the boil for Riddle.'

'I do hope he tries it,' Lucretia said archly, pulling her wand away in seeming satisfaction that no lasting harm had become me.

'Oh, so do I,' Black said, pasting a rather evil grin on his face; it was one that had been missing for too long. 'Anyway,' he said, hauling himself back to his feet, 'I'm going to Hogwarts; I have to check out the arrangements.'

'You can't be seen there,' I objected.

'Severus, I think you have to come to terms with the fact that very soon it will not matter.' He gave me a long troubled look. 'We can't spin this out any longer. You've done your bit; it's up to soldiers now.'

'I'm coming with you,' I said, turning to the door at an altercation I couldn't place. And then Lupin came into my study, then Arthur Weasley and Henry Potter, and Molly Weasley too; she was carrying a redheaded child in each arm, and was quite clearly pregnant, and she was followed by what seemed at first to be another dozen or so redheads of various young vintages, although there were actually only three.

"Don't be difficult, Severus dear," Ethel mentally chided me. *"They're going into the picture."*

'I'm definitely coming with you,' I repeated to Black, who had begun to retreat towards the door.

'Arthur and I are going to stay here,' Henry Potter said. 'Lily and James and the baby are safe, but this house has been visited too often by Riddle.'

'What about the Ministry?' I asked, totally confused. 'Won't you be missed?'

'It's over, Severus,' Potter said calmly. 'The gauntlet has been tossed. Let us just pray that he doesn't realise that we did the throwing.'

It was too quick, I had too much to think about, too much to try to do, too many people I still had to account for, I didn't know where Andromeda was...

'We three shall defend the picture, Severus,' Ethel said, nodding to where Molly and her alarming brood had disappeared. She stood between Henry Potter and Arthur, and somehow she seemed to have grown in physical stature, become more substantial, like someone facing their destiny in the knowledge that they are equal to the test. 'We all have our tasks, and even now Andromeda is on her way to join Narcissa and Lucretia in assisting inside the picture.'

It struck me yet again how many other people were undermining Riddle in so many different ways, when all I had had to do was to keep him distracted for long enough to let them move their game pieces into place, and I knew I hadn't done enough, and I knew then too that it would have to do. I was about to question Ethel as to just what the ladies needed to do inside the picture, when an owl tapped on the window. Black opened the casement, but instead of flying to me, the owl headed for Henry Potter.

The message was short and clear and anonymous, and aside from the fact that it had been delivered to Potter it was addressed to no one, but for all that, it was written in handwriting that didn't look British, and I knew it came from Morton Schultz.

"The Death Eaters have been given instructions to leave Little Hangleton and all other safe houses and congregate in Malfoy Manor in ten days' time."

'Ten days?' I said, quite unable to stem the flood of terror that ran through me. 'Why ten days? Why not three? Or tomorrow afternoon?'

'Are we going to trust this?' Black asked. 'Trust a man who has double-crossed one man already?'

Henry Potter rolled the scroll up. 'I thought we had agreed to trust no one,' he said. 'However, I find myself wondering why he sent this at all.'

But I was thinking of the message in the little book, a message it had seen fit to give me twice: *"For in the end you must rely not on the words of your enemies, but the silence of your friends."* I was wondering which category Morton Schultz fell into.

Chapter Forty-Six

Chapter 46 of 48

The Battle of Hogwarts.

They felt like the longest ten days of my life, a kind of fretful limbo over which I had no control. I wrote to Riddle, twice, the first time asking him to get in touch with me as I was concerned about losing the thread of my research, urging him to understand that my notes were all unchecked, and that without the book I had no reference for completing my work. In the second missive I expressed my concern for Harry's welfare, and asked him why had not replied to my first letter. Aside from an ominous silence, there was nothing, not even an indication that he had received my owls; yet perhaps more tellingly, neither I, nor Black, nor Potter was summoned by the dormant Dark Marks we bore. Even the book, the real book, was silent in its own way, so much so that I almost fancied I had the copy and Riddle had the real thing. In those awful ten days I suspect only two things kept me from going mad with suppressed terror, one of course was Ethel, and the other was the white stone. Whenever I felt I had reached my wits' end, that my frustration would rip from me in a screaming rage, it seemed to sense my feelings of impotence and throb in a way that quieted my jangling senses.

Henry Potter and Arthur sent separate messages to the Ministry that they were unwell, and from there there was silence too. A lull before a storm was too mean a description for those days, they were more like an almost eerie panicked quiet, the sort one actually associates with the aftermath of an apocalyptic event, like a volcano, or a tidal wave.

I went to Godric's Hollow, uneasy, and could take no comfort from the fact that the Fidelius Charm seemed to be intact, and that James and Lily and the child appeared to be safe. We were all just waiting, like little mice who had crawled from safety to face a lion that hadn't turned up.

I couldn't seem to settle anywhere, and I know now that it was because I had left myself with nothing to do, and everyone else seemed to have a sense of purpose. The women were busy tending the old and the young, and the sick and the vulnerable in the picture; and Ethel and Henry and Arthur seemed almost serene in their waiting and watching over those we had hidden. Black and Lupin were busy with the Order members as they cranked up the silent defences of Hogwarts, and Dumbledore was occupied sealing her secrets to Filch and Minerva and Flitwick. And I had nothing to do.

Nothing happened on the day Schultz had warned us about, and it wasn't until early the next evening that I went up to the ramparts of the castle as though drawn there, something that gave me an odd feeling of satisfaction that I hadn't really seen fit to doubt Morton Schultz. The sky was overcast, dull thunder growling in the distance, and that sort of greenish tint that was the prelude to a storm. A fitting backdrop, I thought.

The battlements of the castle bristled with the soldiers of the Order of the Phoenix and those men and women who had come to be part of the fight for the very survival of our people. I wondered if Riddle had given any thought to where I was, or if even then he still had any faith in me. I watched as Black and James Potter briefed the front line defences, Molly Weasley, Kingsley Shacklebolt, Lupin and Moody amongst them. Molly had left her children in the safety of the picture, and I knew she felt her presence at Hogwarts was some sort of fitting tribute to her brothers. I had urged James to do the same with Lily and the baby, but he was content that they were safe where they were at Godric's Hollow, and aside from that it really was too late to begin moving people around. Arthur was still at Spinner's End with Henry Potter and the ladies, as a kind of first line of defence for the picture; against what, we didn't really know, but Ethel had sealed the charm protecting the house to Weasley and Potter, yet permitting any of our own closest circle unhindered access.

Sirius and James were reiterating their orders yet again, that the defence of the castle had not to begin until I gave the order, that whenever they eventually appeared, as we knew they would, as many Death Eaters as possible had to be drawn to the walls in the belief that their prize was within their grasp... and then it began.

Even expecting, and almost longing for it to happen, it was a shock when a bolt of green was shot into the sky, arcing slowly upward like the malignant comet it was until the Dark Mark hovered above us. I heard the elves shriek from below in a terrified lament, as Archie Kettleburn's wolfhounds bayed in fury. I let them draw nearer; knowing that even then there was a possibility that I was sacrificing our own men and women, I let them draw nearer, but I had to see Bellatrix and Macnair and the Lestrangle brothers, and I had to see if Tom Riddle and Cygnus Black and the rest of his inner circle were there, or if Riddle had once more, albeit unwittingly, sent others to do his dying for him. There was no point to any of this if all we did was kill those who made up his numbers.

I dared a look over the ramparts, invisible to everyone but Black and Potter, and just as I was about to turn away, the assembled ranks of Riddle's followers parted to let him and his closest confidants through. I saw Riddle laugh as a man came up to him and seemed to ask for his attention, and I heard James Potter's gasp of shock just as sickening realisation dawned on me too. The man was Peter Pettigrew, our traitor, James and Lily's Secret Keeper, and the man Ethel had warned me that she did not know, the warning I had paid no heed.

I turned in time to see Black talking urgently to Potter before turning to me.

'Go,' I said quickly to Potter. 'Take Lily to Spinner's End. Have Ethel conceal her along with Molly's children and Draco.' I swallowed the surge of fury at myself that I had not insisted he had done so earlier.

'What about our plans?' Potter asked, desperation in his voice.

'Kingsley and Lupin can take your place,' Black replied, looking anxiously over the parapets again at the Death Eaters who assumed the castle to be going about the

business of the evening meal. 'Everyone is briefed to move up a place if anyone falls.'

Potter nodded uneasily as the crowds of Death Eaters below drew apart with an almost audible sigh, and Tom Riddle walked back through their ranks.

'Go now, Potter,' I urged. 'I would not have the blood of any more friends on my hands.'

He had just turned when the Dark Mark shot into the sky again, and Riddle's greatly magnified voice called from below. 'Wakey, wakey, rise and shine.'

I nodded to Black, and the first line of the Order rained their curses on the stunned Death Eaters below, whilst the ones at the rear of our lines raised the battle standards of our faithful to flap above Hogwarts in arrogant disdain: Minerva's wild-cat banner, Lupin's personal wolf banner, the crossed swords of the Shackbolt family, the rearing stag of the Potters, the battle standard of the Ancient and most Noble House of Black, and the silver serpent of the House of Malfoy all flanked Dumbledore's Hogwarts banner, as I fancied they had done in days of antiquity.

The serpent seemed to break away from the Dark Mark suspended in the sky, snaking down like a bolt of green lightning towards our standards, and I felt a scald of disappointment and fear as our flags seemed to part with a sigh like the ranks of the Death Eaters had done. They had not given way to the Dark Mark though, but instead to a gold banner with a red griffin shimmering on it as though it were in living flames, and as the serpent's forked tongue shot from its gaping maw the griffin clawed the air and seemed to bellow derision at the Dark Mark above us, and I thought at that moment our battle lines were truly drawn.

The first few moments were bedlam, curses raining upwards to bounce off the uncaring castle's walls until someone below assembled Riddle's foot soldiers into some sort of order. We took casualties in that first onslaught, men and women who had come from the safety of their hiding places to die for us, but we had the twin supremacy of height and counter-surprise, and it wasn't until almost dawn that the beleaguered Death Eaters began to draw back in what looked to be a vain attempt to regroup.

I'd made my way down to ground level to see if I was able to identify any of Riddle's close circle amongst the dead and wounded, who were even then being tended by our own mediwitches. There was that weird post-battle silence, as though everyone able to do so was checking to see they were still alive. I was sickened by guilt and the remorse that most of those dying would be ordinary witches and wizards just not strong enough to have withstood him, the ones we had let down. There would be many families waiting for a loved one who would never come home.

I dropped the Invisibility Charm as I turned away, intending to go straight to where Dumbledore was maintaining the Perpetuum Tueri of Hogwarts with Flitwick, Minerva, and Filch, but as I ducked in the side door from the pathway an incandescent light caught my eyes from above, and I recognised the white glow of a Patronus skidding to a stop around where I had left Black and Lupin. I flew up the outside of the castle walls, not even taking the time to Disillusion myself, hardly caring if anyone saw me; I had no time to waste, and all that was left of the Death Eaters by then were the weary stragglers. I'd quite forgotten that it was to most of our own people that I would appear as the enemy.

The stag turned as I reached the ramparts, and even as it did I heard Black moan and Lupin gasp in some sort of denial as the white glow seemed to flicker and falter. I raced for the stairs to get to the tunnel that would lead me the quickest way out of Hogwarts to the Apparition point, barely registering that Black was at my side, knowing in my heart that we were probably too late, and knowing the question I needed to ask would remain unanswered, that I had would have to see how events unfolded to tell if Peter Pettigrew knew of my ultimate allegiance.

Black had gone round the back of the house at Godric's Hollow to see if he could gain entry by stealth, leaving me to show myself. Riddle was standing in the hallway of James and Lily's home with a blanket wrapped bundle in the crook of one arm, and I almost fancied he had been waiting for me, and that made me worry that either James had confided in Pettigrew or the charm that prevented Pettigrew from identifying me as the caster of the Fidelius Charm had failed. Neither seemed to be the case though.

'Severus,' he said, 'why are you here?'

'Bellatrix told me to come to you, Tom.' The lies didn't matter anymore, and if it came to pass that Riddle survived this meeting, nothing else would matter either. 'I have been trying to get in touch with you,' I stammered. 'I didn't know what had become of the boy... what had become of you...' Such was the malevolent power of his presence that it was only then that I noticed the two prone figures lying behind him.

Black had come into the hallway from the back of the house, and from the look on his face as he knelt to where James and Lily lay on the floor behind Riddle I knew that no blood coursed through their veins, no fluttering pulse held out a promise; they were both dead.

'No,' I gasped in shock and outrage, but I had to cling to the stone to remind me of the price of failing to convince Riddle to give the baby to me. 'Not the child, Tom?' I asked, grabbing his free arm, in truth to give Black the time to conceal himself again. I was then I noticed Riddle looked unwell, as though sickening for something, and I couldn't imagine what that could be. 'Tell me you haven't destroyed the child,' I asked.

He gave me an odd look as he shook himself free, and glanced carelessly over his shoulder to where James and Lily lay, and I do not know to this day whether he ever knew Sirius Black had been behind him; most likely he just didn't care. 'Of course not,' he said, and there was something almost puzzled in his reply, as though he wasn't thinking clearly. 'I have made him ... shall we say, invincible.'

It was only then that I saw his palm was scorched, as though his wand had burnt it in some way, and then I saw the small bundle in his arm move, and I let go of a sigh, quite forgetting about anything except the child.

'Thank Merlin,' I gasped, holding out my arms for the baby. 'He is the one, Tom. He truly is the one.'

'I know... just as I knew you were faithful to me alone, my love,' he said as the white stone throbbed an unneeded warning in my pocket. 'You are faithful to me, my Severus, are you not? Only, I would fear for you if that did not prove to be the case.'

'Have I ever given you cause for doubt?' I asked.

He raised his eyebrow once in reply, pulled his cloak across himself and the baby and disappeared, but not before I saw something almost like agony cross his features, something that made me wonder again if he were wounded in some way.

Chapter Forty-Seven

Chapter 47 of 48

The Darkness creepeth ever onward.

Black had sent his own Patronus to Hogwarts with a message for Dumbledore and Lupin. After that I helped him move James and Lily's bodies to the lounge of what we had thought was their safe haven, fools that we were. It had only been about an hour since Riddle had disappeared, and the air still felt full of dull shock. Black had said little during that time, but I could feel him watching me as I moved a hank of Lily's beautiful red hair from where it had fallen over her pale face. She looked as though she was asleep, they both did, as though they did not know that even then their baby son was in Tom Riddle's clutches.

When Sirius did break his silence he went in a direction I didn't expect. 'You loved Lily, didn't you?' he asked.

I couldn't answer, not when she sat on that settee, dead, with her dead husband, the man she had loved, at her side, and her baby Merlin alone knew where. 'We're losing, Black,' I said instead. 'How many more will die while we ride out a crusade of glorious failure?'

He spun to me, his face twisted in rage and fear and grief that I mistook for a moment as being directed at me. He grabbed my cravat just below my throat, and I thought he intended to strangle me there and then. 'You didn't do this,' he hissed instead, his face a mere couple of inches from mine. 'Riddle did this, Pettigrew and Riddle, not you.'

'Perhaps not,' I replied, 'but I didn't prevent it either.'

'Stop it, Severus,' he snarled. 'We don't have the time for the luxury of self-recrimination any more than we have time to grieve. All we can do is go on... even if it means not a man of us is left standing at the end.'

Lupin arrived just as Black let go of my cravat. 'Dumbledore has gone to Spinner's End,' he said, closing his eyes for longer than a blink as he looked at the two bodies. 'He wants to tell Henry in person.'

I nodded, trying to stem the flood of selfish relief that I didn't have to tell Potter that not only were his son and daughter-in-law slain by the Dark Lord's hand, but that his grandson had been abducted by Riddle too.

'What about Harry?' Lupin asked.

'Riddle has him,' I replied, and even to me I sounded defeated, as though the words couldn't be reversed.

'There's something wrong with Riddle,' Black said as we sat at what had been James and Lily's kitchen table, and shoved a cigarette into the corner of his mouth, which he forgot to light. 'Severus thinks he might be injured.'

'But he wasn't involved in any fighting,' Lupin argued.

'I couldn't tell what it was,' I admitted, and just as I said it the stone gave a little throb in my pocket, and I couldn't understand why.

We fell silent for a few moments, I suppose each one of us reflecting, and I began to wonder whether I should leave Black and Lupin at Godric's Hollow and go off and try to find out where Riddle had taken Harry, and I pretended to myself that I thought they might want the time alone to come to some sort of terms with the death of the couple who had been their friends for so long. The plain truth was less noble though. I just didn't know what to do or where to go, and it was only when the fireplace was lit by the merry blaze I recognised as Ethel's fire that I understood I had been waiting for her.

'Severus dear,' she said, her beloved little face etched with concern as it poked through the flames, 'Phineas Black has just told Dumbledore that the shades say the Dark One has arrived in Malfoy Manor with the child.'

The manor was dark as we Disapparated, and looked as though it had lain unoccupied for many a year.

Black pushed the back gate that lead from the Apparition point to the kitchen garden, and so perfect were Ethel's charms that flakes of rust fell from the protesting hinges to speckle the damp moss that grew on the once spotless cobbled path. Black rounded the bend, and he and Lupin went to the back door as I stood watching them from the rusted gateway and checking the manor to find his awareness. It was faint, but there, and I wondered again if Riddle were in some way injured and how that could be.

Black turned to me and nodded, cocking his head to the opened back door as Lupin stepped inside. No light spilled from the vast manor kitchen, but as Lupin turned to duck inside, a glow of wand light lit his features, and Walden Macnair stepped from the doorway, his wand at the werewolf's throat. Macnair had seen Black, but he hadn't seen me. I Disillusioned myself, and as I raised my wand, aiming at the middle of Macnair's chest, someone else came out of the kitchen.

'Recognise this?' Bellatrix hissed in triumph to Black. She was holding the wand I had stolen so many years before, the one Sirius had boasted to Riddle about as being a trophy of youth.

I blasted Macnair with a Stunning Hex, he being the more imminently dangerous. It was enough to distract Bellatrix as Walden fell from Lupin's side, his wand clattering to the ground, but her own Stunning Hex had already left her wand, and nothing on this earth was going to call it back. I watched Sirius spin away, a look of disbelief on his face, as Bellatrix let out a maniacal shriek of laughter and pulled a dagger from the bodice of her dark green dress. She flew at Sirius, plunged the dagger into him, and disappeared.

I was running, twenty steps, maybe thirty, just long enough for Lupin to have dropped to Black's prone form. Even in the darkness I could see both men were ashen, Lupin in shock, Sirius in a different kind of shock.

Lupin stood up as I knelt on the damp ground, fumbling for a pulse, panicking when I couldn't find it, at last remembering to breathe myself when I sensed the faint flutter.

'Stay with him, Severus,' Lupin said in a way I didn't understand. 'I'll get help.' He nodded to the quiet brooding manor, twisting his lip in a hate I could hardly associate with the mild-mannered man I knew the werewolf to be. 'Riddle can wait for a change.'

'You wait with Sirius,' I replied, brushing Black's hair back from where it had fallen across his face. 'The child, Lupin... I must go on.'

Lupin dropped to his haunches again. 'It won't be long,' he murmured quietly, touching Black's hand as he said it, and I had not noticed before how well manicured Sirius's fingers were, how fine-boned his hands, larger, yet almost like those of a woman. 'Better you than me,' Lupin said, giving me a last long look as he stood. 'I'm going for help.' And with that he moved towards the kitchen garden, and a few moments later I heard the faint sound as he Apparated away, leaving me holding Black as the darkness of all sorts crept around us.

'Can you hold on, Black?' I asked, my voice sounding shockingly normal. 'You did once before,' I said. 'Lupin's gone for proper help. He won't be long.'

His breath was rattling in his chest, much in the same way that Lupin's had sounded that awful night at the Shack when we had gone to him. It was only when he coughed though, gasping in some tearing agony, and bringing foamy red froth to the sides of his mouth, bloodying the corners of his moustache, and disappearing into his beard, that I fully realised his wounds were mortal. Perhaps then I saw why Lupin had left me alone with him, perhaps the werewolf had always known what I had never understood myself, what had been beyond my comprehension.

'You asked me once... it seems so long ago now... who had stolen my heart,' he murmured, a half whisper that seemed to exhale with his tortured breath. 'I just want you know, before it's too late...' He trailed off, his eyelids fluttering and then opening again, as though he were denying what his body already knew.

I was about to stop him, to tell him that I didn't want to know... but what did it matter in the grander scheme of things? I, who had lain with the Dark Lord, could surely find it

within me to let Sirius Black believe I loved him too: such a small price to pay for what we had been through together. He had never let me down, and I could not let him down then.

He died in my arms, held like a lover, the light in his eyes fading first, and then the beat of his heart, but it was his magic that I watched until the end, as it danced in a halo of blue flames around him, and finally flickered once and disappeared, leaving me completely alone and utterly bereft. And the love rose within me, belated, and as hot and urgent as that of quite a different sort. I felt a howl of fury trying to choke me, and found I was clenching the white stone as though to crush it for daring to allow this to happen. Nothing was worth the lives of the men who had called me friend.

I had to leave him, just leave him lying in the mud, and go on, as the bloodlust thrummed in my veins, filling my mouth with the taste of hate. I had to go on. Riddle was somewhere in that manor, and he had Lily's child with him, James Potter's son. I was almost at the back door, had just stepped over Macnair's unconscious form when I realised I was no longer alone.

'Severus?' Bellatrix asked, hardly surprising me as she slipped from the shadows. 'What are you doing here?' Her eyes glinted with suspicion. 'Does our Lord know you are here?'

'Our Lord?' I asked. 'You may have him all to yourself, hellcat.' I found the wand in my hand was aimed at her breast, and the words I had in youthful folly sworn never to use fell from my lips once more, and I watched her hurtle back in a cocoon of green light, the distrust on her face turning to shock, her hand frozen in the act of dipping again to the bodice of her dress. Such was my hate that I was only sorry that I hadn't the time to feel the pleasure of choking her life out of her with my bare hands. I kicked her body over and saw that it had not been her dagger that she had reached for, but a Time Turner that she wore on a chain around her neck, and I recalled it was the one that Narcissa had used to visit Lucius when she had come to him with her proposal of marriage. I only wondered why I had forgotten all about it, not that it would have changed anything that had happened. These were fleeting thoughts though as I ripped it from her neck, if they coalesced at all. The past was past, and even a Time Turner couldn't awaken the dead; it was all so much heartbreak anyway.

I set my shoulders as I turned away, and, Merlin forgive me, I killed Macnair too, as he lay unconscious and unarmed. But for spitting at Lucius's feet when he'd secured him to a scaffold, and because I'd sworn to myself that I would, I killed him in cold blood, and felt no regret at having done so.

I sensed the atmosphere the moment I slipped through the back door; it was the same tightening I had felt when Black and Potter had raised their shield to keep Salazar from recognising Mordestone, and it gave me hope that Riddle had not been drawn to the catacombs, and let me understand why his awareness had felt so faint to me. It wasn't Potter and Black this time though, nor any of the others who had kept the shield in place that day; this was infinitely more subtle, and I knew it was the ghosts of Malfoy Manor. I knew Riddle was there though, even in the heavy atmosphere I could feel him.

I had my hand clasped on the white stone as I made my way through the rooms on the ground floor, where the only welcome was Ethel's charm of cobwebs and soot-blackened hearths, and doors hanging on rusty hinges. Malfoy Manor was as quiet as the tomb it was.

I made my way by wand light to the great entrance hall where once had hung portraits of generations of Malfoys, and stifled the tearing regret when I saw the dusty upright of the mahogany banister where Sirius Black had concealed himself the night I took the Dark Mark. The silent ghosts of Malfoy Manor thronged the empty hall, and I could almost feel them urging me on, bolstering my resolve, and I felt my breath catch in my chest as one turned to me and then glanced to what had been the grand staircase. It was Lucius Malfoy. Perhaps the rage and the grief kept me going; perhaps they were one and the same, and I let them fill my heart until there was no room for anything but revenge.

Chapter Forty-Eight

Chapter 48 of 48

The madness of Tom Riddle.

I began to climb the stairs to where I knew he would be, probably waiting for me as he had waited for me that awful night that changed all of our lives forever. I made my way along the minstrels' gallery and stopped outside the library door, hardly needing the throb of fury that the white stone gave me to know he was behind that door.

I don't suppose I was surprised that the fire was lit in the library, and that the room was just as it had been that night: the precious volumes on their shelves, the comfortable leather seats, the velvet drapes, as though he had stripped the charm in that room alone, and left Ethel's illusion for others to make of it what they would.

In fact, only one thing surprised me. It was not Riddle who paced in front of the fireplace, it was a woman, and I didn't need to wait for her to throw back her hood one-handed whilst her other held the baby to her breast in a hellish parody of a mother nursing a child. I already knew it was Andromeda Black.

'Give me the child, Andromeda,' I said, surprised to hear my voice was cool and controlled through the desperate fear and howling uncertainty that raged within me, as the stone throbbed a warning. 'The child is mine.'

'Yours?' she queried and I couldn't bear to look into her eyes to read the lies. 'I think not, Severus.'

'The child belongs to my Lord now,' I said carefully, and I knew I felt the stone relax a little that I had seen through his ploy, even as I knew the hardest bit was to come. 'That is Tom's child, Andromeda,' I said.

I could feel his elation, his euphoria that I had crossed a line for him, that I would sacrifice my love for him. I knew, too, that unknowingly he had set me a harder task than any, the same one he had set me when I had cursed Ethel, and that I would have to destroy what was dearest to me. He smiled, the smile such a travesty of Andromeda's own that it was all I could do not to kill him there and then, but I had to get the child; nothing was more important to me at that moment than saving the child.

I had no way of knowing if it was a charm or Polyjuice; one would have been as easy for him as the other. I suspected the latter though; the potion could easily be obtained in Knockturn Alley, or just as easily brewed and kept ready, waiting only for the essence of whomsoever he chose to be. He would have had no difficulty obtaining hair or suchlike belonging to Andromeda, not when her harpy of a sister was... had been... I thought with a tiny surge of satisfaction, one of his most favoured disciples, and I wondered how often he used it, and just what guises he had and what he had overheard.

But now it was just him and me, and the child, of course.

'Tom?' I asked, and I knew I had to put on the performance of a lifetime. I looked down to my arm, as though asking the Dark Mark to confirm my suspicions. 'Tom,' I repeated, and I only prayed I sounded as though some type of miracle had taken place.

'For you, my love, I shall be anyone,' he said, moving closer to me, the baby held to the mockery of Andromeda's left breast and Mordestone in his free hand. He rubbed the stone on his right breast, and I felt the nauseated fury, and wanted to tell him to keep his filthy mouth shut and his depravities to himself, but I didn't; I had to get him to give up the child.

'I shall live a while in this body, my love, and perhaps...' He broke off thoughtfully, as though conceiving some other madness, shocking me yet again when I thought I could no longer be shocked. 'Perhaps I could bear us a child.' The idea excited him, and I wondered at the complexity of his lunacy, and why I was the only one who saw its depth for what it was. Tom Riddle was the epitome not only of evil, but of insanity too, and his madness made him all the more dangerous. He did not know he had limits, hence he had none.

I began to move towards him, the way one might approach a dangerous animal, and it was only then that I saw the glassy sheen of perspiration on his brow, the tightness at the corners of his eyes, and the way the edges of his lips, Andromeda's lips, were drawn down, as though he was suppressing some terrible agony. 'Are you unwell, Tom?' I ventured.

'Not unwell, my love,' he said, backing away the same amount of steps as I had taken towards him. 'And tomorrow, of course, I shall feel the benefit again of your wonderful work.'

At last I understood what ailed him. 'You've taken the potion?' I asked, failing to keep the incredulity from my voice. 'It is far too early, Tom. How... how much have you taken?' The questions tumbled one on top of the other. I glanced to where the baby nestled in his arm. 'The child is only... five weeks old, six at the most.'

He smiled at me. 'Severus, Severus,' he said, 'have we not waited long enough, my love?'

'This cannot be rushed, Tom,' I said, my mind racing with the ramifications of what he thought he had done. 'This has to be done according to my instructions... according to what I have spent months researching.'

'Tonight, my love, you will begin to prepare a fresh batch of Aqua Vitae for the boy,' he said, quite ignoring my expostulations. 'It must be ready for tomorrow.'

'The boy must be fifty-three days old, Tom,' I replied with heat. 'That is not variable.'

'And so he shall be, my Severus, because not only will you prepare Aqua Vitae, but an aging potion too, a very specific one,' he said, in his reasoning way, the one that knew no reason. 'You see, unlike you, my love... you are my love, are you not, Severus?' he asked, breaking off in what at first seemed to be a lapse of concentration that I hoped was something to do with the symptoms of abstinence from the Veritaserum buffer he'd unknowingly ingested. 'Unlike you,' he went on, knocking any notions of petty victory away from me, 'I know exactly how many days old the child is, and I find myself wondering why you have not been keeping the same meticulous count, if you think it is so vital.'

'For how long have you taken the potion, Tom?' I asked, ignoring his impossible demands.

He flinched, as though I had struck him, and I knew the howling need he was feeling, and wondered how to exploit it without endangering the child.

'Twelve days, of course,' he said. 'Was that not what was instructed? They were your instructions, my Severus,' he hissed, his face twisting in a way that dragged Andromeda's features in a way they'd never known. 'Your specific instructions were for the potion to be taken for three days, abstaining on the fourth. That had to be repeated three times,' he said, his voice rising in hysteria. 'So, now, and I do mean now, Severus, it is the time for you to prepare a batch of the potion for the child.' He drew a long breath through his nose, in some sort of attempt to calm himself. 'Now,' he said, slipping Mordestone into the pocket of Andromeda's robe and holding out his free hand, 'give me my potion. I shall require it shortly.' He glanced to the window to where the darkness was becoming lighter, and I could almost feel him counting the minutes until the dawn broke.

'I do not have it with me,' I said, and then I felt the white stone throb again, just once, as though to remind me of something, and it was just as well something was there to help me because I was almost beyond constructive thought. 'Anyway,' I said carefully, 'if you have taken the potion for twelve days, it is now the boy's turn, Tom. You must abstain for a year.'

He drew back again as though I had lashed out. 'You must have something else,' he hissed. 'You have brought me something, have you not? And if not, why not?' he asked. 'You may tell me that after you tell why you have come here, if not to deliver it.'

'I had no idea that you had begun to take the potion,' I replied cautiously, aware that I had begun to tread on very thin ice, and that his desperation instead of weakening him would only make him even more dangerous.

The baby began to fret in his arm, and Riddle moved him to his other arm as I felt the stone in my pocket throb in fury that I somehow thought had to do with Riddle holding the child with the hand that had held Mordestone.

'Let me take the child, Tom,' I said. 'I shall go to Spinner's End and collect something to ease your withdrawal, and the ingredients for the new potion. That will allow you to rest for a couple of hours.'

'I think not, Severus,' he said, nodding to where Rabastan Lestrage had appeared in the doorway. That made me wonder how many other Death Eaters were there, and if they had just arrived, or if they had been there all the time.

Two other men appeared behind Lestrage, and one of them, Morton Schultz, was out of breath and seemed to have been hurrying to keep up with Peter Pettigrew.

Macnair and Bellatrix are dead,' Pettigrew said, drawing his wand as he spun to me. 'I saw him...' He didn't have the opportunity to finish as Morton Schultz's death curse hit him square on the chest.

'A traitor, Tom,' Schultz said, nodding to Pettigrew. 'I think he was going to kill you too.' The old Death Eater avoided looking at me.

'It matters not,' Riddle replied, and it was only then that I noticed with an odd feeling of relief that he had reverted to his own appearance in a way that made me sure it had been a charm and not Polyjuice after all. 'He has provided the only service he was capable of. Now,' he said, turning to Lestrage, 'have you brought the stag?'

'Yes, my Lord,' Lestrage replied. 'Shall I bring it up here?'

'Not all of it, Lestrage,' Riddle murmured. 'I only require a spoon... made from a horn. It does have horns, Lestrage, does it not?' He turned again to me, still clutching the baby, and looking down on him. 'It seems a pity, my Severus, does it not, that I was unable to capture James Potter's Patronus and use its horn. I'm sure it would have improved the efficacy of your wonderful work.'

'Shall I kill the stag first?' Lestrage asked, saving me any comment on his madness.

'Rabastan, if I thought you in any way capable of stilling the beast sufficiently to harvest a spoon from one of its horns, I would have invited you to do so,' Riddle replied, his voice rising as he spoke. 'I shall slay the beast when the time is right, and you, Rabastan, will go to Spinner's End and collect the items from a list which Severus is about to prepare for you.'

I was about to stammer out excuses for keeping Lestrage away from Spinner's End when I felt the shield again, only that time it didn't so much tighten as twist a little.

'We're here, Severus dear. Let him send whomever he wants to Spinner's End; I have brought all we need with me. Ethel's voice had slipped into my mind. You must stay with the Dark One and the child now, dear. Whatever happens around you, your task is to stay with the child until the Dark One is slain.' And with that she slipped from my mind, leaving everything unanswered that I hadn't had time to ask.

As Lestrangle opened the library door I heard an unearthly howl which seemed to come from the very bowels of the manor. The baby fretted again as Riddle spun to the door, dipping into his robe to withdraw Mordestone once more, and I felt the tightening of the shield again. I knew we had to hurry. I had no way of knowing if Salazar Slytherin broke through what hell would break loose with him.
